SHARED IMAGES IN YORUBA AND AFRO-AMERICAN FOLKLORE: AN OPEN QUESTION FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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The use of masks in verbal and plastic art forms in West Africa is widespread and well known. The tradition of masking the human form came to North America with the African slaves chiefly in verbal form along with a few scattered examples of masking and costuming. North America, according to Melville Herskovits, has the lowest retention of "Africanisms" in the whole New World. This, however, does not mean there are none at all. It indicates two things mainly -- first, the state of research at the time of Herskovits' compilation; and second, the inability of American society to acknowledge such phenomena, though research data was within its grasp.

Suffice it to say, Africanisms are there to be found. Some have been submerged in isolated Black American communities; others have been right out in the open, but completely misunderstood as disruptive or unacceptable social behavior by the dominant culture group. The whole tradition for masking, both physical and attitudinal, in Black American communities comes directly from two contributory streams, the culture of the dominant-white majority and the African trans-oceanic cultural continuum. Paul Laurence Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask" is a very poignant expression of the needs for dissembling one's feelings in order to survive in an alien land.[1] The masked figures are in the ubiquitous animal stories, the heritage of Joel Chandler Harris' bowdlerized versions of transplanted West African stories. The human beings in full-body animal masks appear in Richard M. Dorson's American Negro Folktales as well as in other collections of black American folklore.[2] Abigail Christiansen's early (1881) collection of tales have animal personae representing frailties and weaknesses of human kind.[3] Charles Jones' collections from his grandfather's plantation contain animal stories with near morals attached at the end of each.[4] Stoney and Shelby's Black Genesis, also from the Sea Islands area, contains a group of aetiological stories told in dialect form.[5]

Ananse the Ashanti spider occurs in the New World as Anansi (Annancy) or Aunt Nancy. Stories in Daniel J. Crowley's study of the Bahamas include the character "Boy Nasty", a transmutation of B'Anansi.[6] Parsons has also published a group of animal stories, many of which she collected from school children on Ladies Island, South Carolina. A few tales show up in Candy and Guy Carawan's Ain't You Got a Right to the Tree of Life.[7]

Clearly, in these stories the characters represent human beings acting out familiar situations which reflect many good aspects of life as well as man's inhumanity to man. The people's vital cultural concerns tend to show up in these stories. Melville Jacobs, upon questioning his informants, found that they knew the animal personae were humans. E. Evans-Pritchard found in researching the Tuve stories of the Azande that the use of animal characteristics and human personalities were intermixed, sometimes featuring the keen knowledge of animal (including human) behavior.

The masks used in West African societies are often displayed in museums and books as isolated objects. No notion of context and significance is

conveyed in this, making exotic objects out of the masks. In reality the masks are expressions of areas of concern within the society. They themselves are frozen in the carving process, but cloth, raffia, cowries, feathers and other embellishments are added which sometimes cover the while body of the wearer. His human characteristics are hidden or deemphasized by the masks. The masks, which operate as arms of justice and arbiters of social disruptive behavior among other things, are like the story characters because the humanity of the person is covered. It leaves the actors freer to tell the story, teach the morals, or mete out justice. The masks lend a certain anonymity to the person as he enacts the force of justice or the voice of a god. In the stories the teaching and amusing aspects of masks find acceptance.

There arises the question in looking at a group of stories collected by persons from outside the culture, whether or not their collections are representative of the complete corpus of material extant within the society as a whole. The animal stories are particularly "safe" in the moral, political, and social sense. Whatever they do is acceptable because they are non-human, therefore outside the limits of societal demands. The stories enacted by the animals are didactic in purpose, in many instances, and entertain the children and adults as well. Beidelman's articles on Hyena and Rabbit among the Kaguru illustrate an interpretation of how such stories can both entertain and convey a deeper structural meaning.[8] Among the Afro-Americans, of course, the masked figures acted out the rage, frustration, and hostility they felt and were experiencing within the confines of the dominant society which, though featuring Christianity as an ideal value, actually rewarded aggressive and hostile behavior.

