

# QUEENS OF THE VIRGINS: ANCESTRAL VISIONS IN CONTEMPORARY VIRGIN ISLANDS FOLKLORE AND DRAMA

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This article explores the fusion of language, culture, traditional folklore and heritage in the sacred and secular literary traditions of Virgin Islands' (VI) history specific to VI women freedom fighters from 1733 to 1892. The particular aim of this work is to shed light on the cultural diversity, language, dramatic traditions and living folklore that portray the life and work of Queen Breffu, leader of St. Jan's (St. John's) 1733 'Slave Revolt'; Queen Mary, leader of St. Croix's 1878 Fiyahbun (Fireburn); and Queen Coziah, leader of St. Thomas' 1892 Coal Workers Strike. Excerpts from the 2006 Per Ankh Institute production performed in St. John, St. Thomas and St. Croix entitled 'Queens of the Virgins: A Living Chautauqua' will be utilized to illustrate how ancestral voices, a rich dramatic cultural heritage and multi-dimensional extensions of the themes of strength, power, freedom, Afrakan spirituality and self-determination are integrated in contemporary VI drama, folklore, poetry, literature and oral tradition.



Historically documented narratives are intertwined within extended dramatic prose here to reveal the perspectives of the multi-faceted cultural heritage and folklore of pre- and post-enslavement experiences of people of Afrakan ancestry in the VI and its' neighboring islands of the Eastern Caribbean. Culturally diverse linguistic and dramatic folklore are shared through the presentation of narratives and contemporary cultural performances synthesized from select Danish, French, Spanish, Dutch, British, Caribbean and Afrakan archival documents on the actions for social change initiated by the freedom fighter 'Queens' of the VI.

From ancestral times, Afrakan culture and the nations of long-standing strength, have been matrilineal and in some instances matriarchal. So, it is common for women to be recognized as 'queens'. It is customary and part of the cultural traditions of people of

Afrakan ancestry within the Virgin Islands and other Afrakan-populated Caribbean regions, to honor women as ‘queens’ based on their leadership, service to the people of their respective communities, spiritual & healing gifts, and for their enduring strength as the mothers, nurturers, warriors, healers and caretakers of our people. Historically, great Queens of Afraka, like Nefertari, Hatshepsut, Makeda, the Candaces, Nzingha, Al-Kahina, Yaa Asantewa and many others set examples, forged paths and offered shoulders of strength as matriarchs of both patrilineal and matrilineal societies for generations to come for women and men of the Virgin Islands and beyond.

Folkloric cultural arts have the capacity to honor the contributions, progressive actions, historically accurate roles and long-term impact of men and women of societies of the remote and not so remote past. The Queens of the Virgins is a dramatic and theatrical work that juxtaposes the counter-productive and anti-emancipation based actions of the planter class with the diligence, revolutionary consciousness and life-centered steadfastness of these three female leaders.

Chautauquas are historical narratives presented as personal testimonies of individuals that have impacted the social, political, cultural & spiritual traditions and/or general transformations of a specific community. “A Chautauqua is a first person historical characterization or monologue based on biographies and historical information. It includes questions and answers during the performance” (VIHC: 2006). Chautauquas are designed to provide the general community with a historically correct and culturally accurate presentation of the characteristics, actions and words of a specific individual and provide the community / audience with an opportunity to interact with them as if they were amongst us today. In contemporary settings, a Chautauqua is a community presentation that is designed to highlight the collaboration and integration of art, culture, language, tradition, spirituality and education with a professionally creative synergy that enhances understanding and humanitarian camaraderie amongst all members of a community.



