

## THEODICY AND LOVINDEER'S 'WILD GILBERT' ON NICARAGUA'S MOSQUITO COAST

During my first period of fieldwork in 1992 and 1993, one of the recordings that I heard over and over again on the cheap portable radios owned by *costeños* (residents of Nicaragua's east coast), and in restaurants, bars and 'ranches' (nightclubs), was 'Wild Gilbert' by Jamaican dancehall DJ, Lovindeer. The song was a reggae recording featuring a comic account of the havoc wrought by the eponymous hurricane that battered Jamaica on 12<sup>th</sup> September 1998. Reggae in various forms was, and remains, very popular amongst *costeños*, particularly Nicaragua Creole English (known locally as Creole) speakers. What made Lovindeer's recording so popular was its significance for those who had experienced Hurricane Joan which had caused so much destruction to Bluefields, El Bluff, Rama Cay, Kukra Hill, the Corn Islands and the communities of the Pearl Lagoon area in southeastern Nicaragua on 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1988, only a month after Gilbert's devastation of Jamaica.<sup>1</sup>

Gilbert killed 45 people in Jamaica (as well as reportedly 330 in Mexico) (Barker and Miller 1990: 111) while Joan in Nicaragua only took four lives but each hurricane was remembered in the most badly affected areas of those countries as the most destructive in living memory. In Jamaica it did not take long for Gilbert to have acquired both a personality and 'bad boy' nicknames ('Kilbert', 'Rufus' and 'Rambo'). Joan, which came to the Caribbean hard on Gilbert's heels, missed Jamaica but was represented by some Jamaicans, partly because of its unusual

twisting trajectory, as Gilbert's wife looking for her husband (Barker and Miller 1990: 113).

Amongst the almost universally bilingual Miskitu- and Creole-speaking people of Kakabila with whom I conducted fieldwork, and where 'Wild Gilbert' was as popular as anywhere, the notion that a hurricane might have a personality was nothing new; the prevailing winds over the course of the year already had Miskitu names and personalities (Yahbra—north wind; Diwas—west or land wind; Lalma Pasa—east wind; Unghki—northeast wind; and Waupasa—south wind). However, these in some way represent part of the cosmic order for Kakabila whose means of transport and livelihoods (villagers are fisherfolk as well as farmers) were dependent on sail power, outboard motors having yet to make a significant appearance. When those winds got out of line, villagers would stand up with a machete which they might wave in the air to cut up and neutralise the 'breeze'. In more critical weather situations, villagers relied on the most powerful of the two village shamans, Dama Prophet, who would leave his magic calabash to the water's edge in order to arrest the power of the wind—most notably the south wind which sometimes brought hurricanes in October and had the power to make women cry—or the power of the wind's agent, Prahaku, a sky spirit of considerable potential malevolence.

'Why,' I asked villagers, 'if Dama Prophet is able to stave off hurricanes with his calabash, did Juana [the local name for Joan] come?'

‘Well,’ one old man told me, ‘when it’s *really* coming there’s not much you can do.’ And when a hurricane like Joan cannot be stopped by magical means, it threatens a cosmic order that ideally rewards the good and punishes the bad by wreaking havoc on good and bad alike.

Hurricane Joan punished indiscriminately, some told me, inflicting terror and destruction on everyone, regardless of their moral worth. In Kakabila, following radio warnings of its imminent arrival, Mister Whitfield called on fellow villagers to help him tie down the zinc roof of the only large cement building, the village school, so that as many people as possible might seek safety from it. (People’s houses then were built predominantly of lumber.) Some helped him, he told me; others did not. It was those who did not, he added, that were first to fill up the school when Joan arrived. Fortunately, nobody was killed or injured in Kakabila (at that time with a population of less than 300), but all households were affected, with considerable damage to plots of cassava, rice and other cultigens, and the loss of clothes, papers, household utensils and, for some, roofing. Many kitchens, then mostly built outside from sticks and leaf, were also destroyed. Though I am less familiar with details or with many personal anecdotes from outside Kakabila, similar tales of destruction were reported from other communities, especially to the south in the city of Bluefields, Rama Cay and the harbour town of El Bluff over which the hurricane’s eye passed and where entire lumber houses were destroyed completely.

Hurricane Joan’s apparently random depredations, visited on the virtuous and sinful alike it seems, demanded some kind of rationalisation. While, no doubt, many accounts of why Joan had hit Nicaragua were circulating, Lovindeer’s ‘Wild Gilbert’ seemed to offer a theodicy package, humorously expressed, that

appealed to *costeños* long after this hurricane had passed. Lovindeer’s approach in ‘Wild Gilbert’ was to present the listener with a catalogue of threats to the moral order—those rents in the protective ‘sacred canopy’ (Berger 1990) that Gilbert had visited on Jamaica—in specifically autobiographical terms. Those threats reported by Lovindeer applied as much to the Creole-speaking communities of southeastern Nicaragua devastated by Joan as those in Jamaica that were hit by Gilbert. The devastation Lovindeer reported focused at first on the losses and deprivation of the undeserving. He reports in the lyrics that, because of the hurricane, his bedroom was full of water, his bed and pets were all soaked, there was no electric light, his meat and fish had spoiled, he could not cook and was therefore now completely reliant on bully beef (corned beef) of which he was now tired, and (possibly worst of all) a cold beer now cost ten dollars because of the lack of working refrigerators. Meanwhile looters, none of whom seem to have been hurt, thanked the Lord for Mister Gilbert who had given them fridges, colour televisions, video players and stereos.