The masked figures are not only amusing, entertaining, pedagogical in function, but are acceptable to humans as imitators and preceptors of their behavior. In Afro-American folklore the masked actors seem not to have the significance as they have in the West African societies. There is only one instance of a (face) masked figure that I have found in North America in recent times. On John's Island, South Carolina, the Wesley Methodist Church had a revival of their traditional "Devil Play." The Devil, played by a woman, was a humorous character -- homely rather than ugly. The other characters in the play (which was a series of morality sketches ostensibly) were costumed in ragged plantation-style, workclothes of a bygone era. Most of the people played themselves: the drunkard was the drunkard and duly went to hell, the gamblers were gamblers, the dancers were dancers, etc.; so that one might say they were very "thinly" masked. In Atlanta, Georgia, the members of the choirs of Big Bethel Church give an annual pageant based on a Devil Play. The emphasis in role playing and costuming reflected the upwardly mobile urban society. Twenty actors went to heaven and four to hell (on John's Island the scores were reversed). The entire choir personnel representing angels were in white choir robes, as were the saved souls. The raucous fatalism of the John's Island (rural) group was entirely absent. The urban production plainly stated, "we are good, hard-working, striving-for-purity people." The devil was played by a man dressed entirely in red satin including a hood with only his face showing.

Masked figures appear chiefly in the folk stories. I suspect the folk drama was more common and widespread in the past. For now, however, we will deal with the stories peopled with animals who were acceptable to the white people, too, in their entirely clean, moral existence. Joel Chandler Harris' Uncle

Remus stories spread the American Negro animal tale far and wide and set the standard for Afro-American and African collectors alike for a long time to come. We are just beginning to come out of that now in both places as the climate of opinion loosens up and emergent nations develop personnel concerned with their own cultures. We have relied in the past on outside collectors and now begin to have person-in-the-culture vitally involved with the recording of the expressive behavior from within their own group. Julius Lester and J. Mason Brewer are the two best known of the Afro-American group, possibly the only two.[9] Both of them work with stories with human characters undisguised. People working within their own culture are possibly more likely to come up with somewhat different results than outsiders. In this case, results point to the stories including a high incidence of unmasked rather than masked behavior. However, we need more evidence to be able to make such a categorical statement.

In Yoruba folklore the chicken seems to be a most important creature. He occurs in the plastic arts in various forms and media.[10] Chickens are important also in the Ifa literature as sacrifices.[11] The chicken appears in the creation story, spreading the earth so there would be some place to inhabit and grow things.[12] Birds are generally featured in the iron bird wands and in the myth which Ogunbowole gives the title "Trickster and Fate."[13] Trickster steals a cock and Fate changes himself into a bird in order to pursue Trickster, who has climbed a silk cotton tree, from whom he may not be separated, according to Thompson's analysis of the myth.[14] Bird motifs appear in woven and applique cloth, especially the Dahomean cloth which formerly contained the insignia of kings of the pre-French era. Nowadays, the cloth is produced in quantity, but does not have the proverbial significance of the old cloth. Buffalo, Boar, Fish, and Lion also appear in the line-up.[15]

Tortoise is a major Yoruba trickster/hero. Bamgbose posits three classes of Yoruba folktales: moral, why, and tortoise.[16] Many of the tales have a display of cleverness by the tortoise as a feature which might suggest that such ability to manoeuver is an admired trait. Tortoise appears in the plastic arts, too.[17] Westcott theorizes that the trickster figure is a socially-approved outlet for the tensions and difficulties of surviving within a group which is fairly rigidly structured and prescribed.[18] The trickster is an embodiment of the agency of evil and disruptive behavior so that responsibility for such acts will not fall on the persons in the society. Eshu-Elegba is strongly associated with sexuality, admittedly a difficult force which most human societies seek to control in various ways. The trickster, often an animal figure, has license in different societies to act outside the confines of the rules. Tortoise is admired as is Hare, Brer Rabbit, Anansi and others, for his ability to shift in and out of the law. The cruelty of his tricks are wish fulfillments for some of the listeners who may not dare to do such things but love to hear of those who get away with it.