Most published research on and documentation of 18<sup>th</sup> century VI history and culture was composed primarily by patriarchs of the European planter class, with only a few narratives recorded by common people, much less persons of Afrakan ancestry. Although contemporary historians and scholars identify many women as historical ‘Queens of the VI’, they haven’t even begun to account for the number of women who achieved the

title of ‘Queen’ in pre- and post-colonial Virgin Islands’ society. “In St. Croix, ... Estate slaves elected Kings and Queens, Princes and Princesses, Maids of Honor and Pages; a somewhat more formalized structure than anything reported in St. Thomas.” (Hall, 1992: 118)

Freedom fighter Queen Breffu was a pioneer revolutionary leader within the St. John Insurrection by enslaved Afrakans of 1733-1734. Queen Breffu was an enslaved Afrakan from the continental motherland of Afraka. She was originally identified as belonging to the Akan ethnic group of the Gold Coast region of West Afraka (Ghana) in an area near the El Mina Castle and Fort - (hence people from that region are commonly misnamed as the 'Amina'). Research in Togo, Benin and Zaire has since yielded documentation of Queen Breffu's origins being more complex. It has been argued in work from the Cheik Anta Diop Institute and elsewhere that she was captured from the interior of the Afrakan continent (perhaps somewhere in Central Afraka) by Afrakan intermediary enslavers and subsequently sold off to European enslavers on the Gold Coast with her ultimate destination being the then Danish West Indies. Queen Breffu's contributions to the revolution and temporary popular government of St. John by enslaved Afrakans in 1733 exemplified her loyalty to family, freedom, liberation, harsh warrior-ship and emancipation. Queen Breffu's leadership in maintaining the stability of the slaves' Estate Fortsberg stronghold following their actual attacks against the landed plantocracy of St. John exemplify a Candace and Amazonian type training that was common amongst the royal warrior class of the Gold Coast.

The impact of enslavement upon the psyche of enslaved Afrakans, especially the women, was shaped by the economic ascension of the planter class on the one hand and the social promotion of revolutionary women leaders as queens within Afrakan communities on the other. Consequently, as was common amongst enslaved Afrakans, the possibility of *marronage* was considered by Queen Breffu virtually immediately after her forced arrival to St. John in the 1730's.

"Slavery had created the pernicious tradition that manual labor was the badge of the slave and the sphere of influence of the Negro. The first thought of the Negro slave after emancipation was to desert the plantation, where he could, and set up for himself where land was available. White plantation workers could hardly have existed in a society side by side with Negro peasants...Negro slavery therefore was only a solution, in certain historical circumstances, of the Caribbean labor problem. Sugar meant labor - at times that labor has been slave, at other times nominally free; at times black, at other times white or brown or yellow. Slavery in no way implied, in any scientific sense, the inferiority of the Negro. Without it the great development of the Caribbean sugar plantations, between 1650 and 1850, would have been impossible."  
(Williams: 1944: 29)

Excerpts from the 2006 VI Chautauqua presentation and forthcoming film production entitled the 'Queens of the Virgins' shared by the dramatic and living embodiment of 'Queen Breffu' include the following:

*"I am Queen Breffu  
I am a Warrior Queen  
I am one of the women who lead our war for the liberation  
Of Our people stolen from our home along the*

*Gold Coast of West Afraka*  
*We are not slaves to do the bidding of cruel enslavers*  
*Our experience as enslaved ones here on St. John*  
*Is for those that are part of the slave class*  
*I come from one of the most powerful nations of the Gold Coast*  
*I am of the Akan nation amongst*  
*A people who speak the Twi language*  
*From the El Mina region who has no fear to use force*  
*No matter how cruel to free*  
*We deserving ones from these colonialists*  
*Who are beneath us*  
*Many in the west have created a term for us*  
*“Amina” people or “Amina Negroes”*  
*Forcing an incorrect name upon us is*  
*A violation of our self-determination*  
*We know to govern ourselves*  
*Within the Akan nation,*  
*Even the Ashanti and Fante have developed confederacies*  
*That remain powerful throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century*  
*Our neighbors of the Akwamu nation*  
*Are the forerunners of the source of slaves for the slavers—*  
*They are the fierce ones who captured and*  
*Sold Afrakans of many nations into slavery...*  
*Our neighbors who had aided us with*  
*Experiences with trading with the*  
*Portuguese and others are of the Ga nation*  
*Our enslavers and colonialists view*  
*Us as a warring and cruel nation*  
*This warrior spirit increases when*  
*We are stripped, raped, tortured and*  
*We say “A family is like the forest,*  
*If you are outside it is dense,*  
*If you are inside you see that each tree has its’ own position”*  
*...We gathered the morn’ of November 23<sup>rd</sup> by the Coral Bay Fort*  
*We carry wood supplies to the fort just like any other day*  
*This day, we hid cutlasses and weapons inside our wood bundles*  
*...By May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1734 scouts shared reports*  
*24 rebellious maroons found dead at Mary’s Point (Ram’s Head)*  
*Our people choosing freedom in death before bondage in life*  
*Many claim I was one of those found dead*  
*In this unbroken circle of broken muskets, blood and corpses*  
*We Afrakans wage war against our enemies without remorse*  
*Like many of our ancestresses who are queens of empires...”*  
 (Kahina: in VIHC, 2006)

