

# "IN THE FIFTH CITY"

## *An Integral Chapter of* "The New Ancestors"

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**D**AVE GODFREY'S NOVEL *The New Ancestors*<sup>1</sup> contains one very puzzling chapter entitled "In the Fifth City." The book's other five chapters are set in Lost Coast, a fictional representation of Ghana; the surrealistic action of "In the Fifth City" takes place in countries to the north of Lost Coast and it is difficult to relate this action to the rest of the novel. Far from being gratuitous, however, "In the Fifth City" is an essential chapter, an understanding of which is crucial to a meaningful study of *The New Ancestors*. An analysis of the structural shape of the book provides a way of seeing how "In the Fifth City" functions within the novel. By examining the significance of the *kambu* ritual so central to this chapter's theme, one comes to understand what Godfrey learned from Africa, especially about the political position of the foreigner living there.

The Lost Coast chapters concern the activities of Michael Burdener, an Englishman teaching in Lost Coast, and of various characters connected to him. Married to an African woman, Ama, Burdener becomes involved in politics in this African country through his association with his brother-in-law, Gamaliel Harding, and with Harding's half-brother, First Samuels, also known as FS. Gamaliel is a loyal spokesman for the country's leader, Kruman, who is often referred to as the Redeemer. First Samuels supports the Redeemer initially, but later joins a group of counter-revolutionaries plotting to overthrow Kruman because they view his regime as corrupt. Eventually political and personal animosities lead FS to murder Gamaliel Harding. Michael, Gamaliel, and First Samuels are all opposed to Rusk, an American meddling in an unspecified way in the affairs of Lost Coast. Following Gamaliel's murder, First Samuels is himself killed, perhaps by Rusk, and Michael Burdener is expelled from Lost Coast. Rusk's fate remains a mystery. Although in the Fifth City chapter he is murdered numerous times in a variety of ways, the Lost Coast chapters tell us only that Rusk has disappeared.

The narrative technique of "In the Fifth City" distinguishes it from the rest of the novel. The chapters set in Lost Coast — namely "Prologue," "The London Notebook," "A Child of Delicacy," and "Freedom People's Party," which precede the Fifth City chapter, as well as "Agada Notebook," which follows the

Fifth City — are each associated with a particular point of view. "Prologue" deals mainly with the situation in Lost Coast as seen by Geoffrey Firebank, a British expatriate. "The London Notebook" concentrates on the thoughts and jottings of Michael Burdener. "A Child of Delicacy" consists of the stream-of-consciousness musings of Michael's wife Ama. "Freedom People's Party," while departing more from the single point of view than the preceding chapters, treats events, mainly political, in which First Samuels is involved. "In the Fifth City" has much more frequent changes in point of view, an indeterminate number of narrators in fact. With "Agada Notebook" which ends the book, we return to Michael Burdener's point of view.

The contrast between the narrative technique in the Lost Coast chapters and that in "In the Fifth City" is of structural importance. We observe a progression towards a more and more African look at events, a progression which culminates in "In the Fifth City." The first narrator, Firebank, is an outsider like Michael Burdener, but more detached and isolated than is Michael. Firebank observes his surroundings from inside a car for a good part of the chapter, and reads about political events in the newspapers. "The London Notebook" shows us Michael, sometimes in London, but mostly in Lost Coast, attempting to understand and become involved with Africa. The chapter ends with his decision to say "yes" to Africa. With Ama narrating the next chapter, we move inside the mind of an African, yet it is an African who has been subjected to Western influences through her husband. First Samuels' chapter progresses one step further into the African consciousness. Its somewhat inconsistent point of view serves as a transition into "In the Fifth City" wherein the perspective shifts constantly. "Agada Notebook" suggests a movement back out of Africa through the fact that Burdener narrates, this time as he prepares to depart from Lost Coast.

