

Revitalizing Folk Art within the Community

by Beverly Robinson

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I want to share with you a series of experiences and bring them into the whole concept of revitalization. In 1971, when I was a student at UCLA, I took a course offered for the first time entitled “Afro-American Folklore and Culture.” The instructor, who is currently director of the Folk Arts Program at the National Endowment for the Arts, was Bess Hawes. Among the topics we studied were African American verbal traditions, including the dozens, signifying, and the toast. At that time, there were two books specifically devoted to the toast. I remember reading the books and calling a few points to my instructor's attention:

This is not the real deal. I don't even know where the author got this from. A lot of it doesn't rhyme. The rhythms are off.... I know better examples than the ones cited in the required readings.... They're not usually done with a lot of profanity because if men or boys were to perform toasts.... and besides, who gave it the name toast?

About the photo: Beverly Robinson with Jessie Lee Smith, Tifton, Georgia. From the South-Central Georgia Folklife Project collection (AFC 1982/010), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

I first heard “toasts” in the late 1950s, early 1960s; they were traditionally performed by men. If a toast contained profanity, it was never done in the presence of females. To date, no one has been able to definitively answer the question of how old toasts are, but toasts are what I grew up knowing as poetic poems—that is, poetic narratives such as *The Signifying Monkey*:

The signifying monkey said to the lion one day,
There's a great big elephant talking about your mama in a terrible way.
Says she got a . . .

And it goes on and on. The great blues man Willie Dixon (born in 1915) remembers kids performing *The Signifying Monkey* when he was in the third grade and trying “to make poems to criticize each other.” He began writing his own versions of *The Signifying Monkey* in the 1930s, selling them for ten cents, fifteen cents, or two for a quarter in Chicago. An estimated 30 to 40 thousand were sold. This is one of his versions:

Says the monkey to the lion on a bright summer day,
There's a big bad mother living down the way. He talked about your folks in the
damnest (sic) way.
And a lot of other things I'm afraid to say.
The lion jumped up all full of rage,
Like a cat from Harlem that's full of gage.
He met the elephant under the tree,
Said, “you big greasy mother, it gone'na be you or me.”
But the elephant glanced him from the corner of his eyes,
Said, “you better find some one to fight your size.”
Then the lion jumped up and made a fancy pass,
That's when the elephant knocked him on his hairy ass.

There was also the dozens, satirical word play in which people talk about each other; it, too, is predominately performed by men. The dozens usually involved “talking about the other person's mama.” In more ways than one, playing the dozens was actually a test of endurance, that is, patience. For instance, how much could you listen to or talk about (especially someone's mother) without being or getting visually upset. Unlike toasts, the dozens usually occurred between at least two people and were not individual narratives that rhymed.

I remember telling my instructor, “I'm going to collect some other toasts. I know there are others with the traditional lyrical quality that are surviving within my culture and they do rhyme. I have not only heard them, but also know they are not what is often called the four-letter dirty ones. They are clean ones.”

So, I decided to go to the campus barber shop; the barber was an African American named Mr. Jackson, and I went to him.

Robinson: Mr. Jackson, I'm taking this course in Afro-American folklore and culture, and I need your help.

Jackson: Sure, baby. I'll give it to you. I know a couple of toasts, especially *The Signifying Monkey*. Why don't you come to the other shop I have, which is over in the community [south central Los Angeles], and you can get more from there.

When I arrived, the men, seeing that I was a young woman, gave me all the clean versions. Proudly, I went back to my Afro-American folklore and culture course and gave a complete presentation. My instructor was very supportive. It was the first time I ever stood in front of a class and performed what I considered a teaching role. Initially, some of my friends (the ones who thought I was an unprepared *racialist* about to mess up) were embarrassed for me. But a few others wanted to know, “Did I really find stuff?”

I said: “Did I find stuff? I've got a lot here. I didn't even know we had this much going”

The class was racially mixed; and based on responses I received then and over the years, I know people genuinely enjoyed my research and presentation.

In that class I also had the opportunity to share something I knew from my own childhood about a coded language form called Tut. At the time, I thought Tut only existed in my family. But later during my sophomore days and after subsequent research, I learned that Tut is prominent in certain geographical areas of the United States. I found people from Arkansas, Georgia, Texas, and Oklahoma who were familiar with Tut. *Tut* is the phonetic spelling of words. For example:

A = A or AH
B = BUB or BA
C = Cut or CA = DUD or DA
E = E
F = FA or FUD, etc.

Tut's usage is best understood with a personal example. As a child with larger than normal feet who could have been devastatingly teased by other children, it was at home where overly sensitive feelings were put in check. Adults would say:

My goodness, her fa-square-e-tut are as ba-i-gug as Uncle Bert's!

Initially, their language eluded me. Translated, f = fa, ee = square e, t = tut; i.e. feet. Note that double consonants or vowels (in this case e's) are squared.

...her fa[f] square e[ee] tut[t] are as ba[b] i[i] gug[g] as Uncle Bert's.

