

# ENCUENTROS



*Talkin' Ol Story*  
*A Brief Survey of the Oral Tradition*  
*of the Bahamas*

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Lecture by

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TALKIN' OL STORY:  
A BRIEF SURVEY OF THE ORAL TRADITION OF THE BAHAMAS

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*Patricia Glington-Meicholas*

Miss Annie, O! Miss Annie, O!  
Open the door, Miss Annie, O!  
O, no! O, no!  
Since my old master died  
Nobody dares to come in!

My wife, my wife told me  
three days ago  
That she would not marry no more  
But by the light of the keyhole,  
the keyhole, I spy  
There's a man lyn' down  
in my brown cotton  
brown cotton drawers.

This song is the rarest of folktales, a *cante* fable or what remains of one<sup>1</sup>. It is a part of the rich oral literature of the Bahamas, and also a part of the enigma our country poses. Our islands enjoy a high international profile as a tourist destination and a financial services jurisdiction, with much media exposure given to our beaches, hotels, casinos and other attractions, and how we offend the tax regimes of the G7. But, to date, relatively

little has been published or promoted abroad about the extraordinary fund of the creative capital of mankind that the Bahamian oral tradition represents. What one can find of the small corpus on Bahamian oral literature in libraries has been written primarily by non-Bahamian, non-resident academics. All too many have come burdened by preconceived, ethnically-based notions, which skew their methodology and their perceptions of what they uncover, while others operate under the impetus of the “publish or perish” dictum and see our islands as a well stocked convenience store.

At the same time, there are others like Elsie Clews Parsons, who conducted extensive fieldwork in the Bahamas in the second decade of the 20th century, collecting materials that would almost certainly have been lost to our people, for want of official sponsorship and even recognition of their worth to humanity. The ruling classes and the greater number of those who observed and wrote about the popular art forms as a whole, tended to

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*Talkin' Ol' Story: A Brief Survey of the Oral Tradition of the Bahamas* was presented at the Inter-American Development Bank in Washington, D.C., on July 20, 2000 as part of the IDB Cultural Center Lectures Program.

view this valuable patrimony only as remnants of barbarism, suited only to entertain and astonish visitors.<sup>2</sup>

In the early days, the black Bahamian majority could do little else but subscribe to the official view of their folklore.<sup>3</sup> And, once Majority Rule was won, the official drive to examine, preserve, and promote cultural artefacts was, until quite recently, focused almost exclusively on Junkanoo, a colorful portmanteau kind of art form that includes the plastic arts, music, and dance. Bahamians, except a few hardy souls, saw little economic utility in other art forms and therefore considered them unworthy of promotion.

Consequently, even 350 years after the beginning of modern settlement in our islands, the Bahamian oral literature is still an Aladdin's cave, somewhat dusty and cobwebbed waiting for an "Open Sesame!" to reveal its riches, to the wider world. Waiting to be experienced is a wealth of songs, legends, proverbs and children's utterances, brief samples of which I will share before going on to a discussion of our traditional narratives, which are the focus of my paper.

But, as the creativity of a people always has their spatial and temporal experiences as an essential source, an understanding of sources helps immensely in appreciating the creative impulse and the nature of the creation. Therefore, the present circumstances call for a brief historical and geographical sketch of the Bahamian heritage.

One of the most dominant features in the Bahamian cultural matrix is the fact that we live on islands in a large archipelago. Living in a country made up of thousands of discrete chunks of land, rather than a single contiguous mass, can-

not but have a distinct influence on our way of life generally, and especially our worldview and the way we communicate. The sea takes on a persona that looms large in Bahamian consciousness, and island life has bred insularity and self-reliance. Most importantly, for the purposes of this brief survey, it has created cultural variety from island to island, producing diversity in the stories that we tell, the songs that we sing, and other oral productions. For example, although it has gone unremarked except for a small group in the community of linguists, speech patterns vary throughout the Bahamian archipelago. Consider the case of the pronunciation of the vowel cluster in the word 'rain' in the Bahamas. Many Bahamians voice it as a long 'a'. For others, the people of Andros in particular, 'rain' rhymes with 'seen', and for Cat Islanders, it echoes 'men', except the vowel sound is of slightly longer duration.