Tortoise, among other animal tricksters, appears in the New World.

> Mr. Bullfrog and Mr. Terrapin was having a race. One went one road, the other went this one, and at the forks of the road they was going to meet up. The bull frog jumped in a rut, and a truck come along over him, and busted both eyes. Along came Mr. Terrapin, crawling.

"Well Mr. Bullfrog, you made it?"

He said, "Yes, I made it, mighty hardest."

Says, "What's the matter with your eyes?"

Says, "Oh, just a little straining on them."

(The terrapin didn't have sense enough to know the bullfrog hop faster than he could crawl.)[19]

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Every day John had to tote water from the bayou, and every time he'd go to the bayou he would start fussin'. "I'm tired of toting water every day." The next day he went to the bayou and he repeated the same thing (you know just like you repeat the same thing). So last one day John went to the bayou, the turtle was sitting on a log.

Turtle raised up and looked at him, and told John, "Black man, you talk too much."

So John didn't want to think the turtle was talking. He went back to the bayou, got another bucketful of water. The turtle told him the same thing. John throwed the buckets down, took and run to the house, and called Old Marster, and told him the turtle was down there talking. And so Old Marster didn't want to go because he didn't believe it. But John kept telling him the turtle was talking. So finally Old Boss 'cided he could go. But he told John if the turtle didn't talk he was going to give him a good beating. So they all went down to the bayou, and when the got down to the bayou the turtle was sitting on a log with his head back halfway in his shell.

And so John told the turtle, "Tell Old Marster what you told me." So John begged the turtle to talk. So the turtle still didn't say anything. So Old Marsher taken him back to the house, and give him a good beating, and made him git his buckets, and keep totin' water.

When John got back down to the bayou, the turtle had his head sticking up. John dipped up his water, and the turtle raised up and told him, says, "Black man, didn't I tell you you talked too much?"[20]

*

All dem rich men dat countree day got up a race. De fas'es' race-horse was ter race wid Cootah. So day set a day fo' de race. An' dese big mans put de money up. Now, Cootah know what was de amoun' o' money, an' de fas' race-horse know what was de amoun' o' money. So Cootah ax fo' a day. Dey 'gree to gi' Cootah dat day ter decide what he goin' to do. De race was twenty mile wid dat race-horse. An' dat day he get his fam'ly o' cooth, an' set a cootah to ev'y mile. So de nex' day was de race. When de

race come off, de judge, all dem big people was dere to decide de race. Well, de judge decide when de race mus' start. Dey start off. An' de man 'rive to was [one] mile, 'cause de cootah was dere. 'Rive to anoder mile-pos', dere was a cootah dere. Judge at bof en'. When de race-horse 'rive up to de twenty mile, de cootah was dere. Dey had to decide in cootah an' race-horse favor, an' each get half. De en' of de story. When it rained, it rained on Cootah.[21]

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De terripin an' de deer ha' a race. Mr. Terripin git all his kinspeople tegeder an' place one at each mile-pos'. W'en Mr. Deer git to de fi's' mil'-pos', Mr. Terripin say, "Ise heah, Mr. Deer." Mr. Deer jum' to de nex' mil'-pos', but Mr. Terripin was dah; and so 'twas at ebery mil'pos'. Mr. Terripin say, "Well, which one can run de fas'est, Mr. Deer?" -- "I can't fo' say, fo' I still t'ink Ise de fas'est runner in de worl'." -- "Maybe you air, but I kin head you off wid sense."[22]

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Hare an' Cootah goin' to have a race. Man count, "One, two, three! Le's start off!" Hare look back, didn' see de cootah. Say, "I goin' to sleep." When he woke, he hurry to de river. Cootah say, "Man, it's good down here."[23]

His animal characteristics of slowness and smallness are capitalized upon in the stories about races with other animals. The fact that he wins is due only to his craft and guile. The Bahamian trickster animal heroes, chiefly B'Booky and B'Rabby, are openly acknowledged to be people doing their best to get away with sheer chicanery.

