

Transcription of interview on Tuesday (10-12am) 6 March 2007 with Veronica Gordon in the TV lounge (air-conditioned and wired for wireless computing) at the University of the Virgin Islands, St. Croix (1000 students or so):

PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE (not to be stolen, taken away, without compensating the 'owner')

Veronica (59 years old): Before we go into any details, what kind of compensation am I to expect from this? Because ...look at it this way... the knowledge that I have came from my father and [descending down the line] from his mother, from her father, his mother, her father, his mother. So according my father's oral history of our family I am the seventh generation practising bush medicine. [My great-great-great grandparents] came off the ship with it (having medical knowledge from Africa) and the plants that were here they recognized from home. So they were used as medicines. I do believe that as they lived other plants were introduced by other people [added to the treatment repertoire producing a medically pluralistic scene] from other regions who came over and had knowledge of this. It started with this woman who taught her first son: This woman taught her first-born son, and in every generation the gender changes.

I: Why does it change?

Veronica: [For one] The American way of changing the name of the woman when she marries. In Ghana, or in Africa, the children keep their mothers name, so you go on and on and on. It changes [however] every two generations in America: the woman marries and takes that man's name and the children become his [property]. So a generation gets lost there in between: you have a daughter marrying, so it is traditional.

I did not go to school to learn any of that. Lately, within the past five years, I have taken to reading books that other people have written to increase my knowledge as far as the botanical names, the scientific names, substances, etc go. So when we are talking about this [a specific] leave, we both know that we are talking about the same thing. So this is what I am saying, my knowledge is basically traditional.

[Referring to a proposed meeting in the islands to be held at the university where I would lecture on my topic and Veronica would be a commentator] Going on a podium with all these scholars who have all this learned knowledge it's...awesome.

I: I understand, but you are not to feel that this might be an awesome setting. Quite on the contrary. It is basically a friendly exchange of ... and an opportunity for you to say and support my thesis [about Africa, the African connection, African agency]. I will be speaking as a scholar, true. But your and my message is the same: People [slaves] have been active all along, even in the very repressing circumstances of slavery. Your great-great grandmother was surely a serious, active person (fully human=she never lost her humanity), in spite of the Danish planters' attempt to de-humanize and brutalize the human soul [and body].

Veronica: Exactly. They [referring to the slaves] survived [in spite of it all], by way of gender changes in the transmission of knowledge among other things. 'Why was there a change of gender in every generation?' To survive [to confuse the colonial system and the planters], it was a survival tactic [as simple as that].

Getting back to my original question: Is there a financial compensation for me, other than a trip to St. Thomas [for discussion on the Galathea-ship, proposed for Friday 16 March] ? (Laughing a bit)

I: (explain myself) Being a researcher, I am not a government agency with lots of monies to spend. I am here to raise [and contribute to] people's awareness and the importance of the topic, and, as I told George [Tyson], this is just the beginning. I am only in the islands for two weeks, but I will be back for a much longer stay. I am this time around only in the islands for two weeks. It is basically a pilot project, to see how my thesis works and if so, I will develop this into a proper proposal and be back for a much longer period and 'hang around' as they say.

Even then, this is not going to be an extremely well-funded project [i.e. with lots of monies in it]. You know, we researchers are not extremely affluent people. We work on university-grants. At this pilot-stage, I kindly invite you to share the knowledge you have [for free]. Hopefully, in the future, we can come out with a proper role as a consultant for you, to include some monies in the budget that will be drawn up. At this stage, I can only remunerate you with a trip to meet the Galathea Expedition on St. Thomas. I hope you will enjoy it, though. There will be journalists present whose role it is to report back to the Danish public.

Veronica: Is it a refurbished slave ship or what?

I: No, it is a very modern Danish navy ship. It has been going around the globe, mostly doing biological and marine-biological research. We are very few people of my kind. The ship has been to Ghana, Accra. Since then it has continued onwards to Australia, South America. It has gone all over the globe. After the Galapagos Islands the ship will come here. It will arrive on St. Thomas in less than two weeks.