Some islands of the Bahamas are highly urbanized, catering heavily to the tourism and banking that feed the nation. Others depend on the weekly or bi-weekly mailboat as a lifeline and are peopled by farmers who travel to their fields on foot, three-wheeled bicycle, or horseback, and depend on muscle-powered machetes rather than John Deere for land clearance. As might be expected, it is in such settlements as the latter that the more salient aspects of our "orality" cling to life. But even in these traditional communities are pockets of modernity—cell phones, refrigerators and, in at least one place on the island, a tourist inn and a "Reggie's Lounge" or other establishment boasting a satellite receiver and a television set, all of which militate against retention and transmission of oral literature.

For the most part, the majority of our ancestors were of African and British origins. But before migrating to the Bahamas, most of these fore-parents had spent several generations in the Americas. The first wave of post-Columbian settlement, whites and blacks, came from Bermuda, while the immigrants who defined modern Bahamian demographics were compelled to leave the mainland American colonies during or just after the American War of Independence. In the second instance, some were townspeople from New York, but the majority were planters and slaves from the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida. It is vital to mention, too, that after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, African captives who had never experienced slavery or undergone the process of creolization, were liberated from slave ships and resettled in British territories such as the Bahamas, bringing with them a recognized new cultural input<sup>4</sup>.

Although the average Bahamian will vehemently deny it, we are close relatives to the peoples of the Caribbean Basin. Throughout the colonial era, the Bahamas, as the crossroads of the Americas, had frequent intercourse, both legal and illegal, with British and non-British territories across the Caribbean, primarily Haiti, Cuba, Jamaica, Barbados, and Trinidad. By reason of geographical proximity, the contact with the first three islands has been more intimate and more frequent (Craton and Saunders: Vol. I: 184, 189, 291, 422; Vol. II: 450). Furthermore, contacts with the territories of the Caribbean have continued through the ages. The drive to build hotels in the first half of the twentieth century attracted skilled workers from throughout the Caribbean, many of whom eventually settled

here (Johnson: 149-162).

In any examination of cultural heritage, it is important to note that Bahamians are fearless sailors who, in the days of sailing vessels, traded up and down the North American coast and with islands of the Caribbean. Bahamians were also among the flood of migrants who traversed the Americas in search of better opportunities in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Bahamians helped to build the Central Mexican Railway, the Panama Canal, the docks at Charleston in the Carolinas, and cut lumber in Honduras. Work on German steamship lines until the First World War took them to ports as far away as South America. Many travelled to the United States between 1943 and 1960 as migrant workers, and sometimes as permanent settlers, particularly to Florida<sup>5</sup> and other parts of the Eastern Seaboard and the South of the United States (Craton and Saunders, Vol. II: 217-219; 292-296). Bahamians were among the pioneers of Key West, Florida, and helped to build cities such as Miami. It is more than likely that one of the results of these peregrinations was a cross-fertilization of areas of culture.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, much smaller groups of Chinese, Lebanese, Greek, and Jewish migrants settled in the islands (Craton and Saunders: Vol. II: 257-258). While their participation in the economic life of the Bahamas is abundantly apparent, it has not yet been shown that these endogenous groups have had an appreciable impact on the arts.

It is therefore a reasonable assumption that the skeins of heritage mentioned earlier are the ones more likely to have

been woven into the foundation of our oral literature, and the evidence of the tradition itself supports it. It is widely accepted that the British imposed their culture on legal and administrative structures in the Bahamas, but cared little about promulgating their arts and religion, except, in the latter case, as a measure of popular control (Johnson: 74-75). Consequently, the aggregate of African cultures held sway. What survived the Middle Passage continued as a kind of substrate to popular arts, covered with a thin layer of European customs. This veneer was enough of a sugarcoating to convince the overlords of successful "civilizing" influences, dampen fears of concerted, possibly rebellious, activity on the part of African populace, and generally soothe their ethnophobic sensibilities. It is much in the same manner that the Haitians and other Catholicized members of the African Diaspora in the New World, veiled their pantheon beneath the pious cloaks of the Church's saints.

