



## Locating Tribal Cult in Tony Morrison's *TAR BABY*

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Cultural anthropology is a study of the development of human cultures based on ethnologic, ethnographic, linguistic, social and psychological data and methods of analysis which are used as a tool to earth out racial/native remnants in human mind. As a creative writer with a well – imbibed cultural past, Tony Morrison, in the novel *TAR BABY* presents the protagonist with a mental set up tracing native ethnicity.

Morrison's novels are complex presentations of ancient memory, heritage and past history of Afro-Americans. The novel *TAR BABY* shows the significance of tradition. The racial and ancestral memories are evoked through the character Son Green. Son, a Vietnam Veteran from North Florida, is on the run since the killing of his wife eight years ago. While the ship he travelled crosses Caribbean Islands, Son slips out of it and sneaks into the house of wealthy, Philadelphia-based candy king Valerian Street. Valerian is spending his retirement at the Caribbean Island – Isle of Chevaliers. Son hides himself in the closet of Margaret Street, wife of Valerian. When caught by Sydney Childs, the butler in the house of Valerian, Son is invited to stay in the house by Valerian. Angry Sydney and his wife Ondine did not like to see a vagrant undocumented Black American as a guest in L'Arbedela Croix. Their niece Jadine, a graduate in arts and a successful model engaged to a White in Paris, works as an assistant to Valerian's wife Margaret. Son made Jadine fall in love with him and went with her to New York. The culmination of the plot occurred with Jadine and Son trying to change each other to their respective ways of living – Son's ideas of racial/black unity and Jadine's Western, cosmopolitan assimilation.

A geographically fictional island, Isle des Chevaliers, represents itself as a place of tradition, myth and tribal cult with the entry of Son into the house of Valerian Street. (Arbe de la Croix...) The novel's narrative form describing the scenic beauty of Isle des Chevaliers reveals the strains like myth, the constant move or journey of native Caribbeans/West Indies/Native Americans to Europe and America resulting in the constant flux of tradition and modernity. The Isle des Chevaliers is depicted in a mythical mode. The very opening of the novel reveals nature and its resources as idea of tradition, continuity or resistance against suppression/the black's experience. When labourers from Haiti came to clear the land, wild parrots took refuge in

another place and trees in the island. They were afraid of Whites and Europeans disturbing peace and the islander's beliefs in the divinity of natural elements and resources. The river changed its course and turned itself into a demented stream. The clouds failed in providing monsoon rains and there was only occasional rain. Isle des Chevaliers, a Caribbean Island, was set in a mythical mode conveying a larger symbolic resonance. Closely connected with nature, living in union with flora and fauna, the blacks had created powerful mythologies. To quote Claude Levi – Strauss, “Among the peoples called “primitive”... Nature is preculture and it is also subculture. But it is by and large the means through which man may hope to enter into a contact with ancestors, spirits and gods. Thus, there is in the notion of nature a “supernatural” component and this “supernatural” is as undeniably above culture as nature itself is below it”(320).

The natives lived in simple mud houses without wounding the Earth. Quoting Levi-Strauss “...territory is conceived by them as “mother” so that they may neither let it go nor exchange it ... they are forbidden to “wound their mother the earth”... this is indeed a priority given to nature over culture which our civilization has also known in the past and which resurfaces sometimes in times of doubt and crisis, but which in the societies called “primitive” acts as a firmly constructed system of beliefs and practices” (321). To further the ideas and beliefs existing beyond time and space limits, one comes across talking butterflies, ghostly female presences hanging from trees, blind men riding horses from time immemorial.

Geographical location of Caribbean basin comprising Caribbean islands as well as the coastal area of the USA, South and Central America, with the diaspora of Africans, rich in uniqueness and hybridity of myth and folktales gains prominence with the entry of Son in Isle des Chevaliers. Steeped in the value of tradition Son tried to win the affection of Jadine who was broadly cosmopolitan in approach. A graduate from Sorbonne, a student of art history , a successful model in Paris, Jadine preferred Picasso to Itumba mask. Son's first marriage ,his wife's adultery resulting in her killing by him, his act of expiation missing a real life and on exile for the past eight years raised Jadine's interest for him. When accused of laziness by Jadine, Son replied that money could not attract him. Rejection of material life was the predominant characteristic of African tradition. Son was, “A man without human rights, unbaptized, uncircumcised, minus puberty rites or the formal rites of man hood. Propertyless, homeless, sought for but not after...” (165). The law and the world of the Whites which branded Blacks as criminals was rejected and abandoned by Son. By principle blacks were labelled as thieves, rapists, killers, savages. Quoting Claude Levi – Strauss”... This mode of thought by which the “savages” (or all those one chooses to qualify as such) are rejected outside mankind is precisely the most marked and characteristic of these very savages themselves... illustrates well the paradox of cultural relativism” (318 - 9). Son took Jadine to Eloë a small county north of Florida. Jadine thought Eloë as his cradle. Eloë may be of gas stations, dust, heat, dogs, shacks, general store with ice coolers. But to Son, Eloë is his life, breath, success, failure, his mother herself. In the words of Claude Levi-Strauss “The ideal is to come back home since no one will

