

Cart Names in Jamaica

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VISITORS TO KINGSTON always notice and usually photograph the many pushcarts which are used for vending and for transporting goods. These brightly-painted carts appear on postcards and Tourist Board leaflets and are as distinctive a part of the city's local color as are the cable cars in San Francisco. To the tourists the carts are merely colorful items to delight their eyes and their cameras. To most residents of Kingston, they are functional parts of the city's economy. Labor is cheap, and machinery is expensive to obtain and expensive to maintain; it is often cheaper to transport goods from warehouse to retail shop by pushcart than by truck. Furthermore, the narrow streets of downtown Kingston were never designed for motor vehicles; the easily maneuverable carts are often faster for short runs.

To the onomatologist, however, these carts have a special appeal. Jamaican law requires some distinctive mark for positive identification in case of theft. A few cart owners paint numbers on their carts or attach discarded automobile license plates. A few paint their own names on the side. A few rely entirely on a brilliant and unusual color combination. However, nearly all owners give fanciful names to their carts. The mechanisms and the motives in naming these carts reflect the cultural background of the Jamaican poorer class and are therefore of onomastic interest.

Most of these carts fall into one of three types: *handtrucks*, *handcarts*, and *snowball carts*. The construction of each of these types is rigidly prescribed by tradition. One seldom finds even slight variations in construction, and the carts differ from each other only in paint job and name. The *handtruck*, sometimes also called a *jobcart*, a *carry-all*, or a *bawu* [ba'u:] *cart*, consists of a heavy rectangular box, approximately four feet long, two and a half feet wide and deep, mounted on four wheels approximately five inches in diameter.

The front wheels are attached to a cross bar which is pivoted for steering and is controlled by ropes extending to a steering wheel (usually from a junked automobile) at the back of the cart. A small platform at the rear enables the cartman to ride down hills — sometimes at terrifying speeds — and to propel his cart along level ground in the manner of a child's scooter. A trailing strip of automobile tire on which the cartman can step provides an effective brake. A raised platform at the front helps accommodate lighter but bulky loads. Handtrucks frequently carry a load of between five hundred and a thousand pounds.

The *handcart* is similar to a donkey-drawn dray. It is a flat box, approximately five feet square and a foot deep, mounted on two large wagon wheels or (if the cartman is fortunate) regular automobile wheels with tires. The cartman balances and propels a handcart by means of two short shafts which extend to the rear. The handcart is especially suited to carrying large bulky loads and is also used for vending charcoal, fish, coconuts, and other produce. The *snowball cart* is primarily used for vending "snowballs," i. e., fruit syrup poured over shaved ice, but one can usually also buy soft drinks, cakes, cookies, occasionally beer, and (rarely) an illegal tot of rum. Like the handcart, the snowball cart is a large shallow box mounted on two large wheels, but it bears an elaborate and ornamented superstructure and also a pair of legs to enable the cart to stand level when the vendor arrives at a suitable location for business. The superstructure consists of racks for bottles, a glassed-in cabinet for cakes and cookies, and a roof which extends far enough beyond the cart that the vendor and a few of his customers may seek shelter from rain.

Although a lively, original name may attract an employer, the motive in naming is rarely to advertize the services offered, for the names are seldom appropriate to the functions of these three kinds of cart. One would expect names for handtrucks and handcarts to suggest speed and reliability, and indeed one finds *The Rocket*, *Sputnik*, *Sky Rocket* | *The Uptown Contender Transport*, *Spitfire*, *The Ram-rod*, *State Express*, and *Busy Bee Tran* [presumably short for *transport*]. However, only these seven (out of ninety-three different names in my collection for these two types of cart) suggest function. Some are even antithetical to advertizing: *Romeo*, *Rabbit*, and *Leave Me Alone* hardly extol the cartman's services.

Similarly, a promotion-minded cartman would suggest cool refreshment in a name for a snowball cart, and indeed we find *Lady Foote Cooling Station*, *Summer Time*, *Menu Time*, and *Good Luck Bar*, but most names are not especially appropriate to the sale of refreshments. The name *Get There Today* suggests reliable transportation rather than cold drinks.