To discuss storytelling, it is necessary to touch, however briefly, on the various elements of the oral literature of which it is a part.

### Proverbs and Sayings

Bahamian proverbs, sayings, and various allusive locutions are a part of the figurative cornucopia that flavor everyday speech in the Bahamas. They reflect many features of our history and geography and, frequently, the many African cultures that have made a contribution to that of the Bahamas and exhibit many stylistic features recognizable as coming from those cultures. The ones in this category tend to be distributed throughout the

Caribbean region.

Bahamian proverbs and allusive sayings of African origin include:

1. "A hungry dog will eat corn," which means that someone in a desperate situation will not be or cannot afford to be choosy.
2. "The higher up the monkey climb, the more his tail expose," or, the the higher a person climbs in social rank or influence, the more visible his failings are to the public.
3. "If I plant you, will you grow?" meaning: "If I ask you to do something for me, will you do it?"

According to the Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage, this question is asked for the same reason clear across the Caribbean in Guyana, and is a direct translation of a Nupe proverb (Allsopp: 443).

The sea looms large in Bahamian sayings, showing how the new homeland became incorporated in Bahamian consciousness in the creolization process:

1. "Put man mas' head" (Put a man on the masthead) means the hearer is being warned of danger and the need to be careful, as the captain of sailing vessels in days gone by would put men in the crow's nest to spy out land or danger. Here we see the same elision of words featured in African proverbs as mentioned by Finnegan (399-400).
2. "Fish'man never call 'e own fish stink.'" (A fisherman never calls his own fish stink). This proverb is a cynical comment on the inability of many people to see

their own shortcomings or those of their possessions. Compare this with the Zulu generalization "No polecat ever smelt its own stink" (Finnegan: 397).

Other colorful Bahamian proverbs include:

"When you rich don' swonger and when you poor, don' cry."

Don't boast during good times and don't complain during the bad.

"Cockroach don' ask fowl to dance."

Don't put an enemy in a position to harm you.

The following admonition is made to faithless lovers and other wrongdoers who think that there is no one about to catch them at their wrongdoing:

"Every shut eye ain' sleep and every goodbye ain' gone."

Of note also are the figurative statements or phrases that are not used for their content, but are often used as intensifiers or comparatives, because Bahamians are given to metaphorical speech. Examples:

"...when chicken grow teet(h)," as in "I'll forgive you when chicken grow teeth" equals "I'll never forgive you."

"...like a hurrah nes(t), "as in "Your head looks like a hurrah nest," which is to say it is untidy.

"...since Guvner Hill was conch bar" means "He has been in that job since Guvner Hill was conch bar." To those who

know the history of our nation's capital, this expression contains a wealth of meaning. Government House stands on a hill overlooking the City of Nassau and its harbor. The hill would have been much closer to the waterfront in the days before coastal land was reclaimed to extend the commercial area of the town.

Bahamas lore is rich in the songs, chants, and rhymes that accompany the games of children. Many are traditional, static forms that have been handed down verbatim for generations, and can be found distributed worldwide. But children's utterances, especially in the hand-clapping games, are a living form with new chants being born in the schoolyards from time to time.

It is in the traditional chants that we find greatest evidence of British influence on the oral tradition, as it is in this arch game song:

Bluebird, bluebird through my window

Bluebird, bluebird through my window

Bluebird, bluebird through my window

O, Johnny, I'm tired.

Just take a little tap right on my shoulder

Just take a little tap right on my shoulder

Just take a little tap right on my shoulder

O, Johnny, I'm tired.