I have been looking forward to meeting you. George told me of you. I have also seen your picture on the site of *Det Dansk Vestindiske Selskab*.

Veronica: I don't know who put is there.

I: That appears to be an infringement of your rights [the picture being used without your knowledge]. They should have informed you that they intend to use it. They probably didn't intend any harm, though. They are a society which is trying to keep the Danish connectedness with the Virgin Islands alive.

Veronica: I have known George T. for many years. I told him: "I knew you when you had hair". He (George) laughed.

(Explaining that she is wearing work clothes) I work in the Forestry Department planting indigenous and endangered species of plants to be given to people who have enrolled in the *Forest Stewardship Program* (in September) for those people with large tracts of land: If you have, e.g., ten acres of land and want a tax deduction, you can come in and sign up [for the program] and say I want to leave 3 acres as bush for twenty years. In that case, the Forestry will say: "your soil is conducive to growing mahogany, etc. (other native plants), and here we have this plant and you plant it and we have certain insects, animals..."

I: How do you think the plants (similar to those that grow in Africa) came here? Were they carried by slaves as seeds? From one tropical region to another?

Veronica: ‘Some seeds came on the currents’: The slavers tried always to identify people (slaves) with knowledge about plants. Rather than letting the slaves on the ships die and dump them over the side, they must have strived to assign slaves with healing know-how (without giving them any [written] credit) to the ships’ surgeons as ‘assistants’ (after telling Veronica what a ‘poor’ job the DANISH ship surgeons often did basically resorting to 18th century Western medical knowledge, purging bodies, etc.) As brutal as the slave trade was, there had to be some concern on the slavers part to get his entire cargo over to the Americas. He wanted to ship as many slaves alive to the Americas and get duly compensated. They did not want to pick up a load and end up with half. So a brutal and gruesome as the beatings and starvation must have been, there also must have been someone on these ships who [on top of the white surgeons] were ‘entrusted’ with the health of the other captives. Someone who assisted the Surgeon [guessing in these words about a slave-based healing agency on board].

I: Right you are. Here we must guess since no written records of their agency were made. No credits were made. The same pattern is founded when negating and deleting everything slaves may have done in terms of alleviating suffering on plantations. NOT A WORD (not many words at least) is mentioned. But there surely transpired a whole lot. Here I go by my knowledge of contemporary African healing. Mothers will immediately attend to their sick children. The father may not even be informed. And the health problems are usually common things, with sometimes serious consequences, such as sores, fevers, diarrhoeas, respiratory problems, infections, etc. Surgeons were often absent. Probably resided in the towns of Frederiksted, Christiansted, etc.

Veronica: Yes, and consider that the white surgeons had to travel [to often quite distant] plantations on horse back.

I: It appears to me that the ‘African healing situation’ fits the Caribbean case. But tell me how does your healing work? How does a sick person approach you? I suspect that many islanders think of what you are doing as old-fashioned.

Veronica: Right, many consider it old-fashioned, my cures are seen as taking too long (opposite quick fixes with pills). They prefer the western medical system

I: OK, tell me please, how many come to see you? With which problems? How do they get referred to you?

Veronica: As I explained to George, there are many people on this island who have the [healing] knowledge. I travel by word of mouth. In 1998 – uh, that is a long time ago – a lady from the Methodist Church got a grant from the Humanities Council to educate the public about the [indigenous] uses of trees, and this and that ... So she contacted me and asked me if I could come and give a lecture, a walking tour really taking people up the road by the school [?] to show them plants. ‘Sure’, I said, ‘are you going to pay me?’ ‘Yes, of course, I have got a grant’. So I got there, and there were TV cameras set up. So I said: “Wait a minute”. Are we getting a guest or something”. I was then told. “You are the guest”. I said: “You didn’t tell me about filming me. You have to pay me for filming me, because once you film me, you do not need me anymore”. ‘OK’, was the reply. I was told that ‘The batteries are low though, so we can’t go up the road and have to

do everything here'. So I rushed out of the door, picked some plants up the road, came back, put them on the table and they filmed it. They filmed it, and because it was a grant from the Humanities Council they turned the film over to the Public Television Station to disseminate this to the public. In the end I therefore didn't get any money out of it.