The name of a cart depends not on its function but on the imagination of its owner. A cart operator is known as a *cartman*, a *come-around*, or a *huutiya* [‘hu:’tije]. He usually has no long-term contracts nor fixed prices; he bargains to a suitable price for each job he undertakes, and a job may be a single load or a large shipment requiring many trips. Most cartmen own their own carts, but some rent from an owner who might have several carts and perhaps operate one himself. These owners often give all the carts of their “fleet” one name, distinguishing them from each other by numbers; e.g., *Star of the East No. 5*. As most cartmen hope to own a fleet of carts some day, some will add a *No. 1* to their cart names “to encourage me to get ahead,” and a few who own only one cart will use, for example, a pretentious *No. 6*, “just to make me feel prosperous.”

Jamaicans enjoy naming things. The place names of Jamaica are a source of onomastic delight: e.g., *Maggotty Pen*, *Look Behind*, *Corn-Puss Gap*, *Me No Sen’ You No Come*, *Half Way Tree*. Houses, trucks, sometimes even bicycles are named. Most Jamaicans give a “*nom de plume*” when buying sweepstakes tickets, not primarily (as some have supposed) to avoid their creditors if they should win, but because they hope an original and appropriate *nom de plume* will bring them luck and because thinking up a good name is part of the fun of the sweepstakes. Similarly the Jamaican cart owners explain that their motives in naming are not only to identify their property, but also to bring good luck, to catch the eye of a prospective employer with a bright and unusual name, and to personalize the relationship between cart and owner. As one man put it, “I wouldn’t paint only a number on a cart. I’d never get to know the cart then. A good cart deserves more.”

George R. Stewart has written,¹ “The essential field of the onomatologist seems ... to be the mechanisms of naming, rather than

¹ *Names*, II (1954), 2.

the motivations of the namers, except in so far as the former at times reflect the latter." The motives of the Jamaican cartmen can indeed be inferred from their mechanisms of naming, as well as from their own accounts of the naming process. Furthermore, both the mechanisms and the motives reflect the social and cultural milieu of the cartman and so are equally relevant to this study.

Nearly all the cart names may be classified on the basis of mechanism into three groups. First are names derived from other names: names of persons, places, political parties, etc. Second are names derived from topics in current events. Third are newly-created names which express the personal mood or aspirations of the owner (e.g., *I Am Lonely*). Of course these categories overlap. A cart named for a political leader, for example, belongs in both the first and the second groups. The classification is notable for what it excludes. Names are almost never drawn from history, never from trees, plants, or common utensils, seldom from animals, religion, or folklore. Few abstractions occur except those involving the personal status of the cartman. And because the names do not depend on the function of the carts, genuine descriptive names are rare.

The cartman who names his cart for a person is usually trying to commemorate a popular hero. Very seldom are the names obscure and unidentifiable, and with only one exception (*Marcus Garvey*) they are all living persons. The cartman's hero is likely to be Negro, especially a Negro who has been involved in racial controversy. This is hardly surprising in a country in which only about one percent of the population is white yet which is by no means free from color prejudice. Furthermore, most of these popular heroes are Americans. Although Jamaica is an English colony, American cultural influence has made increasing inroads through the tourist trade, motion pictures, popular music, and the American bauxite companies. Americanisms seem to be gaining in the linguistic conflicts between *gas* vs. *petrol*, *kerosene* vs. *paraffin*, *drug store* vs. *chemist's*, *aluminum* vs. *aluminium*, etc. American influences are also reflected in cart names.

Cart names which commemorate stage and screen stars include *Bob Hope*, *Doris Day*, *Errol Flynn*, *Marian Anderson*, *Paul Robeson*, *Louis Armstrong*, and *Lena Horne* — all Americans and a majority Negro. Errol Flynn is a figure of special topical interest because he

owns considerable property in Jamaica and is a frequent visitor to the island. An English exception seemed to be *Guinness*, but the cartman insisted that his cart was named for Guinness Stout. The only two athletes honored are American Negroes: *Joe Louis* and *Jackie Robinson*. Racial controversies in the American South have been extensively reported in Jamaican newspapers and heatedly discussed by Jamaicans of all social classes. Three cart names reflect this interest: *Martin Luther King* (the Alabama clergyman), *Authorine* [sic] *Lucy* (the Negro girl who recently sought admission to the University of Alabama), and *Jimmy Wilson* (whose recent death sentence inspired street demonstrations in Kingston). These names also reveal the cartman's desire for a topical name. I first saw the name *Jimmy Wilson* in August, 1958, and it must have been inspired by the earliest publicity given the case.