“My goodness, her feet are as big as Uncle Bert's.” Uncle Bert was a great-great-uncle known to have the biggest feet in some parts of Texas.

Another example of Tut is centered on skin tones. If a person had very dark skin, you did not say that he or she was black. Rather, the women in my family would say, “That child certainly has bub-la-a- cut-kam skin.” That is: b = bub, l = la, a = a, c = cut, and k = kam skin—black skin.

Since no one was frowning when they spoke, I thought it was the greatest compliment on earth. I was being indoctrinated into life by grandparents and a great-grandmother in our home in northern California. The indoctrination was not only a sensitizing factor but also a socialization process as part of a tradition that had passed from one generation to another. The difference with that tradition, especially the language, was this: It was not Bop Talk and it was not Pig Latin.

A distant relative, Ulyssee S. Guillebeau, who in folklore terms would be called an informant, reminded me that, "Anybody can speak Pig Latin, but only a few of 'ug-sus' [us]¹ can speak Tut!" The same ideology is found in Maya Angelou's novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Some of her spelling of the words used in Tut differ slightly from those that I have collected, specifically "ak" and "ack." The structure, however, has not changed, and the superior exclusiveness of Tut over Pig Latin is dramatized in the friendship between two girls:

She became my first friend. We spent tedious hours teaching ourselves the Tut language. You (Yak on you) know (kack nug oh wuy) what (wack hash a tut). Since all the other children spoke Pig Latin, we were superior because Tut was hard to speak and even harder to understand. At last I began to comprehend what girls giggled about. (p. 119-120)

Tut is based on the phonetic spelling of words, which means its roots are grounded in a literate tradition. You had to know how to spell. Folks were not spelling *gluteus maximus*; they were spelling *a-square-sus*, because certain words in their standard form were not allowed in our household (translated, *a-square-sus* is *ass*).

Things have changed over time, but this was my first introduction in a classroom to appreciating a culture I had grown up with. Later, from 1975 to 1976, I, like many of my colleagues, worked at the Smithsonian as a participant coordinator. I will never forget working between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial with the Bicentennial Folklife Festival. A momentous occasion during this celebration was when fife and drum players from the South were performing. On another stage, some distance away, a group from Ghana was performing. During a brief quiet moment in their performance, the Ghanaians heard the fife and drum players and suddenly stopped their performance altogether and started motioning their hands from their chest toward the audience as though they were lamenting. Continuing with these movements, they began walking toward the fife and drum players. I was with the fife and drum players and saw the Ghanaians and a sizable crowd coming across the mall toward us. I did not have a clue about what was going on. "Oh no," I said, "Something has happened. I don't know what's happened or happening!" I did not know what to do. The Ghanaians appeared deeply concerned about something. The fife and drum performers were baffled. As more people joined the crowd, the atmosphere was one of curiosity and confusion. Yet, there was a strange understanding that "everything's going to be all right."

What happened was that the Ghanaians heard the fife and drum players performing a traditional funeral song. The fife and drum players explained that it was a song they learned from their foreparents many years ago and were simply sharing it with an audience interested in the instruments they played. After all, how often do you hear black fife and drum players? The

Ghanaians confirmed that this was indeed a funeral song. That is why, they explained, they stopped their own performance to show respect for, and to come see, the person who had died.

Suddenly, I saw a merge of what we call Africanisms coming together in real life. It was a revitalization mechanism on one hand; but on the other, it supported something that I knew from what I had learned in a class much earlier. *So much of what we have, we take for granted. Often, we do not even know where it comes from.*



Session of hand games organized by Beverly Robinson.
South-Central Georgia Folklife Project collection (AFC 1982/010)
American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

After the Smithsonian festival, the Library of Congress sent me to Tifton, Georgia. Well, that was going to be my introduction to what I then considered the Deep South. It was a challenging assignment. I did not know anyone, had never been to Georgia except to change planes in Atlanta, and suddenly was with one of the first folklife teams for the Library of Congress. I was the only woman and only African American with a team of five people to collect folklore. I had to know where to go and how I was going to do this. I had taken my bicycle with me only to learn that it was not the *ladylike* thing to do. (Riding a bike when you are over 21 is not “cool” in that part of the country, especially for an African American, and in the “summertime.”)

But I went to the churches, Baptist and Methodist, and introduced myself. I got up and tried to explain in my educated manner (I was working on a doctorate at the University of Pennsylvania by then) what it was I wanted to do. I will never forget the suggestion made by this lady who quietly approached me: “Honey, speak plain.”

I said: “Oh, okay. Got it.”

I thought a lot about what it meant to “speak plain,” and when I had to return to these same churches (and visit others), I spoke plain. I said, “There are things that hold you and hold us together as a people. What are these things? Why are they important and who are the important people in your community?” I did not bother with my previous speech in which I asked, “Who are the significant others” or “gatekeepers,” phrases I had learned in anthropology. No, in Tifton, I asked and talked about who are the important people and why they are so.