Then, there are the more creole game songs:

Hunter: Muh chillun, muh chillun

Prey: Yes, ma'am.  
Hunter: You hear me callin'?  
Prey: Yes, ma'am.  
Hunter: Why you don' come?  
Prey: Don' feel like comin'!  
Hunter: I guh sen' my dog at yuh!  
Prey: I don' care!  
Hunter: I guh sen' my cat at yuh!  
Prey: I don' care!  
Hunter: I guh sen' muhself at yuh!

This last statement signals the beginning of the chase, and neither party is allowed to move away before it is uttered.

The American influence on Bahamian culture can be discerned in many hand-clapping game chants and ring play songs:

1.  
Slide, push, clap  
Little Billy, little Johnny  
Take a step like a man  
Your shoes, your hat cost a dollar,  
a dollar, a dollar and a half.  
I asked my mother for fifty cents  
To see the wild elephant jump  
the fence  
It jumped so high  
'Til it touched the sky  
And never came back til  
The fourth of July.  
Pharaoh, come pay the money  
Pharaoh, come pay the money  
I love coffee, I love tea  
I love the pretty boys who love me.  
Mary Mack, dressed in black  
Twenty-four button behind her back  
One to the east, one to the west  
One right down to the cuckoo nest.

2.  
Got a letter from Miami  
And in that letter was a dollar  
I take that dollar an' buy some candy  
Buy some candy for my baby  
Shake the dilly tree, dilly drop  
When the dilly drop, pick it up  
Ala pala chicken kalala  
Ala pala boush!

Originating in our islands, this song is an allusion to the times Bahamians spent as contract laborers in the United States for various periods from the late nineteenth century to the mid-1960s. It was a time when Bahamian families left behind counted heavily on remittances for their livelihood (see Craton and Saunders: 221, 292-294).

Finally, there are the ring-play game songs that appear to be entirely Bahamian in their references and are used by children and adults (with sexual undertones, in the latter case):

Blue Hill water dry  
No where to wash my clothes  
I remember the Saturday night  
We had fried fish and johnnycake  
Santippy (centipede knock to  
muhdoor last night  
I thought it was Johnny Slam Bam.

Songs are a very important part of social interaction in the Bahamas generally and they exist for every occasion. Shown below are excerpts of special event songs: the first ones are sung in a party setting to coax tired band members to continue playing, and the other is sung at wakes.

Don' stop, don' stop  
Goin' a'ready!  
Turn it over 'til fore day mornin'  
Goin' a'ready!  
Turn it over 'til fore day mornin'  
Goin' a'ready!

Two well-distributed dance songs are  
"Bonefish" and the "Crow Song":

Good morning, Father Fisher, good  
morning, Father Brown  
Have you any sea-crab to lend me one  
or two  
Bonefish are biting and I have no bait  
to catch them  
Every married man has his own  
bonefish.

The accompaniment of the Crow  
Dance, the Crow Song, is probably more  
properly labeled a chant:

Run my mama, come see de crow  
See how dey fly  
Run my mama, come see de crow  
See how dey fly  
Fly right down to Abaco  
See how dey fly.

The wake song, sung for the dying, is  
one of the most haunting and beautiful  
associated with Bahamian tradition and  
has been recorded by the American  
rhythm and blues singer Aaron Neville:

Lay down my brother  
Lay down and take your rest  
I'm gonna lay your head  
Upon the Savior's breast

I love you, but Jesus loves you best  
I bid you goodnight, goodnight,

goodnight  
I bid you goodnight, goodnight,  
goodnight.

And now to consider the jewel in the  
crown—the ol' story, which, by its very  
name, demonstrates an appreciation for  
the fact that the form has been passed  
down from former times. It must be said  
from the outset that ol' stories are on the  
endangered species list, the plunge over  
the brink of extinction stayed only by  
fragile conservation efforts on the part  
of a few individuals (Craton and  
Saunders, Vol. II).