Other names derived from well-known figures include *Lady Foote* [sic] *Cooling Station*, referring to the wife of the popular ex-governor of Jamaica, Sir Hugh Foot, *Busta Special*, commemorating the Jamaican political leader Sir Alexander Bustamante, *Henry J. Kaiser*, whose company mines bauxite in Jamaica, and *Billy Graham*, whose recent religious meetings in Jamaica were enthusiastically attended. Some Jamaicans find their heroes in the comic strips, and we find carts named *Flash Gordon*, *Buck Rogers*, *Phantom*, *Garth*, and *Mandrake the Magician*. Rarely are persons other than popular heroes commemorated. Of the exceptions, *Rosey* and *Ruby* may be named for sweethearts and *Aunt Sue* probably for a relative. Although I am told that a few cartmen paint their own names on their carts, I have found no examples of this. *Mr. Burry Still Trying*, for example, is not owned by a Mr. Burry.

Topical cart names often reflect local politics. During the 1958 federal election campaign, I saw two handtrucks at the same street intersection, one named *PNP Forever*, the other *Busta Special*. The PNP is the Jamaican majority party, the People's National Party, and *Busta* is the popular nickname of Sir Alexander Bustamante, leader of the opposition party. The new federation of the West Indies inspired the cart names *Federation Star* and *Chaguaramas*, the latter being the American military base in Trinidad which was chosen by the West Indies as the site for the national capital and which has been the subject of considerable political controversy.

During the 1958 election campaign, an obscure street-cleaner named Zebedee Jackson was murdered while returning from a meeting of the Jamaica Labour Party and has since been considered a martyr by that party. The owner of a handtruck insisted that this was the origin of his cart name *Jackson's Labour*. However, the paint on the name was badly weathered, and the name obviously long antedated the Jackson murder. This owner had made his name more topical merely by reinterpreting its etymology.

The successful launching of the Russian satellites in 1957 captured the Jamaican imagination, and within a few days carts were named *Sattelite* [sic] and *Sputnik* (so far, I have seen no carts named for the American Vanguard, Pioneer, or Explorer). The names *The Rocket* and *Sky Rocket* | *The Uptown Contender Transport* antedated the sputnik but have become much more topical during the past year. One air-age-minded cartman named his cart *Radar* and another (which narrowly missed ramming my automobile) *The Missile*.

A religious society called the Ras Tafari is centered in Kingston. Its members wear beards and long hair, extol the superiority of Negro over white, and claim allegiance to Ethiopia, from which they claim (incorrectly) that their ancestors were brought as slaves. Many members of this cult are cartmen, and the cult is reflected in cart names: *Brother Man* is an appellation assumed by many members. *Peace and Love* is a customary greeting among members. *Back to Africa* reflects their desire for repatriation to Ethiopia, and *Marcus Garvey* commemorates the Negro whom they respect as an early leader in the back-to-Africa movement. The Ras Tafari showed keen interest and sympathy with the Mau Mau rebellions in Kenya. One bearded cartman has named his handtruck *Kikuyu* and another *Kenyatta*, after the Mau Mau leader.

Except for the Ras Tafari members, few cartmen draw their names from religion. Of course Martin Luther King and Billy Graham are religious leaders, but primarily they are popular heroes and names in the news. *Christ Mercy* is the only name whose origin is indisputably religious. Nor are many names drawn from folklore. The name *Get There Today* probably represents the Jamaican proverb, "Take time, get there today; make haste, get there tomorrow." The name *Come Make Me Hold Yuh Hand* is the refrain from a folk

song. But no other songs or proverbs and no characters from the rich folktale literature appear in cart names. The only fictional names which I have seen are *Cinderalla* [sic] and *Romeo*, neither of these from stories likely to be familiar to the cartmen. Although the Jamaican enjoys his folk literature, only recently has he been taught to respect it. Many Jamaicans will conceal any knowledge of folk lore for fear of being thought backward. Similarly many Jamaicans have been taught to despise the local dialects as "broken language" or "bush talk." The spelling of *Yuh* in *Come Make Me Hold Yuh Hand* is the only conscious attempt which I have seen to indicate dialect pronunciation. Influence of the dialect is probably unintentional in *Rain Bud* and *Me Back*. The former would make no sense as *bud*; however, the rainbird is a common Jamaican bird, and in the dialects of the lower classes, *bud* and *bird* are pronounced identically. The name *Me Back* is ambiguous in these dialects: with one pattern of stress and intonation it would mean "my back;" with another it would mean "I am back."

