

Louise Bennett and the Mento Tradition

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LOUISE BENNETT, OR Miss Lou as she is popularly known, is probably the Jamaican poet most readily associated with dialect — or “patois” as it is called in Jamaica — and with the defense of this language. Miss Lou is primarily known as a performer of dialect poetry and as the champion of the people’s language, even though until the late 1960s she was not recognized as a writer; after all, she was only “doing dialect” (Markham 46). The 1960s and the coming of independence brought her a measure of recognition with an article written by the leading poet and critic Mervyn Morris and with the publication of a collection of her most popular poems, edited by Rex Nettleford in 1966. In 1982, Morris edited a second collection of Bennett’s poems; a record of one of her “performances” in London was released by Island Records in 1983. Her work “in dialect, and with dialect” (Markham 46) is now fully recognized and she has become an established writer, as is shown by the masterful study of her poems by Carolyn Cooper.

Miss Lou is often and rightly referred to as the champion of dialect verse and as the godmother of performance poetry, but it should also be pointed out that her poetry comes out of a specific musical and cultural tradition: the Mento tradition. The poet Linton Kwesi Johnson once remarked: “If anything, Miss Lou is working in a mento tradition rather than a dub tradition” (Markham 256). The poet may have had in mind certain formal and thematic characteristics associated with Mento and we do not claim to be able to point out all these characteristics in Miss Lou’s poems. What we propose to do is simply to draw the reader’s attention to some features of her work which may be derived from the Mento tradition or which are strongly reminiscent of this tradition.

What is the Mento tradition? Before the advent of American Rhythm and Blues in the 1950’s, Mento was very popular in Jamaica and was played at country dances (“brams”), weddings

and at various other gatherings. Mento was first and foremost dance music and a typical Mento band would feature a banjo, a bongo drum, a guitar and a "kalinda" or "thumb piano." This music was first played in the country but soon the local recording industry began to cater to the tourist market and an urban form of Mento thus appeared, played for the tourists and the new urbanized population in Kingston. Mento songs are often about the daily life of Jamaicans, their problems and their struggles, but they deal with these themes in a light-hearted and humorous way: in Mento songs the lighter side of things always prevails. Steve Barrow and Peter Dalton quote an excerpt from Hubert Frier and George Moxey's "Dry Weather House" as a prime example of Mento's approach to social problems:

Some of them rooms is so small
 You can't turn around in them at all
 When you want to turn around, you've got to go outside
 Then you turn your back and go inside
 When the rainy weather was raising Cain
 The house began to leak
 And the whole foundation started to squeak
 Some of the rooms the landlord rent
 They're just like a scorpion tent. . . . (Barrow and Dalton 7)

In this excerpt, the problem of inadequate housing is dealt with in an ironic manner typical of the humour found in Mento songs.

The Mento style is also apparent in folk songs which refer to the gossiping associated with village life in rural Jamaica. One such song is entitled "Nobody's Business":

Ef ah married to a Nayga man,
 An' ah lef him for a Chiney man,
 Nobody's bus'ness but me own.
 Ef me even old like Taggoram
 An' me wan' fe pose as twentyone,
 Nobod's business but me own. . . . (Carley 143)

Mento songs are also famous for their risqué double-entendre and their sexual innuendoes. One of the most popular of Mento songs, recorded by Lord Creator and the Jolly Boys, refers to the "big bamboo" that "stands big and tall" and "pleases one and all." Another example of such double-entendre is the song

“Touch Me Tomato,” traditionally sung by Kingston market women and popularized by the Jolly Boys:

Please, Mister don't you touch me tomato
 Please, don't touch me tomato, touch me
 Yam, me pumpkin, potato, don't you touch
 Me tomato
 Touch me this, touch me that
 Touch me everyting I've got
 Touch me plums and me apples too
 But here's one thing you must not do
 For all you do is feel up, feel up. . . .

After the popularity it achieved in the late 1940's and in the 1950's by catering to the tourist market, Mento went into decline and was superseded by American Rhythm and Blues which Jamaicans heard on their transistor radios. This relative decline was reversed in the 1960s, when many Jamaican singers began to record Mento songs in the then-current Ska style. Ska, a hybrid form that mixed Jamaican folk music with American R'n'B, was the first modern form of Jamaican popular music.¹ The independent mood of the time (Jamaica became independent in 1962) led to a Mento revival through Ska, and as a consequence, Mento became Jamaica's true national music. The singer Monty Morris recorded a ska version of the old folk tune “Penny Reel” and Shenley Duffus did the same with “Rucumbine,” an old Mento standard (Skatalites and Friends). The Mento tradition thus was still alive in the late 1960s and was given a new lease of life by Ska's popularity. This Mento revival coincided with the recognition of Louise Bennett as a major practitioner of dialect poetry.