So since 1998 the general public is aware that I am a bush doctor. Prior to that only my family knew that I have this knowledge and they would come and consult me. But only family (members). But then the public started to call me and asked me for various help addressing me 'Mrs Gordon', 'Bush Lady'. I said to myself that I am not ready for this and do not want the world on my shoulders. But the issue accelerated and then the newspaper would come and wanted to do a story about me. People would then look me up, based on the newspaper article, in the phone book and call me or people would advise one another to give me a call. But I have never advertised.

I: Before 1998?

Veronica: Nobody from the public knew, only my family.

I: The healing business is a very serious business. In Africa, knowledge is not given out easily. It may take a long time to learn from one healer to practice.

Veronica: My husband's family is a *Sackey* (Ghanaian family, Ga, Accra-area), came over from Ghana (to live here). Every four years he and some of my relatives go over to Ghana. You have to announce that you are coming two years in advance. You just don't walk in there. My husband's family came over to St. Croix not as slaves, but later. That is why my husband always stresses that I must get paid for my time.

Prior to 1998, Carol Wakefield who works at the Whim Museum somehow found out about my knowledge, maybe from a family member, and she asked me in 1993 to give a talk at the Museum about the plants that grow here. So I gave a little talk, but from 1993-1998 I remained hidden from the public's attention. Only after 1998, when they saw my picture in the paper, heard about me on TV, did the public begin to call me, to get into my life: They would, e.g., say 'George Tyson told me to call you' ... I offer one, maybe up to one and a half hour's consultation. And when you come to me, you must know what is wrong with you, because I do not diagnose. People get their diagnosis from the physician, a western doctor.

When they arrive for a consultation: First of all, I do not touch. My knowledge is not sanctioned by the American Medical Association, AMA. It wants me to pay fees to become part of their organisation. I do not find that to be proper since I acquired my knowledge apart from them. Apart from that, I have a lot of medical doctors, nurses, pharmacists consulting me about the plants in the bush. I am not part of the AMA, so I do not touch patients, so you cannot go and sue me. I disseminate my knowledge to them... '

I: Please explain me about 'not touching'. Presumably, your father (like any herbalist) touched.

Veronica: I disseminate my knowledge to them. E.g., a patient says s/he has gout. So I ask: 'Did they take tests?'

Veronica notes by way of an example of a person 'disrespectfully' (without a proper introduction and her willingness to be consulted) approaching her in the Supermarket during shopping wanting a quick opinion of what might be wrong with her skin. She is simply not willing to dish out opinions 'like that' (cf.

Fuseini, the Ghanaian, Dagomba, bone-setter mentioned by Bierlich 2007). One cannot disrespect me like that. One has to call me and schedule an appointment ...

I always ask why a patient wants my diagnosis. You have to pay me in advance, schedule an appointment, and then come and see me. [Veronica is vehemently opposed to being exploited].

I: These days there is a lot of disrespect and a widespread use of Western medicines (pharmaceuticals) around.

Veronica: My grandmother and previous generations did not ask for money (that is clearly an adaptation to the current exploitative situation). When a patient knows, I have his/her money, the patient will show up for a consultation [reason for consultations having to be scheduled], people are forced to show up and commit to my healing methods.

I: Do you ask the patient him/herself to get the plant/s needed. Do you mix/add something.