Freedom fighter Queen Mary was a laborer, leader and woman of revolutionary change who led enslaved Afrakans in the St. Croix Fireburn of October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1878. Queen Mary worked on sugar plantations and records of her life affirm that she had a free-spirited mind of her own. After VI Emancipation in 1848, persistent imbalances

of power and inequities in the treatment of former slaves had brought tensions to the boiling point across the island. 21<sup>st</sup> century novelists in the VI have expressed the historical accounts of the quest for self-determination, human rights and liberation of the women of the VI as follows:

“Now I was part of the Fireburn rebellion of 1878. It had its roots in the passing of the Proclamation of 1847 that stated that as of July 1847 new born babies of slaves would be free and all other Black slaves would be free twelve years later. You see, slaves were being freed in other part of the world and the desire for freedom was burning in the bellies of the Virgin Islanders. The Danish gov’ment thought that this proclamation would satisfy the slaves, but no suh! The people did not like the idea that they would be slaves and their children free so they secretly started planning a revolt. Meetings among slaves were forbidden but a skilled craftsman, Moses Gottlieb, known as Buddhoe was the man who secretly organized and led the revolt for freedom in 1848. He quietly organized the people and on July 2<sup>nd</sup> the ringing of the church bells and the blowing of the conch shell around midnight was the signal for the beginning of the rebellion. On July 3<sup>rd</sup>, thousands of people from the country gathered at the Frederiksted Fort shouting for freedom. They told the soldiers at the Fort that if a single shot was fired they would burn all of West End. Finally, the people sent word to Governor General Peter von Scholten to come to Frederiksted by 4’oclock Monday afternoon or they would burn down the town. The Governor arrived just before 4’oclock and declared, ‘All unfree in the Danish West Indies are from today free!’” (Joseph, 2009: 85)

But the official end of slavery did not bring with it the qualitative political and economic transformation of society that was promised when Emancipation was declared. The observance of Contract Day (October 1<sup>st</sup>) in 1878 created a volatile and hostile atmosphere amongst natives, immigrants and others on St. Croix. The role of Queen Mary became central in this period as a voice of freedom and as a leader amongst other queens and men who supported a vision for liberty, freedom and real emancipation. Excerpts from the 2006 VI Chautauqua presentation and forthcoming film production entitled the ‘Queens of the Virgins’ shared by the dramatic and living embodiment of ‘Queen Mary’ include the following:

*“I am a Freedom Queen  
I am a Freedom Fighter Queen  
I am Queen Mary  
My birth name is Mary Thomas  
I live here and tis’ a Cruzan I be by de sweat of me brow  
I was born n’ raised in Antigua of the British West Indies  
I larn’ dat my people come from Afraka so  
I come from a long bloodline of matriarchs  
From a long line of queens who lead de people which part dey deh  
I livin’ on de westend plantation in Estate La Grange  
N’ have worked in Estates Sprat Hall & Williams Punch  
I am one of the Queens of the Great Fiyahbun of 1878  
I iz a canefield worker*