The shifting perspective in "In the Fifth City" is meant to represent African thought patterns as opposed to European. In this one chapter there are an indefinite number of narrators and it is not always easy to ascertain who is speaking. In addition, here we encounter a "voice" resembling that of an omniscient narrator. This voice makes remarks which amount to authorial intrusions, drawing attention to the fact that the speaker is responsible for ordering the details of the chapter. For instance it says, "We have heard that description already, or would you like it repeated now. I think not." Another similarity between the "voice" and that of an omniscient narrator is that "the voice" knows how the story is to be interpreted. Paradoxically, what it knows is that the story is to be interpreted by taking into account a number of points of view. To discourage the reader from accepting any one version of events, it repeatedly uses such expressions as "perhaps," "or else," and "yet if," denoting that there are a number of possibilities open. A contrast is established between the European mind seeking absolute answers, and the African mind accepting diverse answers simultaneously.

In considering the function of this "voice," it is important to note its association with one of the characters in the chapter, Burr. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between Burr and the "voice" as narrator. A complication arises here because, as critic Robert Margeson points out, Burr is the Fifth City equivalent of Michael Burdener.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Margeson indicates that a possible link between the Fifth City chapter and the rest of the novel is to be found in Michael's dream described in "Agada Notebook": "He dreamed that night of hatred and tossed in his narrow and disease-infected bed. In his whore's room. Cursing the secrecy. Living and reliving Rusk's death and the arrival of the military figures." Since Rusk's death occurs repeatedly in "In the Fifth City," there is some justification for connecting the chapter with Michael's dream. Additional support for this theory comes from the fact that one senses a similarity between Michael's arrogant tone in "The London Notebook" and the tone of the guiding voice in "In the Fifth City." Scientific jargon and French expressions feature also as factors common to the two narrators.

What results, then, is an association between Burr (and therefore Burdener) and the "voice," suggesting that Burdener holds a special place among the narrators of the novel. This leads to a possible theory concerning the narrative structure of the book. All of the narrative voices, while they are not quite aspects of Burdener's personality, represent phases through which Burdener passes or wishes to pass. Thus the Englishman, Firebank, stands for the position of outsider which Burdener rejects. The African narrators, Ama and First Samuels, offer a view of things African which Burdener wishes to attain. The desire for total immersion in the African consciousness is fulfilled through fantasy in "In the Fifth City" but negated in the book's final, more realistic chapter.

Although this structural analysis may help in a general way to establish the place of the Fifth City chapter within *The New Ancestors*, much of the chapter and indeed the novel remains a mystery unless one investigates the significance of the *kambu* ritual. An understanding of this fetish reinforces what has been said thus far about narrative technique and also links the Fifth City thematically with the Lost Coast chapters.

THE NOVEL OFFERS LITTLE DIRECTION on the subject of the *kambu*. Godfrey states in an interview with Donald Cameron: "There's a whole voodoo level in *The New Ancestors* which no one has discovered yet."<sup>3</sup> However, he gives no hint where the reader is to look for further information about the voodoo involved. A book by Horace Miner called *The Primitive City of Timbuctoo*<sup>4</sup> provides a very helpful explanation of North African fetish practices.

Miner tells us that *kambu* means tweezers or tongs. The fetish objects made in Timbuctoo consist of a pair of metal tongs. Between the ends of the tongs a

written charm is placed; a piece of cloth from a saint's tomb or from a shroud is sewn to the tongs; four cords, red, white, black and yellow are tied around the *kambu*. The sorcerer speaks secret words over each cord. The blood of a white cock known as *bono dyongu* is smeared over the *kambu* and then the fetish is placed in the belly of the dead bird. The sorcerer drives spikes into its wings while chanting a secret incantation. He feeds the *kambu* chewed kola nuts at specified times while reciting the Moslem *ġâtiġah*. The blood of a sheep is put on the fetish every ten days, and after forty days the *kambu* is removed from the bird's belly. When the sorcerer pulls the coloured cords the *kambu* speaks words which the sorcerer interprets. After it has spoken, the *kambu* is placed in a leather sack. The sorcerer continues to administer kola nuts and cock's blood weekly. When he wishes to use the powers of the *kambu* for divination or to destroy enemies, he winds one of the cords around the body of the fetish to make it speak again. Three times the *kambu* is placed in the sun until it becomes shaded, and then it will do what is required of it.