The social psychologist Madeline Kerr² has described the personality type of the Jamaican peasant as extra-punitive and inverted, frustrated by a conflict between cultures, between one way of life which the peasant is taught to accept as ideal and another from which he is unable to escape. Although Miss Kerr's research was confined to rural Jamaica, many of her observations seem to apply also to city laborers such as the cartmen. For example, she lists excessive hero worship and escape into fantasy as two common results of this cultural conflict. The hero worship is reflected in the many commemorative cart names already discussed. The cartman's escape fantasies also result in cart names.

The life of the Jamaican cartman is hard, compounded of drudgery, disillusionment, and dreary monotony. Some cart names seem to be attempts at compensation. Some cartmen name their carts with attributes which they wish they themselves possessed or which they wish other people would attribute to them. As one man told me, "I call my cart *Tiger Boy* because that's what I always wished people would call me." Other such names include *Spree Boy*, *Little Hero*, *Funny Man*, *Young Tiger*, *Baby Boy*, *Mambo Boy*, *Spitfire*, *Romeo*, *Rowdy*, *Happy Girl*, *Romance Girl*, and *Honey Love* (the last

² *Personality and Conflict in Jamaica* (Liverpool, 1952).

three being names for snowball carts operated by women). A few names to have been selected merely for their favorable connotations, their promise of better days to come: *Prosperity* / *In God We Trust*, *Good Luck Bar*, *Song and Dance*, and *Dawn*. A larger group reveal a desire for the exotic: *Rising Star*, *Silver Queen*, *Star of the East*, *Western Star*, *Indian Queen*, *Flying Dutchman*, *Jupiter*, *Red Eagle*.

The poor Jamaican frequently believes that he has only three opportunities to improve his lot. He naturally daydreams a great deal about these, and his fantasies are reflected in cart names. First, he may win a sweepstakes. Carts are named *Sweepstakes*, *Winning Ticket*, *Teen Ager* (the name of a winning racehorse), and *Knutsford Park* (the scene of the Jamaican sweepstakes races). Second, he may emigrate to England. The cart *S. S. Auriga* is named for a ship which, until recently, was primarily employed in carrying West Indian emigrants. Third, he may obtain a short-term work contract to do farm work in the United States and hope to return to Jamaica with enough savings to buy a piece of land or a fleet of carts. Many Jamaicans have done this, and their glowing accounts of high wages and city lights have probably added not only the ubiquitous *okay* to the folk vocabulary but also the cart names *Hollywood*, *Chicago*, *New York*, *New Yorker*, *Detroit*, *Miami*, *Michigan*, and *Idaho*. Non-American place names are seldom commemorated in cart names. The only clear exceptions are *Knutsford Park*, which is inseparably associated with the sweepstakes, and *Chaguaramas*, which to most Jamaicans is more of a current event than a place name.

Madeline Kerr also stresses the peasant's lack of opportunity for personal expression and states that this expression sometimes finds devious outlets such as religious fanaticism. A highly unusual outlet for personal expression not noticed by Miss Kerr, is the cart names. Some cartmen pour out their misfortunes, their dissatisfaction with a life which they are unable to improve. One sees *I Am Lonely*, *Lonely Boy*, *Leave Me Alone*, *Remember Me*, *Don't Gamble with Love*, *Black and Hungry*, *Man on Spot*, and *Forget Me Not*. The Jamaican laborer likes to think of himself as carrying on heroically beneath a great load of misfortunes, sustaining himself with hard work and a sense of humor. This attitude appears in the names *Little Hero*, *Little Hero's Daily Bread*, *The Toiling Boy*, *Bread and Butter*, *Daily Bread*, *Me Back*, and *Jackson's Labour* (before this last name was

given a topical reinterpretation). Nowhere have I found a more succinct expression of this common Jamaican personality type than in the name *Mr. Burry Still Trying*.³

Of course the trend is toward motor transportation, and eventually the march of progress will banish the little carts with their expressive names, leaving only company-owned motor vans, discreetly labeled *Jamaica Electronics Ltd.* or *The Times Store*. One wonders to what medium the poor Jamaican will then turn to honor his heroes, comment upon the current news, and vent his *welt-schmerz*.

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³ A small residue of names in my collection resist all attempt at interpretation. *Lockavon* may be a ship name or a place name which I have been unable to identify. *Hopewell* used to be the name of a small coffee plantation in Jamaica, but one would not expect so minor a place name to be commemorated. *Density Data* and *Immensity Data* may be merely nonsensical results of the Jamaican love of playing with big words (cf. *The Uptown Contender Transport*). And the enigmatic *Cow Head*, *Agle*, *Watch It*, *Gully*, and *Roof Cab* may represent some topical allusion or some slang or argot usage with which I am not familiar.