Once upon a time, was a merry old time, the monkey chew tobacco and he spit white lime. Cockero jump from bank, and never touch he toes to water yet.

Now, this was B'Booky and B'Rabby again, two t'iefing Niggers. Man, this man had a shop. Couldn't find any-one to wait in the shop, so he had to hire B'Booky and B'Rabby. Now, this day, the man keep missing his butter, missing his butter. Say, "Wonder where the butter's go-ing to. I ain't see no money coming in for no butter, but there's missing it." B'Booky first swallow, "Son, I don't t'ief, Son, I's a good boy." B'Rabby tell him, "Be like me, Son, I don't t'ief." May say, "OK, you don't t'ief, eh! I can find out where all this butter going to." This day, now he miss somes more butter. He say, "OK now, I going put you all two boys in the sun, and who melt eat the butter." They ain't melt that day. The sun is a little too cold. The next day it wasn't too hot. This day now, the sun hot hot hot hot! Put them in sight of the sun, ain't see nothing but butter run out of them. Man say, "OK, you going pay for all my butter." Two Nig-gers were working about three weeks, and they ain't get paid."[24]

Concerns of prime importance to any given group will keep recurring in their folklore as noted above. This is not always true, as some items are so much a part of the daily scene that they are taken for granted and so do not appear although they are basic. Throughout Afro-American lore we find tremendous concern with food, its acquisition, and sources. The selling-the-grandmother story which occurs among the Kaguru, occurs in almost the same form in the Sea Islands collection.[25]

> Oncet upon a time Ber Rabbit an' Ber Wolf made a frien'. An' dey agree to sell deir moder, an' buy some bread an' butter. So dey was goin' to do ahction, an' had deir moder tied on to de wagon. An' Ber Rabbit say, "Oh, look at somet'in' good! I see somet'in' good!" An' Ber Wolf looked. An' Ber Rabbit loose his own moder an' tu'n his own moder loose while Ber Wolf was drivin' de horse. An' when dey got to de ahction, poor Ber Wolf had to seel his moder alone. Anyhow, Ber Wolf bought de bread an' butter wid his own money.[26]

The Bahamian stories of the house filled with food are another example.

> Well, anyhow, Rabby sing the house up in the air, "Mary go up so high, Mary go up so high, Mary go up so high, till he touch the sky." The house going up so high.
>
> Any, John Brown, Rabby didn't stand, he sort he stuffs, he get he lard, he pork, he beef, he flour, he rice, he grits, and everything like that, and when he think he had a load, he sing the house down.[27]

"The Tortoise in the Animal Kingdom" story in Ogundipe's collection seems to combine some of the elements of both these stories -- the killing of the mother in the famine, the trickster's deception, and the food source in the sky.[28]

In the story "How the Dog Became a Domestic Animal" by a Yoruba informant, the race between Tortoise and Hare appears.[29] The same story is in the Parsons Sea Islands Collection in three versions.[30] "Too Great a Pride can Lead to Disaster" includes monster people in a neighboring town who were only heads.[31] B'Head (contracted Brother Head) is a trickster in Crowley's collection.

> Damn, when he juke the knife in the hog, damn if a head jump out the hold [in the ground]. Was only a head, no body. A head jump out the hole, say, "Oh damn," he say, "you think you want to eat allee."[32]

Yoruba folk stories seem very concerned with social interrelationships and proper behavior. Though the animals trick, they are often caught by their own maliciousness. The humans are supposed to act in a moral manner, more in the sense of what is right within that society than any sort of Christian "morals". The interdependence of the members of the society and their interactions occur and recur in the stories in the Ifa corpus as well as elsewhere. Social skills are of maximum importance. Association patterns are as intricate and complex as the hierarchy of gods. The same values are found in the Sea Islands. The social network is complex and obligatory for all members of

the group and involves reciprocal obligations in social, economic and emotional categories. What shows up very strongly in the folklore in the Sea Islands, however, is the ever-present food/hunger problem and the violence visited upon them by the dominant society, expressed in their violent tricks on each other.