Storytelling in general, is in no dan-  
ger. The Bahamas is an oral society given  
to recounting at length, and with much  
embellishment, family history and ver-  
sions of notable current events. Some of  
the latter retellings often become the  
stuff of legend, as in the case of oral nar-  
ratives telling of hurricanes, shipwrecks,  
and other contretemps. Our historical  
heritage and our geography also lend  
themselves to abundant tales featuring  
piracy, buried treasure, and ghosts, sin-  
gly or in nerve-wracking combinations.

In recounting such stories, however  
far-fetched, Bahamian storytellers strive  
for verisimilitude by their characteriza-  
tion and settings. It is just the opposite  
with the ol' story, a point which is imme-  
diately underscored by the fact that many  
older Bahamians refer to these tales with  
amused exasperation as "Dem ol' lies."  
Furthermore, in Bahamian Creole to  
"story" is to tell a lie.

In days gone by, ol' stories were told  
(or 'talked', as Bahamians say) in the  
evening and, in fact, there was a supersti-  
tion that telling them by day would bring  
misfortune. The stories had two intercon-

nected functions. They provided entertainment in communities where there were few other forms, and this entertainment was a way in which rural people could extend working hours to do chores set aside during the day in favor of time in the fields.

### Riddles

In the times when the telling of ol' stories was well integrated in community culture, such sessions were, as were the stories themselves, characterized by a recognizable pattern. The prelude to storytelling was most often riddling as a means of allowing children to participate. This and many of the claims Ruth Finnegan makes in her book *Oral Literature in Africa* for the function, structure, and style of African forms of this art find an exact parallel in the Bahamian tradition (Finnegan: 426-443).

For example, Finnegan mentions that kinship terms of reference are common in African riddles, with the expression 'My father' being the most popular (Finnegan: 436).

In this last instance, Bahamian riddles are strikingly similar. They typically opened with the formula:

M'riddle, m'riddle, m'yandy, O!  
My father has a thing.

This opening is followed immediately by a description of the thing.

### Ol' Story Types

Bahamian ol' stories have yet to be formally classified but the main types are

referred to according to the predominant feature or intention of the content, or predominant character or pairs of characters, as is often the case. I generally identify stories with B'er Bouki and B'er Rabby and Jack and Be'r Debbil as being the key types in the Bahamian trickster and dupe cycle,<sup>6</sup> and the most often told and most important in Bahamian oral literature. Of almost equal importance are the tales of anthropomorphism in which the complicating element of the plot is the fact that one of the characters can change shape at will. There are also stories of the hero/rescuer, good child/bad child, and contest tale types, as well as tales of humour in which predominate misfortunes of venal, doddering, or easily duped preachers, or foolish or adulterous wives (Parsons [nos. 35-38 and 47]: 77-79, 93).

While there may not be enough of them to speak of a type, good mother tales exist, in which a devoted mother seeks a lost or kidnapped child for ages, or the revenant of an equally devoted dead mother cares for the child/children she has left behind. In one such story, the spectral mother uses a pet dog to do the physical work of bathing and feeding her baby. (Parsons [no. 103]: 150)

Adding further diversity is an assortment of numbskull animals whose stupidity and venality put them at risk of losing their lives, or having the whole community laugh at them. A good example is B'er White Bud (Bird), who thinks himself very handsome. Although he has no clothes to wear and is suffering a bad case of diarrhea, he is determined to go to a dance, where he is certain that he will be the center of the girls' attention. B'er White Bud borrows a suit of clothes from

B'er Snake, who secretly harbors similar intentions. With a corncob to block natural emissions and the borrowed finery, B'er White Bud cuts quite a figure, until Snake, in the cumulative style of many folktales, slowly reclaims his clothing, leaving White Bud naked. To add insult to injury, the corncob, having no further deterrent, is expelled, and nature takes its course. B'er White Bud flees, with the laughter of all present following him out the door. Tales such as this one and the good child/bad child stories have an obvious moralizing intent.