Who iz tiyahd of de oppression  
 Being imposed upon us  
 By our exploitative slave massas dem  
 The kettle start to burn up long before October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1878  
 On October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1878 fiyah break loose  
 After de gendarme dem murder one ah we  
 Even if he was a drunken man...  
 He was still a man and one ah we  
 N' de buckra say we jus went wil'  
 Starting all sorts of chaos through town  
 De people rush to the dead body and  
 Den' dey just start to yell out  
 "Our Side or Iron Side!"  
 We rush de fort and the guards couldn't stop we...  
 It was burned down  
 I ask de people dem to bun' up all the rum barrels and  
 De store house dem and the stores of the massa dem  
 'Cuz we see dem tings mean more to dem slave massas than we do!  
 Dis' situation don' gone far from wha' we deservin' in this life  
 We plan and prepare to bun up from Frederiksted to Christiansted

...My queenship is shared by many other women of St. Croix  
 All' ah we ain' even bawn yah'  
 We come from Antigua, St. Christopher, Puerto Rico,  
 St. Dominguez, the French West Indies  
 –Martinque, Guadeloupe, the Dutch West Indies,  
 the British West Indies and other isles  
 I share my queen title wid Queen Agnes, Queen Bottom Belly,  
 Queen Mathilde & othas  
 I am regarded as a brave Afrakan woman of St. Croix and de Caribbean  
 Remember you able to walk tall, strong and long upon we shoulders  
 Remember how we sacrifice for we freedom and humanity  
 Nurture dis child of freedom  
 So mi' work and dat of othas don't die in vain  
 Remember Ourside or Ironside!  
 I am Queen Mary" (Kahina in VIHC, 2006)

Queen Mary is considered to be a powerful heroine in the folkloric cultural expressions, stories, oral tradition collections, caiso, calypso and other traditional songs, plays, literary works of the Virgin Islands. Despite the fact that she was a freedom fighter who led the Great Fireburn of 1878 and that she was jailed for many years in Copenhagen along with other queens, the Danish government eventually minted a coin with an illustration of her emblazoned on it. Contemporary writers have included her in works that share the history, tradition, culture, heritage and loyalty of the women leaders of St. Croix and the Virgin Islands, as illustrated in the following passage by a VI-based historian, political activist and novelist:

“Every year we were promised that the Labor Act would be repealed, but after t’irty years and still no changes, we had had enough. On October 1, 1878 the laborers came to Frederiksted as they usually did on Contract Day. The laborers were gathered at the front of Fort Frederik seeking passes, passports, or requesting changes of jobs They had serious complaints and hoped the Labour Act would be repealed. When they realize that there would be no changes the crowd grew angry and the soldiers tried to make the people go home by waving their sabers. Instead of going home my son, - what a sight -the people started throwing stones, conch shells, bricks, any t’ing deh could get dere hands on. The soldiers ran inside the Fort and started firing dere guns. This only further enraged we. Some tore off the outer gate and t’rew it into the sea. Den dey tried to break da inner gate and the soldiers started shooting again. The crowd broke up and started setting fire to shops, houses, even the Customs house.”

(Joseph, 2009: 86)

Keepers of ancient and sacred dance movements and rhythms in the Kongo-Zaire, Cameroons, Senegal, Ghana, Guinea-Conakry, Burkina Faso, Guadeloupe, St. Lucia, Louisiana, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, St. Thomas, St. Croix and other regions of the world preserve Bamboula as a traditional art form indicative of the expressions amongst leaders and ‘Queens’ in most Indigenous Afrakan communities. In most VI historical and literary documents, from the 1730’s to the 1900’s and beyond women recognized as ‘Queens of the Virgin Islands’ in St. John, St. Croix and St. Thomas respectively and respectfully used the Bamboula cultural heritage traditions via dance and musical rhythms that represent methods for communication for uprisings, celebrations, sensual expressions and protest actions amongst enslaved Afrakans throughout the Caribbean and Americas.