In the course of describing the *kambu* ritual, Miner points out that the African's faith in the sorcerer's magic is based on a frame of reference quite alien to a Westerner's concept of reality. He also notes that there are a number of variations in the procedure used to create the *kambu*:

The difference between the native and myself is not in our manner of thought or in what we observe. We differ in the nature of the techniques in which we place our faith. The technique of the doctor is no more rational than that of the sorcerer. Rationality operates within a set of logics — a frame of reference. The techniques of the doctor, however, are more practical. It is this secular factor of efficiency, recognized by every man, which leads to the ultimate dominance of the doctor's techniques in my cultural order.

To return to the realm of logic of the smith whose ritual was just described, he affirms that he would use the *kambu* against anyone who worked in a metal other than that which his forbears used. It will be recalled that the smiths are family guilds specializing in particular metals or combinations of metals. It is said by some that *kambu* made of iron are all-powerful. Those made of copper are only effective in witchcraft against children or in their protection. *Kambu* of brass can only protect against health and wealth. The colors of the *kambu* cords have special significance. When the fetish is to be used to make a victim sicken or die, the particular colored cord selected to tighten around the *kambu* depends upon the skin color of the victim. Thus, the black strand is used against Negro Bela and Gabibi, the red against Arabs, and the yellow against the French.<sup>5</sup>

In the Fifth City chapter, certain details concerning the *kambu* underline the distinction already noted between African and Western thought. One example is the following passage:

Whatever the texture of the metal, whatever the purpose — even if merely the brass which causes children to sicken and die — the important factor is the words that are spoken, the story that is told before the *kambu* will take on life and begin

to move in the sun like the rest of us. The charm that is written upside down and placed between the tongs, the charms which fill the skull of the *bono dyongu*, the victim of the hundred heads, are important also, but more important are the words that are spoken as the smith attaches the four cords, the words that Burr speaks as he drives the two spears through the arms of his father to spreadeagle him in the burning sun, the daily chanting of the *fâtiha* morning and evening as the *kambu* is fed with chewed kola, the final words which are spoken as the living force is drawn from the cavity of the decayed victim. Look closely. You will see where we have hidden these words. If your desires are truly one with ours you will have no difficulty in deciphering them. This is not it:

$$X = \frac{k}{2m} t^2 + at + b$$

The dismissal of the scientific formula, an equation of motion in a classical sense, suggests that this kind of Western science is not the answer to an understanding of the chapter's message. Further explanation of the gap in outlook which prevents Westerners from understanding comes in a section concerning the Dogon story-teller (the story-teller is a blacksmith or weaver, a fact which establishes a connection between the art of creating a *kambu* and the art of story-telling):

an old man of the Dogons is called in, a blacksmith or a weaver, and lectures begin, or perhaps stories would be a more exact word. Certainly begun is a fixed word, for wisdom is a wife not a whore, and if the listener were French or Arab, what difficulties might not be present because of ancient enslavement recorded in this man's memory, sons conscripted for wars and lying dead and sullied in Verdun or Morocco, ancestors mutilated in war, villages destroyed, grinding stones broken. Yet if the listener walks beyond all that, slow wisdom and enrichment. An ancient pattern of patterns of the universe revealed.

What Godfrey does, then, is to contrast the logic of the oppressor and the magic of the oppressed. In the Fifth City chapter, as in the *kambu* itself, we are confronted with words acting as a charm, not as a means of designating something which Westerners would consider rational. Thus the meaning of the chapter comes largely from the spell created by the words. In the Lost Coast chapters, we find a series of individual views of the truth all of which make up a consistent story; in the Fifth City chapter, we gain slow wisdom and enrichment through the multiple perspectives, contradictory though they may be.

WHAT HAS BEEN SAID THUS FAR should clarify the relation between "In the Fifth City" and the Lost Coast chapters as far as structure and style are concerned. There remains the question of theme: with Miner's information about the *kambu*, one is better able to appreciate what "In the Fifth

City” implies about ancestry and neo-colonialism, central concerns in the rest of the novel.