Some fascinating comparisons are emerging in this brief investigation between the Yoruba and Afro-American folklore. When we have more tale collections from Yorubaland and the Sea Islands area, a very fruitful line of inquiry may be pursued. This kind of evidence may well help us to pinpoint the movement of peoples and learn more of their history. The last line in "The Moon and the Sun" in Ogundipe's collection -- "And sometimes, they both meet and have an argument, that is when we have an eclipse" -- tells a story which is found on John's Island, South Carolina.[33] The story contains mythic elements saying that an eclipse is a battle for supremacy between the sun and moon to see whether it will always be night or day. When asked what had been decided, the narrator (W. C. Saunders, John's Island, South Carolina) said they haven't resolved the conflict yet, so we have half night and half day.

William Fagg says, in the introduction to African Sculpture, that "Art, in fact, like language, religion, social institutions and customary law, is one of the ways in which a tribe (by its nature an 'in-group') distinguishes itself from its neighbors."[34] This particularity of African art forms (I would include verbal here), in contradistinction to the international nature of Western art, may well serve a particular group's search for identity, even though they have suffered anonymity and vast changes.

This paper has moved afield from its original purpose to a certain extent. But quite a few of my own hard-won points are laid out in the introduction to Folk Tales and Fables by Gurrey and Itayemi, who say, for instance: "...as expected; they are the natural mode of behaving, and so there is no need for the story teller to point them out; for example, hospitality to strangers and politeness are never commented on."[35] They see three primary themes in oral lore: 1) the value of knowledge, 2) the importance of good social behavior, and 3) the upbringing of children.[36] Their interpretation of the value of knowledge does not exactly coincide with mine. The trickster's abilities to manipulate and manoeuver are not knowledge but cleverness which can be coupled with fairly low intelligence in some instances. In the matter of tale analysis, Ayo Bamgbose divides the stories into three categories: moral, why, and tortoise.[37] The first two are concerned with abstract quantities, but the third presupposes the knowledge of Tortoise's qualities on the reader's part. What this does show is the importance of Tortoise, a character in Yoruba folklore. The story of the fox who talked the leopard right back into the cage out of which he (the leopard) had just talked himself is a fine illustration of the value of persuasive speech. One might say that the tale concerns the value of knowlede and how to use it and communicate it. Needless to say, the other two points involve communication as well. They bring up the point that the stories express the values of the people and entertain. The themes of hunger and the fear of it and the consequent greed show up particularly in the tortoise stories. The story "The Greedy Tortoise and the Generous Porcupine" has an approximate parallel in Guy Carawan's collection, "The Rabbit and the Patridge," one of the only places in Black American folklore that polygamy shows up.[38] It is practised on the island as a de facto institution, of course, as it does not fit with the white man's law.

Beier, in his article about dogs, opens up another interesting question.[39] Here again, I believe, we would find parallels between the attitudes of the Sea Islanders and the Yorubas toward dogs as working members of society. The islanders hunted more in times past than they do now because of increasing restriction by the whites on their movement on the island. More investigation is needed here, and I would like more corroboration of Beier's work to be sure of this. Shango appears with a dog in Lawal's dissertation.[40] The dog wears beads and looks well fed, a bit bulky around the middle. Other animals occur in the representations of masks, such as chickens or birds, ram horns, snail and horse. In Yoruba mythology Obatala steals a horse and gets put in jail instead of doing what he was supposed to in the beginning of the world.[41] Animals keep constantly appearing and reappearing; for was it not the chicken, coming down the chain with first man and palm nuts, that spread the earth? So even the creation force is clothed in animal guise in the complex Yoruba world view.