Thematically, Bahamian stories proceed almost linearly to a definite struggle between good and evil, with none but trifling detours. To those existing outside the tradition, the boundary lines between the good and the bad may appear to have been erased in many cases, as superior wits, rather than concern for justice and fairplay, seem to be the clay from which our storytellers cast the heroic mold. For example, according to many ethical systems in the Western world, B'er Rabby, who is an opportunist and a thief and plays woeful jokes on his friend Bouki, is perhaps more properly considered an antihero. It has been argued that exigencies that could not be overcome in life led to the creation of such tricksters as Rabby to provide a vent for feelings that were best hidden or sublimated for the safety of the person holding them. Levine has this to say on the subject:

The slaves' animal and human trickster tales shared a number of common elements: they placed the same emphasis upon the tactics of trickery and indirection, took the same delight in seeing the weak outwit and humiliate

the strong, manifested the same lack of idealization, and served the same dual function which included the expression of repressed feelings and the inculcation of the tactics of survival (Levine: 131).

The Jack and B'er Debbil tales fall neatly into category. Jack, indisputably the Bahamian hero and rescuer of damsels and children in distress, is as clever and resourceful as Rabby. Also like Rabby, he is a trickster, his foil being B'er Debbil who, despite his awesome powers, his magic rooster and donkey, can never, because of over-confidence and most often downright stupidity, defeat Jack. Neither is B'er Debbil the beautiful Lucifer of Christianity—he is a gourmand who hides peas soup in his hat and a master who has sometimes to carry his donkey to escape retribution.

We see highly distinctive characterization in Bahamian tales of anthropomorphism in which the main character, the shape-changer, tends to be phenotypically a woman after sundown and hunts in her true form as a gaulin, a huge, fearsome bird, or as a tiger. She always marries a human male who either destroys her or is destroyed by her. The Bahamian hag exhibits an important exception to this pattern of behaviour; she exists as a beautiful woman by day and hunts by night.

#### Setting and Structure

The Bahamian ol' story exists in a dreamtime landscape where human beings exhibit a fluid morphology that permits them to grow barnacles on their backs, change form, marry animals, and in

many other ways defy the natural laws. In addition to their intimate converse with mankind, animals normally seen primarily on the African grasslands cavort, without a hint of anomaly, with the denizens of ocean deeps. This is the realm of the faerie shared by people from one end of the globe to another.

Typically, the ol' story opens with a traditional formula, which provides an instant distancing from reality:

Once upon a time  
Was a very good time  
Monkey chew tobakker  
And spit white lime  
Bullfrog jump from limb to limb  
And Mosquiter keep up the time.

(Storytellers often vary the jumper and the timekeeper to create amusement by the ridiculousness of their claims.)

As is common in folktales in many traditions, the development of the plot tends to take place through cumulative or repeated actions, e.g., a character must usually repeat a speech, song or an action (often three times), before the complication takes effect.

The songs that punctuate ol' stories in the Bahamas are called 'sings' and the various ones are among the distinctive features of Bahamian storytelling. They can be used to introduce or delineate a character. Pinky Whya the tiger woman sings:

Pinky Whya, Whya  
Pinky Whya, Whya  
Me no tiger!

In a story in which three hungry little girls eat peas from a soup pot their mean

guardian has left them to mind, a goat sits sewing on a chest by the roadside and eventually helps to rescue the girls, sings this self-identification ditty:

Say man a go, pity man a go  
Some say me the cobbler  
Some say me the seamster.  
Some say me the cobbler  
Some say me the seamster.

Songs can function as dialogue. A woman put the children under her care into the River of Truth to ensure their veracity, and when she asks who ate her peas, each child replies:

I'n eatee no peas  
I'n eatee no rice  
'Cause if I eatee my mama peas  
Sure de river guh swaller me.

Some are warning devices. B'er Debbil utters the following to waken his master and alert him to the escape of Jack's sister, whom he has forced to marry him:

Coocooroocoo, Massa,  
Yuh gal gone home!  
Ay yi yi, I bin a tell yuh so  
Go my, Poonoocanoocoo!