By comparing the details of Miner’s description of *kambu* with the ritual we witness in the Fifth City, we find that the ritual has been considerably altered such that sometimes Rusk’s murder becomes part of the *kambu* ceremony. Sometimes his blood is used instead of the cock’s, and his skull is part of the ritual object. That the traditional practice is not being strictly followed is clear from the following passage: “Gazing at the skull, the three men, the three sons, the murderer brothers, encourage one another. None are reticent about inventing ritual.” Significantly, the three are described here as sons. The three people who are present when the skull is mentioned are Burr, El Amaliel, and Effez, the Fifth City counterparts of Burdener, Gamaliel, and FS.<sup>6</sup> Evidence that the skull is that of Rusk, and that Rusk is being called “father” comes when the skull is placed in the leather sack and the question is asked: “What memory of the potent colonel father does this leave us with?” Rusk himself says at one point: “You do not wish to hear how my sons rose against me.” Perhaps the most telling quotation on this subject is this one: “The men are peacefully remorseful. The difficult adjustments which follow the killing of the father and the realization that none, now, may occupy the place that all have dreamed of within their hatred, are completed.” It seems that the American, Rusk, provides a focus for the hatred of Effez, Burr, and El Amaliel in the same way that a father or an oppressive authority figure might do.

The alteration in the use of the *kambu* ritual indicates a changeover from acceptance of African myth to acceptance of Western myth. African tradition demands respect for the elders: the influence of Western values has reversed this, requiring that the fathers be killed in order that the young may take over. The contrast between the two systems is expressed in a remark Godfrey makes to critic Robert Weaver. Weaver says: “Godfrey told me recently that he brought out of Africa a sense of ‘the determination that is built up in a family from generation to generation’ and which to him is opposed to the American dream where ‘Adam is reborn for each generation.’” It is the former which is giving place to the latter in the symbolic proceedings in the Fifth City as well as in the machinations of the young counterrevolutionaries in Lost Coast.

The political implications of Rusk’s death require some explanation. Although the murder takes place in the Fifth City and thus can only be seen as part of a dream, the fantasy described in that chapter is related to political events in Lost Coast. Burdener’s dream in the final chapter has already been mentioned as a linking factor in this respect. It is important to note that Burdener invents scenes in which “the reactionaries were destroyed. And the revisionists were redeemed.” Through a series of details in “In the Fifth City” the ritual killing of Rusk is connected to Burdener’s wish for the political redemption of Lost Coast. The

murder seems to be a means of protecting the Redeemer, Kruman, and thus assuring the future of Lost Coast. Clues about the motive for the murder come from a conversation in which Donald asks El Amaliel why the men want *kambu*. "Someone important asked us to obtain it," "Someone who desires *kambu*," and "You would have to return with us to the rain forest to discover." The important person is perhaps the redeemer himself who has sent these men on a mission from Lost Coast. Other links with Kruman are established. In his speech to Rusk, El Amaliel says: "you're made me a fraud and my redeemer a crook by precisioning yourselves into gold machinery which only *kambu* will destroy. . . ." Also, a line in "Freedom People's Party" informs us that Kruman wore Nehru suits in an early stage of the revolution. In the Fifth City chapter, a girl sews a miniature Nehru jacket of blue silk and gold thread. Other references indicate that the tongs of the *kambu* are wrapped in blue cloth, presumably the same blue silk jacket. According to traditional practice, the tongs are wrapped in a shroud of a piece of cloth from a saint's tomb. It would appear that a miniature of Kruman's Nehru jacket, symbol of an earlier uncorrupted era of the revolution, is being substituted for the saint's shroud. From all this we conclude that Rusk's killing, at least in this instance, is a political murder, meant to further the cause of the revolution by restoring it to its purer state.

Any suggestion that political murder represents a solution to the oppression of Lost Coastians is undercut, however, by the irony and ambiguity with which the murder is handled. An identification between oppressor and victim contributes to this irony. Blatant anti-American sentiment is expressed throughout the novel, especially by Burdener, but also by FS and Gamaliel. The Americans are viewed as powerful imperialists using force to advance their country's interests. The focus of this hatred is Rusk, yet Rusk's role is never clarified. One realization that Michael reaches is worth noting: "His [Rusk's] purpose is exactly similar to ours. Up to a point." More specifically, this purpose is "encouraging chaotic conditions." Although their ideals may differ, both Michael and Rusk are outsiders interfering in the internal politics of Lost Coast. Thus the oppressor Rusk and the victim Burdener — a victim because he sympathizes so strongly with Lost Coastians — are not unlike.