Bennett's poems are reminiscent of the Mento tradition inasmuch as they are based on a type of humour, derived from Mento, that relies on a recurrent cast of characters and that sees the comic aspect in tragic events. These Mento-derived characteristics make for a warmth of tone that places Miss Lou's poems firmly in the Jamaican oral tradition. Among the recurrent characters in Miss Lou's poems we find the ubiquitous Miss Mattie whom we can meet in many Mento songs. The character of Miss Mattie seems to represent the average Jamaican woman, always ready to indulge in the Jamaican pastime of “labrish.”²

This character appears in famous Mento songs like “Mother Mattie,” by the Slickers, which is included in the anthology *The Reggae Train*, produced by Joe Gibbs:

Madda Mattie whoy! Beg you hold me!
 A why mek you gwan soh?
 You wan’ to bus me belly ’pon mi tambourina
 A why mek you wheel an’ turn me?
 You wan’ me to fall down an’ bus me belly pon mi tambourina.”

Some of Louise Bennett’s most famous poems feature this character, for instance, “Colonization in Reverse” and “Back to Africa.” In “Colonization in Reverse,” the character of Miss Mattie provides Miss Lou with a ready interlocutor for her hilarious account of Jamaican immigration to the “mother country” and represents the figure of the reader or listener since Miss Lou’s poems are meant to be heard:

Wat a joyful news, Miss Mattie,
 I feel like me heart gwine burs’
 Jamaica people colonizin
 England in reverse. (*Labrish* 179)

In this poem, the character of Miss Mattie could be Miss Lou’s next door neighbour or a friend that she has just bumped into. Her function is to create the illusion of a dialogue, to inject into the poem a conversational tone: we feel that the poet is addressing a friend and we identify with that friend. In “Back to Africa,” the character of Miss Mattie seems to play a different part, representing not only Miss Lou’s interlocutor but also the view held by those who want to go back to Africa, that is, Rastafarians and their sympathizers. In this poem, Miss Lou takes the common sense view that if everybody in Jamaica or Europe went back where their ancestors were from, utter shambles would follow:

Back to Africa Miss Matty?
 Yuh noh know wha yuh dah-seh?
 Yuh haffe come from some weh fus,
 Before yuh go back deh? (*Labrish* 214)

In this poem, Miss Mattie, who symbolizes a point of view or an attitude that the poet wishes to ridicule, is repeatedly taken to task (“Den is weh yuh gwine Miss Matty?” and “Teck yuh chance,

but Matty, do / Sure o' weh yuh come from so yuh got / Someweh fe come-back to!") (Bennett, *Labrish* 215). The character of Miss Mattie appears under various guises in Miss Lou's poems and is variously called "Miss Vie," "Miss Mary," "Miss Kerry," or "Nancy." All these characters are gossips or "labrishers" and represent the warmth of village life in rural Jamaica where all kinds of information are disseminated by word of mouth. Besides symbolizing the average Jamaican and providing the poet with an interlocutor, this character's function is also to provide some comic relief in Miss Lou's account of the hardships most Jamaicans face, which brings us to a second Mento-derived characteristic to be found in Louise Bennett's poems: the ability to see the comic side of tragic events.

In an interview conducted with the poet Dennis Scott in 1968, Louise Bennett remarked, "I can portray the tragic side of things or the serious side of things; but immediately the comedy of it comes to mind and that's what I want to express" (Markham 45). She went on to quote a Mento song entitled "London Torbun," which includes the lyrics,

You no heari' wha' me heari'?
 No, no, sah.
 Me heari seh London Torbun
 Boiler bottom burs'
 Kill over nineteen man!
 Me heari seh, los'can' fin'
 Miss Matti man los' cyan' fin
 De likkle bwoy los' cyan fi. . . (Markham 49)

"London Torbun" is a prime example of Mento's ability to laugh at tragic events and to "tek bad tings mek joke."³ This characteristic of Mento also appears in a song found in an anthology of "Jamaican Calypso" released on the Treasure Isle label in the 1960's, "Hard Time" by Count Alert:

What a hard time!
 What a rough time!
 What a hard time!
 It is raging all around!

There is a little work but the pay was extra small
 And Friday when I reach home the woman start to bawl

She tell me not to worry because she's on strike
 And if she can't get money, I won't get what I like!
 (*Independence Jump Up Calypso*)

This passage is a good illustration of Mento humour: the singer manages to insert some risqué double-entendre into a tale of hardship in post-independence Jamaica, thus equating financial reward with sexual intercourse.

Many poems by Louise Bennett are characterized by that bitter-sweet humour which makes us perceive the comedy in tragic events. Three poems from the collection *Jamaica Labrish* illustrate this point: "Earthquake Night," "Yuh Nephew Sue," and "Hard Time."