Objects that do not have voices outside the realm of whimsy sometimes sing. In one story, a pair of wayward shoes sings:

Brow, karow  
Miss Nettie gone away  
Leggo me hand  
Lemme walk for mesef.

And in this final example, a pair of breasts sings:

Louise, Louise  
Rub a pint to de last  
Rubba, rubba pint, pint pint.

Bahamian ol' stories also feature closing formulae that, like the openings, are intended to distance the story from the real world and real time. First, storytellers appear to make an authentication statement by claiming direct participation in the action of the story, and then follow with a statement that puts the veracity of what they have just recounted in doubt: "A big wind blow me right here to tell you this lie."

Or in the case of a story that ended in a fight: "They hit me a blow right 'side my head and lick me right here to tell yinna this lie!" There are other, shorter formulae. The following appear to be drawn from Scottish tradition: "Biddy bo ben," or "Be bo ben, my story is en'." Another favoured closing is: "They live in peace, die in peace, and bury in a pot o' candle grease."

#### The Storyteller

If one looks at the one 115 tales that appear in Parsons' collection from Andros, they seem flat, lacking in fluency and creativity. I believe that two things account for this. First of all, the telling of the tales may have been disjointed because storytellers were reticent in the presence of a white foreign stranger, and in such cases, their habit was to try to upgrade their speech. Secondly, the tales are written down and lack the necessary dramatic skills of a living, creative storyteller. Contrary to Parsons' belief that the ol' story form permits little variation,<sup>7</sup> the gifted

Bahamian storyteller creates living theatre. She or he does so by building a repertoire of voices, onomatopoeia and, above all, by using the traditional motifs only as a skeleton upon which to wrap the flesh of personal creativity.

#### Roots:

#### The Ol' Story's Connection to the Oral Literatures of the African Diaspora in the Americas

A study of Bahamian oral literature generally reveals elements of European oral tradition, but clearer still is its place in the African Diaspora in the Americas. Many Florida history books have numerous references to Bahamian participation in the settlement and development of that state. Every facet of Zora Neale Hurston's examination of Florida folklore, particularly confirms an extensive contact, which she acknowledges (Hurston: 89-90).

We share many aspects of our culture with the people of the Carolinas, and with none more than the Gullah people. In his work *Blue Roots: African-American Folk Magic of the Gullah People*, Pinckney describes the slip-skin hag of Gullah legend as a woman who sheds her skin by night to go about committing misdeeds, most often sexual attacks against men. If she cannot slip into her skin before "day-clean" or dawn, she will disappear forever. The same happens if humans find the hag's skin and pour salt into it. When approaching her skin for reintegration, the hag speaks a verification formula. Pinckney reports that the Gullah hag asks, "Skin, skin, do you know me?" (Pinckney: 76-78).

The Bahamian hag satisfies all of these details, including an inability to count

beyond a certain number. The only difference is that the Bahamian verification formula has been reduced to “‘Kinny, ‘Kinny, you know me?’”

A comparison of Bahamian preacher stories with those Mariella Hartsfeld collected in Grady County in South Georgia yield startlingly similar cognates (Glinton-Meicholas).

My current research is producing evidence of an extraordinary thread that links the Bahamas, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Louisiana, and Old Mines, Missouri. It is only in the storytelling tradition of these places that the pair of folktale characters Bouki and Rabbit, whether called Rabby, Lapin, Lapén, or Malice, are found in combination as trickster and foil. These two characters are linked ultimately to West Africa, particularly the Senegambia region, where it is assumed that Bouki has his origin. In fact, it remains to discover the character Bouki elsewhere<sup>8</sup> (Glinton-Meicholas).

As declared at the outset, this is intended only as a brief survey of Bahamian oral literature. It is hoped that enough has been said to demonstrate that Bahamian oral literature is not “merely as vestiges to be dredged up from the past for curious folklorist,” as Levine says in defense of the creativity of the animal and trickster tales of the United States. He says rather that, “They endured, but they underwent continuous change reflective of the changes taking place in Afro-American consciousness” (Levine: 374). Just as an aggregation of peoples have been blended to create the construct termed “Bahamian,” so too have Bahamians woven together disparate threads of experience and creativity, and generated a unique form of literary expression.