Queen Coziah was a leader of one of the first non-violent labor and protest actions in the Caribbean, which took place in St. Thomas on September 12, 1892. Excerpts from the 2006 VI Chautauqua presentation include the following:

*“I am a Worker Queen  
 I am a Bamboula Queen  
 I am Queen Coziah  
 Ah’ queen two times ovuh’  
 Our Black people from times of Afraka  
 The thrones of we homeland in Afraka iz in our genes  
 We women folk are determined, proud and strong  
 We come from a long line of matriarchs and queen mothers of  
 Strength and stability  
 I tell de other Queens  
 Yeah, dey iz more dan me pushing  
 All this wild fiyah to the steamship owners and dem  
 And these otha queens come from  
 St. Thomas, St. John, St. Croix and all ovah  
 We alla one people with different birth place based on which part  
 We mothers slave, work and make free for they self  
 We know we hav’ tuh’ get our money*

*An' we gon' get wha' we earn  
 With no bloodshed...we jus' ain' gon' work and  
 Dem boat dem can't move without we!  
 We queens and the other women with  
 De men playing the kettle drum  
 We are the foundation for nonviolence  
 As a movement in the late 1890's  
 We have fair wages for we work cuz'  
 We work hard for it...  
 Tek time an' yoh'll fine ants guts  
 Remember wha' me and othas do  
 For we fair labor and freedom from money injustices  
 Respect de sacrifices we make for you and you and you  
 I am a Bamboula queen and leader of our workers  
 For I am Queen Coziah"*

(Kahina in VIHC, 2006)

The folkloric accounts of the life and times of the three 'Queens of the Virgin Islands' shared herein represent and embody not only the principles of leadership, compassion, aggressive force, firm nurturing, and spiritual transformation, but also the myopia of political indifference, tribalism and ethnic prejudice. These qualities and shortcomings are uniquely integrated into the personality, character traits and actions for change exemplified in each of these women. It is important to note that these Queens represented and reflected the loyalty to human struggle and liberation shared by their people of Afrakan heritage and ethnicity. These Queens endured tremendous hardships that were imposed upon them (and in some instances imposed by them) in violation of the human principles of liberty, self-determination, justice and freedom. Despite the many considerable obstacles placed on their paths by societal institutions that were inhumane, our VI, national and international communities have immortalized and in some instances negatively romanticized these Queens of the Virgin Islands into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

It is important to note that the openly biased and negative portrayals of these women's lives from the dominant perspective of the planter class have been cautiously integrated into the performance to insure that a well rounded sense of the historical reality of these women's humanity, with all of its qualities and flaws, may be maintained while more intensive research is being carried out to present a more truthful and balanced portrayal of the Queens of the Virgin Islands. An example of such less than flattering accounts is the following quote from the testimony of Frederik von Scholten in a Danish court case that followed the Fireburn:

"Among the black population, women play a role of great importance. They do the same work that the men do and their physical build and size render them formidable adversaries in the rough and tumble of a fight. Throughout the disturbances they were more aggressive, vengeful and altogether more violent in their passion than the



men...Women displayed a rage no less primordial than the men's. Slavery had after all made no distinction as to gender, and their sex laid them open to the additional disadvantage of harassment, not to mention the perversion of normal maternal relations." (Hall, 1992: 143)

Queen Breffu, Queen Mary and Queen Coziah represent the ancestral, traditional, customary and contemporary essence that lies dormant amongst many women in our society and is often rejected and shunned in those of our women who dare to carry on these great women's pioneering and championship of causes for LIFE (i.e., life, inspiration, freedom and education). Conclusively, our Queens of these Beloved Virgin Islands represent women of strength, anger, displaced rage, ethnic imbalance, leadership, arrogance, aggression, compassion, intolerance, non-violence, endurance, humility and a plethora of other human qualities, principles and characteristics. At least for some, these women who are honored and acknowledged as queens reflect and exemplify a spirited force for emancipation that has permeated a liberating vibration that has existed since ancient times, through pre-colonial America, throughout the transition from feudalism to mercantilism to industrialism and capitalism, throughout the enslavement experience and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. May we reflect on the origins of the ancient saying 'long live the Queen' and apply it in an inclusive way to the contributions, tribulations and sacrifices of women of Afrakan ancestry who have been ostracized, feared, celebrated, immortalized and commemorated in the Virgin Islands as the 'Queens of the Virgins'.

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