Veronica: I do not mix, do not rub, only disseminate knowledge. The patients have to work hard themselves. I say: 'Are you willing to take on the responsibility to cure yourself?' If the patient says 'yes', I know s/he is going to follow my instructions. I say: 'It takes work, since it took 40 years to poison your body, so your problem is likely not to go away within seven days or with one cup of tea. You have to work at this, to get well.'

When a plant is needed, we [the patient and I] jump into the vehicle, drive out into the bush, to collect the plant needed. I then ask the patient to taste it, to smell it ...

I then give directions of how long to take the medicine, usually for 4 months (for problems of eczema, loss of hair). Here I am not talking of small, minor, everyday problems, like a simple cold, headache, fever. Here 3-7 days are called for.

I: Let us go back two hundred years ago, to your ancestors' time.

Veronica: The vast majority here are only familiar with bush teas [generally invigorating and refreshing]. People primarily know about North-American health food. I believe that one has to eat what the soil HERE produces...It also makes better economic sense. Costs nothing to go and get the plants yourself.

I: Do you mix?

Veronica: Occasionally I need more than one plant, often a foot plant (orange juice and garlic for example). But usually one very potent plant is what is needed. My father did everything, mixing, diagnosing, etc. But I don't. I have modified his work, simplified it, since many patients these days are not willing to follow intricate directions, to follow orders. I look for the most potent plant. That I did not learn from my father. That is 'common sense'.

I: Is there a category like the Ghanaian *tim* (medicine)? It has a holistic meaning.

Veronica: There is a word (a secret word). I can't tell you. [Confirming the *holistic dimension of healing*] To heal is not an isolated thing: what did you eat for the past 3 days, the previous month? Are you married? How is your sex life? How is your social life? Do you have children? Etc., etc. I thus slowly gather info about the pt. I may find that s/he is not suffering from a

physical but a psychological problem. You do not want to treat psychological problems with plant medicine.

The nature of plant medicines

Plants – unlike pharmaceutical substances are complex. When I take people out to the bush, we do not approach the plants together. I approach the plant alone, because in my going to the plant I have to say certain prayers, pour libations, pay respect, ask for permission. I do not want the patient to see that I am performing something [that may be wrongly interpreted as] ‘doing something in a showy manner’, so that the pt. doesn’t think, e.g., that I am doing a witch dance. Once permission is granted and a pact with the ancestors has been established, I let the patient approach and pick the plant.

I: A very African pattern.

Veronica: What I have to say, is that I have to address the plant and explain that [in the future] not I but the patient will be coming. I will not come back. It is an intricate matter with plants. It is not just a matter of saying to the pt, that ‘here it is’.

I: Back to the issue of transmission of knowledge of healing:

Veronica: I am the first daughter (I have 6 siblings). My father from whom I inherited my healing knowledge was the last-born son. The first son (=my father’s senior brother who was in line to have the healing knowledge imparted) had, however, emigrated to the US. All my father’s siblings had also emigrated. My father was left here to take care of his parents. His mother was bed-ridden for many years. And first he also had to take care of his father, who had a hole in his spine. He died before the mother. In having to take care of them, he had to learn the plants. The mother would tell him from her bed: ‘Go and get this and that...’ My father, as he grew up, also saw his mother go and pick plants and go to different houses in the night for healing. So he learnt the healing aspect from her. He didn’t go with her [He was, as said, the last son]. The first son who DID learn [and was supposed to perform as a healer] died up there [US]. You are supposed to start the learning process when you are five and by twelve-years you should know everything. And from twelve to eighteen is your apprenticeship [period], when you go with the mentor to learn how to feel and diagnose. After that you are ‘on your own’. You can, however, always go back to your mentor (as long as he is alive) for a second opinion and confirmation.

When I was twelve they sent me to New York. This is why I did not learn how to diagnose, that is why I can’t touch you [The apprenticeship period, twelve-eighteen, is missing]. That is why you have to know what is wrong with you, when you come to me. I learnt all of the bush [knowledge of plants], but from twelve to eighteen I was away in New York. I resolved that I was not going to make thirty in New York, but here [home is home, her roots are in the Virgin Islands] Much as I love the convenience of everything there, I always wanted to come back here.

