

Remarks

Dr Erna Brodber

On behalf of the Woodside Community Action Group
On receiving the Carib Cement Build Your Community Award
Tuesday, August 13, 2019

This project, the Woodside Ancestral Garden, the brain child of the education committee of the Woodside Community Development Action group of which I was chair person, has been gestating a long time. We hope that today is delivery time. In 2006, we submitted it to an agency for funding. We were unsuccessful but we were consoled to hear that the funders liked it, turned it down because we were late but hoped that we would resubmit the year after. We didn't, perhaps because we were losing our energy: three of our most committed community members and members of the executive passed away and two declared themselves too old, sick and tired for community work. We have continued to decline: our affiliated youth club given to writing and producing their own plays and staging them in and out of St Mary sometimes with financial rewards, lost members to the need to make a livelihood, to go to college, to join relatives abroad. And our administrative system by which action proceeded through seven committees, is on its face. Keeping the community as a unit has been an uphill task which could be lightened by the grant of funds to install our ancestral garden.

This project is the extension of our educo-tourism product. We the people of Woodside love our village and are fascinated by our history. For years we met to study this history, sometimes led in discussions by lecturers from the University of the West Indies. With these we attracted people from as far as Kingston and Montego Bay. One of these lecturers inspired us to write own village history, culminating in two works: *The people of my Jamaican Village* and *Woodside Pear Tree Grove P.O.* We acted out our history, in the process becoming in 1999 one of the first communities to design its emancipation celebrations. This helped to put us on the map literally and our community became seen as a model. We won

the Michael Manley award for self-reliance and a Digicel grant for our heritage tourism product with which funds we bought chairs for our community centre.

We have a history of association with various universities. It began with the University of Massachusetts which, after Hurricane Gilbert sent their students to live among us and help; our own University of the West Indies put students here to do their social work practicum and approved of us enough to send a visiting paramount chief from Central Ghana to spend a weekend with us. A student from a university in Atlanta came as did a college from Germany. We thus began to realize that we had a community tourism product which we preferred to call an educo- tourism product since our clients were students and our business was about learning, some of it structured; visitors would learn from us and we would learn from them in what we called the share-learning approach to tourism. Within this conceptualisation, Gettysburg College in the US trusted us with about fifteen students every year for ten years to do their service learning, and after them the School for international training in Vermont came, for three weeks annually and in the case of some students, for six week.

We did learn together but we did make money. We could house 30 guests in about twenty households at US\$30 per household per night. These households were vetted by our accommodation committee. The grocery stores now sold bottled water along with snacks and one was specially approved by the Woodside Community Development Acton Group as a place where students could interact with sundry members of the community playing dominoes and drinking beer. The village learnt that it had skills which were worth passing on to others with some monetary gains: The herbalist became a teacher, so did the craft worker and the youths versed in local dance moves as well as those who knew the village history, its cave structure included. Our slogan was "Our village is a hotel and college" which we actually were, but with the exit of Gettysburg College and the School for International Training, our village became a place with interesting historical sites and caves; the shared learning approach to tourism exited with the long stay visitors and we had instead one day visitors needing only a tour guide and food. The clientele continued to be students of Jamaican high schools and colleges and a new kind- people who were not only curious but attached a spiritual meaning to

what they saw. These were Tainos from Puerto Rico and Florida and African Americans and Jamaicans associated with African spiritual paths. We figured that if a livelihood was to come from these sites we should have them formally declared as national heritage sites. We succeeded with this in 2015/16 and looked for a way to maximize their worth to the community. Dr. Roosevelt Crooks, a high ranking officer in the TDPCO in St Mary/St Ann, visiting with us as we celebrated the government's definition of our historical sites as national protected heritage sites, is in print for having informed us then that with our declared sites we had great tourism potential.

Encouraged, we went back to our 2006 notion of an Ancestral Garden. Three of the declared sites were contiguous – the Anglican church which was the nineteenth century residence of the European slave master and where many Woodside people have worshipped, still do and buried their relatives, Daddy Rock which was a place where the master's African slaves retired to seek spiritual succor and the Taino/Arawak steps which led to the Taino's midden, sacred to them. These three spaces sacred historically and currently to three sets of people who lived in Woodside, begged to be treated as a current sacred space. Non Anglican Christian clergy have come to Woodside looking to proselytize, looking for a retreat in which to prepare themselves for their summer camps and looking for a picnic space for the children of their church and have made inquiries about accommodation. Our ancestral garden could fill this bill as it does on All Souls' day when the Anglican church entertains people who have buried their loved ones in the church yard. We saw how we could maintain the sacrosanct nature of this space, while entertaining more one day tourists who recognize themselves as having a religious and contemplative nature. We would make the space with the three sites into a beautiful place for them. This extended space, though now protected national heritage sites belongs to the Anglican diocese. We have sought their formal permission to do this transformation and though we have yet to receive a formal note, have heard from several clergymen including the one who serves the Woodside church, that not only has the diocese granted permission but they do like our project.

It is not only the people now resident in Woodside who love our community; past residents and past students schooled in the church building when it functioned as the elementary school, love it too. Our project we hope will facilitate not only their occasional return to sit in the garden and think on their past and their relatives, and underwrite the cleaning and care of the space but will encourage some to come back to live on the family lands which are now sources of dust ants and a home for mongoose. A sacred space as a tourism product we know, is unusual in Jamaica but we also know that our wider society suffers from having lost the distinction between the sacred and the profane. Our project hopes to return us Jamaicans to the appreciation of these distinctions with Woodside providing the nation with a working model.

There is no need for this sacred tourism to be a one day experience only. There are other significant sites with which one can also relate such as Atabey, a petroglyph discussed in the historical records since 1820 and which according to the Tainos is their earth mother and mother of their chief god Yocahu. We also have caves, significant enough to attract the Leeds University in the UK and to be pictured in Fincham's *Jamaica Underground*. There are people in the village who can make some dollars leading tourists through these caves through which the Leeds University researchers write that they have walked for nine miles and feel that they have only gone through ten percent of the way. All who have been in what is officially called, 'The Rock Spring caverns' declare that it is very beautiful. Researcher are welcome to stay with us and map the other ninety percent and tourists to enjoy the beauty of the first part, for we do have people who have been trained as cave guides and have made some money from it. We are still pleasant people. The long-stay share learning educo tourism can return, for householders are still willing to host and we still want to share-learn with people of other cultures.

Erna Brodber

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