The most striking similarities between Rusk's role and Burdener's emerge when one considers the significance of the term *pharmakos*, a word used several times in "The London Notebook." In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye defines *pharmakos* as: "The character in an ironic fiction who has the role of scapegoat or arbitrarily chosen victim."<sup>8</sup> He also tells us: "The *pharmakos* is neither innocent nor guilty. He is innocent in the sense that what happens to him is far greater than anything he has done provokes, like the mountaineer whose shout brings down an avalanche. He is guilty in the sense that he is a member of a guilty society, or living in a world where such injustices are an inescapable part

of existence.”<sup>9</sup> The term *pharmakos* is Greek; Jane Harrison in her *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* explains the function of the *pharmakos* in Greek society. The leading out of the *pharmakos* was part of a festival in Athens. The victim was expelled from the city and beaten to death, both to drive out evil influences from the city and to relieve the feelings of the beaters.<sup>10</sup> The above passages bring to mind Rusk’s treatment in the Fifth City. In effect, Godfrey has created a hybrid of *pharmakos* and *kambu* rituals in which Rusk serves as sacrificial victim.

The further association between Burdener and Rusk comes from the fact that the word *pharmakos* is used in *The New Ancestors* with explicit reference not to Rusk but to Michael. Michael opens his London Notebook by stating: “I know how I am spoken of, perhaps that is the first thing to set clear; in the whispers, in analysis and in loud goatish laughter. *Pharmakos*.” He claims that the Africans victimize him, criticize and mock him, blaming him for their troubles simply because he is white.

Burdener’s name denotes his situation: he bears the white man’s burden in Africa, being held responsible for the acts of his compatriots. Similarly, Rusk is blamed for the imperialist policies of his home government. In fantasy at least, Burdener and his African friends persecute Rusk because of his nationality. Thus Michael’s statement about the duality of his own identity becomes noteworthy: “Forget what I am: *pharmakos*. I do not know myself what I am. Michael Burdener named. *Pharmakos* and creator of victims and tormentors.” While Michael is victim of the Africans and the Americans, he is the tormentor of Rusk and, in the minds of some Africans, just as much an expatriate neo-colonialist as is Rusk; while Rusk may be an exploiter of Africans, he himself is victimized eventually. Thus Michael and Rusk occupy ambiguous positions in relation to one another and their roles in the two contrasting portions of the novel are inextricably intertwined.

Having recognized that the Fifth City chapter is not logical, the Western reader is still tempted to sift through its contents, trying to arrive at a rational interpretation. What makes “In the Fifth City” such a rich chapter is the fact that it so strongly resists this approach. In effect what one must do in reading the chapter, indeed in relating it to the whole novel, is to view it as one is told to view the cords wrapped around the *kambu* fetish: “The yellow winds. The black winds. The red winds. The white winds. You must observe all the colours. What else provides the bulk?”

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Dave Godfrey, *The New Ancestors* (Toronto: New Press, 1970).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Margeson, “A Preliminary Interpretation of *The New Ancestors*,” *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 4, no. 1 (1975), 99-100.



- <sup>3</sup> Donald Cameron, *Conversations with Canadian Novelists Part Two* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), p. 36.
- <sup>4</sup> Horace Miner, *The Primitive City of Timbuctoo* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), pp. 109-12.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.
- <sup>6</sup> Margeson, pp. 99-100.
- <sup>7</sup> Robert Weaver, "Reviews," *Macleans*, 84 (February 1971), p. 57.
- <sup>8</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), p. 367.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- <sup>10</sup> Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), pp. 95-98.

## DIANE ARBUS: GROUND GLASS

*Kenneth Sherman*

You grew up  
peering from behind smoked glass  
your schooldays private,  
privileged.

Freaked by surfeit of attention  
the unreality of your class,  
you by-passed fictions  
saying *ground glass does not lie*.

Who could escape  
the vicious scrutiny  
of that wide eye, a voyeur's  
insatiable hunger?

I can hear the film's manic whirr,  
the clack clack of the shutter  
as you move in, as you  
work

pushing the real  
towards the fantastic