ever leave the bosom of his mother again” (322). Jadine’s rejection of Eloë and its women hurt Son. He was sad with Jadine who called him a man with a past and no future and women of Eloë as vestiges of culture.

Son’s principles of negritude made him love ignorant Therese, Alma Estee and Gideon, proud Sydney and Ondine, orphaned West Indian girl Nommo. He was reminded of his grandmother, mother, sister and first wife and their self-assertion, respect, conformity to culture with dignity. Anything European including the educational system bereft of Black heritage and culture was immaterial to Son. The whole passive race of Africans was wiped off its tradition, continuity and history in the name civilisation, educational progress. Jadine was pointed out, that White’s educational curriculum did not teach, “...all about your mama and your papa...” (264-5). Son expected that each black should perpetuate his/her ancestral beliefs and community living. But Jadine had rejected her ancestral belief in the name of civilisation. About human races’ continuity Claude Levi-Strauss remarked “...that love for the past is a lie in cities where the need for growth has caused men to massacre all the vestiges of what they once were and of those who made them; that the cult of beauty and truth is incompatible with seashores being turned into shanty towns and ghettos and with the sides of “national” roads turn into garbage dumps”(285).

The whole of Africa abound in myth and beliefs, rituals, magical or religious observances. Every folktale is associated with phenomena turning into myth and powerful symbols. The tar baby folktale narrated by Son showed Jadine trapped in the tar pit laid by White Valerian who treated the black women as pets. Symbolically it was a trap to the black men who could be victimised by Whites. Son, a Brer Rabbit was to be trapped by the tar baby Jadine. As Jadine felt that her success was due to Valerian the Brer Fox, Valerian tried to trap Son through her. For contemporary Paris has a new interest in African things. A honey-coloured European looking beauty was a welcome in Paris. She was exotic, and sexual. Refused to be a domestic drudge Jadine chose to be the sexual choice, an alluring primitive attraction. To Jadine Eloë and its women, from the novel, were “...rotten and more bore than ever. A burnt-out place“(259).

In African societies everyone in the community must have equal share in prosperity. This is an anthropological concept known as “The Image of Limited Good”. The pie is limited and no one wants to deprive others’ share and have more. One person’s success should not be at the expense of others. The African culture is meaningful that it never boasts and is always sympathetic towards another’s misfortune. Conformity is the key in African society. Quoting Conrad Phillip, “These would include land, wealth, health, love and friendship, honor, respect and status, power and influence, safety and security” (222). Son was haunted by the image of ladies at the Pie table at Good Shepherd Church at Eloë. Jadine was influenced by Western individualism and refused to take care of her Uncle and Aunt. Jadine was selfish and she had deserted her uncle and aunt to pursue her career, not conforming to African values.

Countries with rich heritage and great past abound in legendary men and women deified. Natural resources were anthropomorphised in ancient cultures. The landscape myth – blind horse men mating with the swamp women in the trees in Isle des Chevaliers is a fusion of history and legend. The legendary/mythical version was “...one hundred black men on one hundred unshod horses rode blind and naked through the hills and had done so for hundreds of years” (206). In Therese’s memory Son was ascribed as one of the blind horsemen coming to the rescue of Jadine entrapped by White Valerian. About the universalisation of Western culture, Claude Levi-Strauss viewed that Western culture, “...has established its soldiers, its trading posts, its plantations, its missionaries throughout the entire world. It has directly or indirectly intervened in the life of coloured populations. It has thoroughly upset other traditional ways of life, either by imposing its own in their stead or by establishing such conditions that cause the disappearance of existing frame works without replacing them by something else” (346). Like most of the diasporic tribes/natives of Africa’s obsession to go back to home towns to lead a worthy life, Son’s obsession for Eloë -his home town and ancestral past, his closeness to ancestral cult is traced in this paper.

### References

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