Lovindeer sings, ‘The little dog laughed to see such fun and the dish run away with the spoon’ (from the nursery rhyme *Hey diddle diddle*); at first one believes this to mean that the hurricane carried away his kitchen utensils until he qualifies it by asking if anyone has seen his satellite dish which took off ‘like flying saucer’. This is a coy intimation by Lovindeer that because he has a satellite dish, and is therefore relatively wealthy in Jamaican (and Nicaraguan) terms, he might be deserving of a levelling turn of events. Meanwhile his roof ‘migrate[s] without a visa’, a lyric that would evince a wry smile from both Jamaicans and Creole-speaking Nicaraguans, almost all of whom would know or be aware of fellow country-people who had entered the United States seeking their fortunes

without the necessary, and very hard to obtain, legal paperwork. Meanwhile the hurricane has destroyed Mister Chin's restaurant and blown down Mister Chin's grocery shop, both apparently acts of random destruction by Gilbert but possibly nods to the fact that many important businesses in both Jamaica and southeastern Nicaragua are owned by Chinese migrants and their descendants rather than Afro-descendant people (Sujo 1998: 70–75). The implication is that Gilbert might somehow have levelled perceived economic disparities between 'Chinee' people and other locals.<sup>2</sup> In these ways Lovindeer offers the listener hints that perhaps there is indeed some moral justification in what Gilbert has done after all. That Lovindeer is mindful of these political and economic imbalances is certainly suggested near the beginning of 'Wild Gilbert' when he declares with satirically acrolectal pronunciation, possibly reproducing a patronizing and almost meaningless government platitude, 'We would like to express our sympathies to those affected by Gilbert.'

This line of argument, one in which perhaps Gilbert makes some kind of moral sense, is more explicitly pursued in Lovindeer's accounts of Oliver and Natty Dread's experiences of the hurricane. Oliver's mother urges him to come inside as it becomes more intense but he laughs and tells her that it is only a 'dibby dibby' (weak) breeze, and that he wishes to experience it. In the event, as Gilbert approaches and he becomes 'vexed' (angry) with Oliver and evidently more threatening, it is Oliver—like those people who refused during Hurricane Joan to help tie down the Kakabila school roof, described above by Mister Whitfield—who is first to hide under the bed.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile Natty Dread, a Rastafarian, sees Gilbert as a messenger from Jah (God). Natty urges Gilbert to strike ('jook') the sinners he sees around him by breaking their windows,

tearing off their roofs, but sparing their lives, so that they may see how Jah and the righteous (Rastafarians like himself) 'run things'. In the end, however, Gilbert turns back and lifts Natty Dread's roof off his shack, causing consternation to Natty who had previously thought that he 'live right' (lives with moral rectitude). Gilbert then goes on to blow away 'the youth who a loot and rob'.

In summary, Gilbert, according to Lovindeer, punishes the wealthy (the Chinese businessman), those with hubris (Oliver), the self-righteous (the Rastafarian Natty Dread), and the looters, and the rent in the sacred canopy is repaired and the moral order reaffirmed.

Lovindeer's 'Wild Gilbert' was of course written for the events of 12<sup>th</sup> September in Jamaica and it was reportedly at that time 'the fastest selling reggae record in the history of Jamaican music' (Barker and Miller 1990: 107). Although they knew that this recording was written for a different hurricane, 'Wild Gilbert' for Nicaraguan *costeños* was, and is, really about Hurricane Joan where the hubris, hypocrisies, inequalities and criminal behaviour were imagined in terms that were very similar to those reported of Jamaica by Lovindeer. The themes and explanations offered by 'Wild Gilbert' represented for them, I argue here, a theodicy that made sense of their experience of the events of 22<sup>nd</sup> October, little more than a month after Gilbert's devastation of Jamaica, in southeastern Nicaragua. The sacred canopy that protected and protects the people of this region may have been blown off (perhaps to 'migrate without a visa') on that fateful day, but Lovindeer's recording represented, for those whose understanding of the cosmos as a specifically moral universe was compromised, a contribution towards its proper restoration. It is this attempt to restore the canopy or roof of the cosmos that made 'Wild

Gilbert' so popular both in Jamaica and, most significantly for me as I heard it time and again during fieldwork, amongst Nicaragua's Creole-speakers of Kakabila, Bluefields and elsewhere.

## NOTES

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- 2 See Levy (1986) for discussion of the economic niches occupied by Chinese Jamaicans.
- 3 It is said that during Hurricane Joan one Bluefields man took refuge inside his fridge.

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