My father gave the land I live on [in the Forestry-area] to me, being his first daughter, and his first son. 2 acres. The place is located at ‘Grove Place’ [close to the University grounds].

Coming back, being reincorporated – people and their ancestors having been forcefully taken away and lost their family

I cannot go over to Ghana this year, although a whole contingent of my family is going. It is simply too expensive, a lot of gifts have to be given as well. I want to invest in a new truck. My old truck has broken down. The radiator went, the clutch-

I went in spirit to Ghana in 1998, when I made fifty, I charted a course: I moved St. Martens out of the way, and Guadeloupe and all these other islands and then straight over the Sea. I said to myself: I will go this way, and I won't touch any land. Cause I don't want to get stuck. So I went 'zoom' straight across and ended up on the beach [of Ghana], a beautiful beach. But as I got further inland, there was a little village further in. I could hear the sounds of people rummaging. I went to the rural area [of the village]. I left my spirit there for one week. The problem I had over there was getting off the beach, over the plants/shrubbery, to see the people, to get into the village. All I did for an entire week was walking up and down this beach and hearing voices, but nobody came to the beach for a whole week. I am looking at the plants, recognizing them, but I cannot get off the beach. This is not good, I said to myself. And as the days went on, I was getting worn down and on the 7th day I decided to go back, since I cannot be separated for so long from my family. The night of the 7th day I brought myself together and returned. OK, I did not understand what had happened, and after a while I forgot about this experience.

I: Do you dream a lot?

Veronica: Yeah, I have several recurring dreams. They are always about the bush [here on the island], me looking for something, calabashes, mangoes, seeds of trees. I collect and sell calabash ornaments and mangoes in the summer. So when the calabash-season approaches and it is time for me to collect them. I also collect seeds and make these into jewellery.

The origin of medical knowledge

When I meet someone from a surrounding island in the Caribbean, from St. Martens, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Antigua, Dominica, I always ask people about their knowledge of plants. So with that exchange, I increase my knowledge of healing plants. And if I want to learn about the chemical components of the plants, their constituents, then I go to my cousin, who has book-knowledge of plants. He is a botanist or Rudy Riley, another botanist. So I use the knowledge I gain from people, botanists, and others.

I: what do you do about plants that do not grow here?

Veronica: I look for local substitutes by going by the chemical components. For example the leaves of: the *Sour Sap* leave of the *Sour Sap*, if you drink it in tea on a regular basis, for several weeks, and then you go to do a blood or urine test, it will show that you have marijuana in your blood, as though you had taken marijuana in spite of you only having taken *Sour Sap*. So it is things like that.

I: what do you think about taking western medicine on board?

Treatment of Illness and the Locality of a Person

Veronica: If a person lives in a foreign place (e.g., in the US), there is no use for sending a person to the bush. I will rather enlighten that person about the plants we have here and that can treat one or the other problem, but because he cannot get it there and because he is eating of the soils there, it does not make sense for me to dry plants and send them to that person every other month or so. I do not force anything on the person living elsewhere. Rather: 'Let me know what you have, what is useful to you.'

I am always looking for the root problem of the ailment. But if it is a common cold or fever, no explanation is needed and it is treated immediately. But if it is something bigger than that, we have to find out what caused this. E.g., If the leg is swollen is it related to a problem of the kidneys, the bladder? I always go into diet and inquire where a person works, what he eats, etc. Usually my consultations take an hour and a half. If the disease is a physical one [has a biomedical basis], then ..., but if [on the other hand] it is a psychological problem, then I stop the consultation.

I: We may live in modern times, but 'tradition' is very much alive

Veronica: I do not have any supernatural powers, only knowledge of plants to help me ward off evil intentions directed at me. That is all.

Length of Interview: 01:18