NOTES

1. The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar (New York, 1913), p. 71.

2. (New York, 1967), pp. 66-123.

3. Afro-American Folklore (Boston, 1892).

4. Negro Myths from the Georgia Coast (Boston and New York, 1888).

5. (New York, 1930).

6. Daniel J. Crowley, I Could Talk Old-Story Good: Creativity in Bahamian Folklore (Berkeley, 1966).

7. (New York, 1966), pp. 114-126.

8. "Hyena and Rabbit: A Kaguru Representation of Matrilineal Relations," Africa 31 (1961), 61-74; "Further Adventures of Hyena and Rabbit: The Folktale as a Sociological Model," Africa 33 (1963), 54-69.

9. Julius Lester, Black Folktales (New York, 1970); J. Mason Brewer, The Word on the Brazos (Austin, Texas, 1953), Worser Days and Better Times (Chicago, 1965).

10. Dennis Duerden, African Art (Middlesex, England, 1968), p. 48; Robert Farris Thompson, Black Gods and Kings (Los Angeles, 1971), chap. 2, facing p. 1; chap. 14, p. 8, fig. 3; chap. 19, p. 8, fig. 27.

11. William R. Bascom, Ifa Divination: Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa (Bloomington, Indiana, 1969), plate no. 8; p. 181, nos. 4-1A and 4-1B; p. 185, no. 5-1.

12. William R. Bascom, Personal Communication.

13. Thompson, Black Gods and Kings, chap. 1, pp. 9-10, figs. 13-17; chap. 11, facing p. 1.

14. Ibid., chap. 2, pp. 1-2.

15. Kate P. Kent, *West African Cloth* (Denver, 1971), pp. 73-78.

16. Ayo Bangbose, *Yoruba Folk Tales* (abstract) in A. Banjo, *African Abstracts* 22:4 (1971), 146.

17. Thompson, *Black Gods and Kings*, chap. 5, p. 12, fig. 24; Bascom, *Ifa* Divination, p. 8, plate no. 11.

18. Joan Wescott, "The Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegba, the Yoruba Trickster," *Africa* 31 (1962), 336-354.

19. Dorson, *American Negro Folktales*, p. 106.

20. *Ibid*., pp. 148-149.

21. Parsons, *Folk-Lore of the Sea Islands, South Carolina*, MAFLS 16 (1923), 79.

22. *Ibid*.

23. *Ibid*.

24. Crowley, *I Could Talk Old-Story Good*, p. 91.

25. Beidelman, "Hyena and Rabbit," pp. 61-62.

26. Parsons, *Folk-Lore of the Sea Islands*, p. 11.

27. Crowley, *I Could Talk Old-Story Good*, p. 50.

28. Ayodele Ogundipe, "An Annotated Collection of Folktales from African (Nigeria) Students in the United States," M.A. Thesis (Indiana University, 1966), pp. 51-53.

29. *Ibid*., pp. 36-39.

30. Parsons, *Folk-Lore of the Sea Islands*, p. 79.

31. Ogundipe, "An Annotated Collection," pp. 41-43.

32. Crowley, *I Could Talk Old-Story Good*, p. 108.

33. Ogundipe, "An Annotated Collection," p. 103.

34. (New York, 1970), p. 6.

35. (London, 1953), pp. 17-18.

36. *Ibid*., p. 14.

37. *Yoruba Folk Tales* (abstract), p. 46.

38. Itayemi and Gurrey, *Folk Tales and Fables*, pp. 67-69; Carawan, *Ain't You Got a Right to the Tree of Life*, p. 120.

39. Ulli H. Beier, "The Yoruba Attitude to Dogs," *Odu*, no. 7 (1959), pp. 31-37.

40. Babatunde Lawal, "Yoruba Sango Sculpture in Historical Retrospect," Ph.D. diss. (Indiana University, 1970), p. 217.

41. William R. Bascom, remarks made at Indiana African Folklore Conference, Bloomington, 1970.