In "Earthquake Night," the poet uses a natural disaster to reveal her contemporaries' foibles and weaknesses when faced with a difficult situation. Two characters are the butt of Miss Lou's humour: "Amy play-wite aunt" and "Becky Bredda." Amy's aunt seems to represent "the white bias" and the colonial mentality which at the time consisted in aping white people's behaviour. As for Becky's brother, he is the archetypal macho man whose male chauvinism is shattered to pieces when disaster strikes. Both characters are ridiculed as their cowardice is exposed: Amy's aunt takes shelter in Amy's bed as the earthquake has frightened her out of her wits, and Becky's brother starts panicking and "fine himself half-naked / Half-mile from him yard a-run" (*Labrish* 32).

Louise Bennett's Mento-derived approach is also apparent in "Yuh Nephew Sue," the poem she wrote about the hurricane that devastated the north coast of Jamaica in 1944, decapitating thousands of coconut trees in the process. The main character in this poem is a Jamaican woman named Sue who writes to her aunt to let her know about the damage done by the hurricane. She tells her aunt about the farmer's meeting she attended to ask for compensation and about her embarrassment when she realized that most of the coconut farmers present had lost hundreds of trees whereas she had lost only one. When asked by the chairman of the meeting how many trees she lost, Sue is too ashamed to admit she only lost "one" and answers "two." The humour of the poem appears clearly in the next stanza:

Him frowns and sey, "two hundred or
 Two touden tree Miss Sue?"
 Hear me "percent is hundred but
 Per tree is so-so two." (*Labrish* 34)

Sue's answer is wickedly funny in that it hinges upon a pun on the various uses of the prefix "per" ("percent" and "per tree"); it also reveals her embarrassment. Sue's foibles and human qualities are revealed in her reaction to a tragic natural disaster. The use of punning to inject a humorous note into the treatment of a serious subject is evident also in the poem "Hard Time," in which Miss Mattie, who must struggle to make ends meet, is advised by the speaker in the poem to "stretch" a one-pound note so that it will enable her to buy more things: "Me advise her fe calm herself / An try fe meck it stretch" (*Labrish* 119). Poor Miss Mattie unfortunately takes this advice quite literally and tries to stretch her pound note, which does not survive such treatment:

Wat a pity, po' Miss Matty!
 She dah-halla like ram-goat
 Sey she try fe stretch her wages
 An tear up de one-pound note! (*Labrish* 119)

In this poem the poet deals with a serious subject (the difficult period of the 1930's and 1940's) in a light-hearted manner. Punning is used as a distancing device to defuse a potentially tragic situation. Miss Mattie, like Miss Mary and Miss Vie, represents the average Jamaican who must struggle to survive; but at the same time, these characters embody foibles and weaknesses that become the target of Miss Lou's humour. More than anything perhaps, these characters symbolize Jamaicans' ability to "tek bad ting mek joke" and to look on the bright side of things.

Louise Bennett's connection with the Mento tradition is not a purely literary phenomenon: during her performances, she contributes to the Mento tradition by interspersing her poems with Mento songs. On the 1983 recording, *Yes M'Dear — Miss Lou Live*, for example, Bennett can be heard performing a spirited rendition of a traditional Jamaican "welcome song" entitled "Gal Long Time Me Never See You." It should not be forgotten that in the 1950s Miss Lou also had a career as a Mento

or Calypso singer, recording in London such Jamaican classics as "Linstead Market" and "Bongo Man" (Barrow and Dalton 8). One of her poems, in fact, makes a plea for the selection of a Mento song as the Jamaican national anthem: the poem, entitled "Jamaica Ant'em," cleverly strings together the titles of famous Jamaican folk and Mento songs:

Doah Jamaica ant'em shoulda be
 "We all a cumbolo,"
 It hooda suit one gentleman
 Fe sing "Peel head John-crow" . . .
 Den we have "Jing-bang" an "Chichi Bud"
 An "Bitta Girosee,"
 "Herring an Jerk Pork," "Ole him Joe"
 An "Sweetie Charlie" (*Labrish* 157)

Thus the Mento tradition has been an important influence on Bennett's poems. The poems borrow from the Mento tradition in their use of a recurrent cast of characters and in their tendency to deal with serious issues in a light-hearted manner. Mento embodies the spirit which one of Miss Lou's characters (Auntie Roachie) calls the "Jamaica Philosophy": "a whole heap of Culture an Tradition an Birthright dat han dung to dem [Jamaican people] from generation to generation" (Cooper 37).

NOTES

- 1 Ska: "Jamaican music with a quick, lively 1-2-1-2 drumbeat, accompanied by wind instruments, especially the trombone, and folk lyrics" (Allsopp).
- 2 Labrish: "Idle chatter; wicked gossip" (Allsopp).
- 3 This expression, which roughly translates as "to look on the bright side of things," points to the ability of Jamaicans to see the comic side in any tragic event.

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