

The Legend of the Great Waters of Guyana.

We all have been bred on the line that “Guyana” is the Amerindian word for “Land of Many Waters.” That reflects a deep understanding of the nature, and is truly an accurate description of the country; but with excess water we have floods, and with scarcity of water we have droughts. The Amerindians myths and legends tell of great floods and droughts. They understood the dynamic impact of these events.

In my quest to comprehend the events of the Rupununi Uprising, I came across a book that was cross-referenced. I requested it and found that it makes for fascinating reading. It points out the deficiencies in my own education of the creative myths and legends of our own people right in our country - GUYANA. These were most likely based on their own experiences. The book is: **“Legends and Myths of the Aboriginal Indians of British Guiana.” Collected and Edited by the Rev. William Henry Brett, B.D.** (Missionary in connection with S.P.G.; Chaplain to the Lord Bishop of Guiana; and Late Rector of the Parish of Holy Trinity, Essequibo.) This second edition (1870/1880) of this book was published in London by Williams Wells Gardner, 2, Paternoster Buildings. I was able to borrow a copy from the National Library and Archives of Canada (by Interlibrary loan). This book is over 125 years old. I hope there is a copy in Guyana’s National Archives. My search shows that it was republished from the original By Kessinger Publisher LLC 20/5/2003, paperback, ISBN 0766158160. It should be used in our High Schools.

In the Preface, the author states: “The chief object of the present work has been to preserve, and to give at one view, the more serious traditions - religious, mythological, and historical – of the four aboriginal races who live nearest the shores of Guiana.”

“A few of these legends appeared in a former work on Indian tribes. To them are here added the more copious results of systematic research, extending over many years. A metrical form has been added, as agreeable to the native style in former days, when their national traditions were recited with peculiar intonation – chanted, rather than told.”

“The head-men, mostly sorcerers, who guarded, and from time to time have, in the vicinity of our missions, nearly all passed away. Many time-honoured legends have expired with them, as the old state of things have yielded to the spread of Christianity... Some are very popular, and will probably continue to be told, for the purpose of amusement, over their evening fires, as long as the native languages shall be spoken.”

Below, I shall quote directly from this book (Page 62):

The Legend of the Great Waters.

Years rolled on, and men grown hateful,
Ceased their passions to restrain;
Took their Maker’s gifts; ungrateful,
Thank Him not for the sun and rain;
But forsook Him once again,
When they ceased to suffer pain.

“Kanonatu” seeing slaughter,
Acts of rapine, deeds unclean
Sent their punishment by *water*,
Which had once their blessing been.

Floods, obeying Him were seen
O'er the hills and valleys green.

Eight poor men, in that disaster,
With six women, trembling stood.
Pausing in His wrath, the Master
Saw their hearts still true and good,
Bade them take the 'bahbi' wood,
Safe to float amidst the flood.

Evil spirits of the waters
Saw them then float past undrowned.
They were saved that sons and daughters
Might again on earth be found,
And from them mankind abound,
Fish, and hunt, and till the ground.

He who saved them had provided
Land, to which they might repair,
Streams appeared as floods subsided,
One small lake shone bright and fair.
Yet of that He said, "Beware!
Shun its waters, bathe not there!"

Well our sires obeyed the warning;
Some to guard that lake they choose,
Lest some bathe, danger scorning,
There should meet with deadly foes.
Ages past. No Warou goes
Where those waters calm repose!

The above mythologies of humanity's fall, punishment by floods, God's rescue, re-population of the earth and forbidden place to trespass show a very high level of sophistication comparable to any (Hebrew, Greek, etc) that we know. I shall end with an accurate description with part of another legend (page129). **The Monkey's Exploit:** -

"See the water!" They cried,
" Pouring over the side.
See! The fishes are all swimming down with the tide.
See, the stump and roots are all forced from the ground,
And the land disappears as the waters flow round.
O man, our good leader! We cleave to thy side,
And thou for the safety of all must provide.

The monkeys were pleading to man for help from the consequences of the forces of nature; just as the people today are pleading for help from the Govt. from the consequences of man's dereliction of duty. What an uncanny analogy from the sages of the past. Unbelievable!

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