There is far more to be studied and noted. But will there be time enough? For, as also remarked earlier, our prose narratives are marvelous but moribund. I believe that a revival is possible, and work towards that end. It remains to be seen whether the fragile tenure of the stories will grow strong roots once again.

Patricia Glinton Meicholas

## NOTES

1. The author as a child in Cat Island learned this cante fable, and all examples of Bahamian oral literature are derived from this personal experience of the tradition, except where otherwise noted. Else Clews Parsons recorded a variant in Andros (Parsons [#114]: 165-166). In her book *Folk Tales of Andros Island*, Parsons follows this tale with another cante fable, "The Baboon Sister," which she indicates has cognates in British and American tradition. Baboon Sister has been sung by Bahamian children from time immemorial to accompany an energetic dance called "Kicking the Conch Style":

Monkey married to de baboon sister  
Went smackin' mout' until it blister  
Kiss de heart till it blister,  
He was quite a swell.

What you t'ink he had to deir weddin'?  
Black-eye pease and monkey-liver.  
Poun'-cake roas'. All dey flutter,  
All is quite a swell.

What you t'ink de bride done dress in?  
What you t'ink de bride done dress in?  
A white whale scale, white kid slippers,  
All is swell.

What you t'ink de groom did dress in?  
What you t'ink de groom did dress in?  
Paper collar, long white frock, cos' a dollar,  
All was quite a swell.

What you t'ink of de tune dey dance wi'?  
Pa la mafa bloom tree, pa la mafa bloom tree,  
An' wiggle his tail on de flo'.  
He was quite a swell.

2. Zora Neale Hurston scripted a performance of the Bahamian fire dance, which was presented for the first time at the Work Projects Administration's "National Exhibition of Skills" in Orlando, Florida, from January 16 to February 16, 1939. It is noteworthy that, in the title of the exhibition, the Federal Writers' Project referred to the fire dance as an "African Grotesque."

3. “Because African cultures have been largely submerged and, until recent times, almost wholly denigrated, even by black Bahamians, their traces are not easily recovered today. American folklorists made pioneer studies of all-black Out Island communities as early as Parsons’ *Folk Tales of Andros Island* (1911), but locally these were ignored or regarded as dealing with primitive survivals. (Craton: 175)

4. The number of recaptives landed in the Bahamas peaked in the 1830s. Between July 1831 and December 1838, approximately 4,000 Africans entered the colony. This influx resulted in a renewal of earlier anxieties of the white colonists about the economic competition for their slaves and the dangers of the free black presence. The arrival of the recaptives in large numbers also heightened the white community’s awareness of the cultural differences between the Creole slave population and the newcomers. (Johnson: 70)

5. Although the Bahamas supplied labor for the construction of the Panama Canal and other American enterprises in Central America and the Caribbean, the main destination for Bahamian labor was the state of Florida across the Gulf Stream. This population movement constituted migration in reverse, for in the late eighteenth century, American loyalists and their slaves had moved to the Bahamas from East Florida and subsequently transformed the economy and society of the colony. In the early years of the twentieth century, the Bahamas provided the mainly black labor force which built the city of Miami and was responsible for the expansion of agrarian capitalism in South Florida. (Johnson: 163)

6. There is a human trickster group of tales in the Bahamas in which Shine frequently outwitted Mr. Miller in the same way the slave trickster described by Levine (121-133) duped his master. Young Bahamian storytellers once favored these stories before political correctness and the general attrition of Bahamian storytelling caused them to lose currency.

7. “The tales allow for individualistic variation, deliberate variation, only in their conclusion. The narrator is expected to connect the tale with the occasion of its telling, — an opportunity for personal garnish or wit.” (Parsons)

8. ‘Bookay’ appears as a password in a Georgia version of the tale “Entering Cow’s Belly” (Bascom: 93).

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