

Extract from Chapter 5: Gambo Lai Lai the Cynic (pages 209-213)

Section 2: A Philosopher Arises

The distinction between Gambo Lai Lai's life and performances began to blur when he started taking his old anglé away from carnival and into ordinary street life. This began as a way of appeasing the young women who followed him around asking for, "Just a little of your old anglé, oh please, Mr. Gambo Lai," but before long he found himself performing on the busiest streets and squares of Port of Spain whether or not it was carnival time. As his fame increased, he started to drink more rum, smoke more cigars, and experiment with different hats—he eventually settled on the Panama as his preferred look. Life was treating him well, but he nevertheless felt a certain dissatisfaction which he was unable to comprehend as yet. He was still thinking about the meaning of life.

The great transformation was set in motion one afternoon when he was reading from Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* to a large crowd on Woodford Square. It was a speech about Christian morality, the need to not allow yourself to be distracted from the ultimate goal of reaching the Celestial City, and the importance of overcoming ignorance. At the end there was long applause, but Gambo, who'd been drinking heavily, was suddenly overcome by disgust. There was frivolity, sin and ignorance written all over the faces of the people in the crowd, he thought. It made no difference where he turned his gaze, whether to a beautiful young woman or an ugly old man, everyone looked grotesque—ethically grotesque.²¹⁰

"Damn you," he shouted angrily, "for applauding a message you contradict with your lives."

The bemused crowd quickly dispersed after this unexpected outburst, while Gambo stormed off to the public library. He browsed the shelves until his eye was caught by an old book entitled *The Cynical Philosophy of Diogenes and Crates*. He took it back to his bungalow, where one of his girlfriends was waiting for him with two tumblers of rum and a bowl of pig's feet; he quickly shooed her away. He read the book deep into the night until he reached the end, then started a second time. He continued to read until he could no longer force himself to stay awake, then, the moment he awoke the next morning, he continued with his obsessive reading of the book, over and over again, until he involuntarily fell asleep once more. This process continued for over two weeks, until Gambo Lai Lai the Cynic emerged fully formed, as if from a chrysalis.

Many have debated whether Gambo was the greatest of all the Cynic philosophers, but it seems to me that since he belonged to such a different cultural milieu from his ancient Greek forbears, such comparison is futile. He was less original, to be sure, but then again hardly unoriginal, and his own particular genius was to find a way to apply their philosophy to the modern world. We should not think of favouring one over the other, then, but simply be glad that we have them all. I've written a poem about it:

The Cynics scandalised the Greeks,
Defying all convention,
You can't compare their distant lives,
With Gambo's reinvention.

The first action of Gambo Lai Lai the Cynic was to head directly to the masquerade fancy dress shop to see if they had a crown for sale. They had several and he bought the most flamboyant, shining as if made from real gold, and encrusted with paste jewellery—he insisted on paying five times the asking price. With the crown upon his head, he made his way to Gloria's house. He gave her possession of his belongings, including the bungalow and Johnny's stash (still a small fortune). He told her to use his wealth as she saw fit, knowing that this good woman would help the poor as best she could.

The business with Gloria completed, he stepped out into the street, wearing a perfectly pressed morning suit and the carnival crown still wedged on his head. Lighting a cigar, he threw back his crowned head, paused a while to enjoy the sun on his face, then shouted out as loudly as he could:

“Gambo Lai Lai has set Gambo Lai Lai free!”

“Where you gonna live now, doodoo-darling?” asked Gloria, who was standing in her doorway, looking bemused. Gambo ignored her.

“Gambo Lai Lai has set Gambo Lai Lai free!” he repeated, quietly this time, then he strode away purposefully in the direction of the dockyard. When he arrived, Gambo paid no attention to the fishermen and sailors, some of whom stopped to comment on his crown—respectfully, of course, Gambo was already a popular figure. He was looking for the giant oil drums that he'd heard had been washed up from the wreck of an American ship—enormous great things, twice as tall and wide as a standard 55-gallon oil drum. There were three of them lined up at the far end of the docks, and with great effort, Gambo pulled one crashing down onto its side—it rolled only a little, since it was so heavy, before coming to a rest. Gambo climbed inside.

“To roam Giddily, and be everywhere but at home, such freedom doth a banishment become,” he muttered to himself, quoting John Donne, as he sat in his oil drum and looked out to sea.

Section 3: Early Encounters and Anecdotes

I believe there is no better introduction to the philosophy of Gambo Lai Lai than to recount his most celebrated encounters, together with some of the popular anecdotes; afterwards I shall proceed to a more systematic exposition. The reader should note that these encounters and anecdotes all predate his three incarcerations. This was a time when he was heavily under the influence of Diogenes and Crates; only later did his originality blossom. §

When asked why he'd given away all his money and left his bungalow for a rusty oil drum, Gambo Lai Lai answered:

“For friendship and safety, wretch! Only now may I number the poor amongst my friends—betwixt rich and poor a friendship cannot flourish and ‘a wise man never attempts impossibilities’, as Massinger sayeth.”

“One of my friends is rich,” objected a woman in the crowd.

“If truly she be your friend,” answered Gambo, “why art thou poor? Friendship is one soul in two bodies.”

“You say you gave away your fortune for safety,” said an old man, looking puzzled, “but everyone knows wealth offers protection and the poor are always in danger.”

“Scum!” snapped Gambo. “Wealth is the vomit of Fortune and Fortune is powerless against the Cyclopean walls of my beloved Poverty. The rich are like fruit trees growing in inaccessible places, a waste of fruit. Don’t cast us into strife by your preference for crab and dumplings over tremoços.”

Gambo then took from his pocket a bag of lupin beans, the traditional food of the Cynic philosopher, and popular in Trinidad too (tremoços). He began to squeeze the salty yellow flesh out of the translucent shells and into his mouth: “Whilst others live to eat, Gambo eats to live,” he spluttered.

“Don’t you miss your Raleigh bike, Gambo?” asked a small boy.

Gambo swallowed so he could answer properly: “As I was descending the proclivity at a precipitous velocity on my velocipede, I did oftentimes experience great joy,” he admitted, “but I’m glad to have ended my enslavement by possessions. Bringers of joy they may be, but at the cost of dependency, fear, and inevitable loss.”

“Don’t you want to be happy anymore, Gambo?” continued the boy, looking quite upset—the thought of somebody not wanting their Raleigh bike anymore made him want to cry.

“Best not measure life by happiness, boy,” replied Gambo, “lest thou disconcert thyself. Rest assured life’s not bad … though ‘tis mostly lived badly.”

“What’s the good life, then?” asked a man in a boiler suit, who’d been listening quietly until now, but always with an openly sceptical expression—which Gambo had noticed.

“Life lived with calm and cheerful soul, unperturbed by both despised pleasures and the welcome challenge of misfortune.”

“Well, you ain’t persuaded me none,” said the man, “living in an oil drum, eating tremoços and talking that stupid *Gros Anglais* don’t sound like the good life to me!”

“If I was capable of persuading a wretch like you,” snarled Gambo, “you’d hang yourself from a tree.”