I also went to social gatherings of both blacks and whites involved with 4-H clubs. When different churches came together, both black and white Baptists and Methodists, I spoke to them as well, asking for the same information: Who and what are important in your community? If we all left here today and wanted to leave a legacy to say “this was important to us” or “these people are important to us,” what or who are they?

In Tifton, I learned that for whites, the important person was someone called Auntie. Blacks felt an endearment for someone called Grannie, Aunt Phyllis, and Ant Phyllis. For some of the young people who were aware of an oral historian, and knew the term, they spoke about the “griot,” while elderly whites and blacks mentioned a “doctor” or the “midwife.”

Because I thought I was dealing with six different people, I attempted to find at least five, if not all six, of them. The results led to one person, and her name was Phyllis Carter. Mrs. Phyllis Carter was then the oldest midwife in the state of Georgia. The search taught me an invaluable lesson that especially relates to people involved with fieldwork. If you begin to really dig to find out from a community who and what are important, you start to see what a community wants to hold on to.

As professionally trained folklorists, we also begin to understand what the process is and what is important—knowing that these people or these things have one commonality which gives a special edge to the word *folklore*, contrary to all its theoretical definitions—that is, *folk* being people; *lore*, knowledge (a special type that has transcended time and often has been passed from one generation to another). The commonality is that people often know what knowledge they want preserved if we as field-workers have the smarts to collect (and ultimately present) it.

In Los Angeles, in 1988, we had a festival called From Louisiana to Los Angeles, the La-LA Festival. It was a great festival, but I want to point out what I call the pauses. Recall here that I have already noted one pause in my Tifton story when I had to move away from my learned notion of significant others to speaking plainly. Another pause I want to share derives from a field-research experience I had with the La-LA Festival.

As part of my involvement with the festival, I did a lot of the field research. I learned much about folks from Louisiana and Texas, particularly the group from Louisiana. These people would rather pay you to leave them alone than to receive \$25 or \$30 to be in a festival. Also, they have a lot of pride about who is selected to be involved in a festival and about being a part of the selective process. The more acquainted the field-worker becomes with the community, the easier it is to explain purposes, choices, and formats. In his presentation on field research in the African American community, Worth Long addresses the question of the field researcher-

informant relationship. The answer has several parts: The field researcher should become a friend and earn the respect of the people after going into their community to talk about presenting their arts and any knowledge about them publicly, and the people must trust the field researcher. Then there is the matter of who comes to the festival, and it is here that I address the pause.

This pause occurred when I looked at the analysis of who came to the celebration: mostly people from Louisiana who had a wonderful feeling of geographical oneness. Witnessing this made me feel very good about part of my own family heritage. But the celebration did not accomplish what it should have. What about the neighbors in the surrounding geographical areas? What about the people who need to discover and learn about Louisianans in and out of Los Angeles? It is important to celebrate one's uniqueness, but there must be a coming together with others, a sharing of cultural and ethnic enclaves whether it is Louisianans in California who acknowledge their African and African American cultural roots or the various African diaspora populations in New York.

New York has the largest population of ethnically diverse descendants of African heritage than probably anywhere else in the world. When festivals are held to celebrate this diversity (e.g., the annual Caribbean festival in Brooklyn on Labor Day), the audiences should not just be from the cultures of the people represented in the festivities. Every effort should be made first to bring the diaspora together and second to share with *all* New Yorkers a public celebration honoring specific cultures or geographic areas. My bicoastal relationship with New York is one of love. Although I do not think New Yorkers like to hear it too often, there are some real questions about how much peoples of African heritage respect and know about each other.

Look at two words: *community* and *revitalization*. "Community," to me, means how people *come* into unity. "Revitalization" means to give new life to, to give new vigor to. When you give life to people and things that we are calling folk art in our various communities, the programmatic issue is how do we bring those two together. I suggest that you be extremely cognizant of *where* you do your festival programming and of how you can get as many people as possible involved, both within and outside the community, so that what you do becomes a learning process for all. One of today's challenges for many programming agencies is that of eliminating the "call them" or "make sure they" are included operations. This is important from a multicultural perspective and is a way of eliminating marginalism—that is, having people hanging on the periphery.

In addition, the state of New York, by virtue of its years of existence, has a phenomenal history. The question of existing or past traditions should never be an issue. Rather, the challenge in fieldwork is to (a) identify the similarities and differences in the art forms of the diaspora (e.g., in costume, music, food, dance, tales); (b) identify perpetuators of these forms; and (c) bring them all together in programs so that people begin to understand each other. Perhaps what needs to happen is for people to begin looking at other genres, other forms of the folk arts that we often take for granted or have somehow overlooked.

With us today is Schroeder Cherry, a puppeteer. I have been aware of his work for some time and have helped display some of his puppets and related art, especially when funds were

unavailable to fly him out for a performance presentation. Ventriloquists and puppeteers are as old as time, a part of African tradition, and are right here in New York. You will not find a lot of puppeteers whose knowledge of the art form has passed from one generation to the next; but ventriloquism is ancient, and there are families who practice this art in New York. The Hatch-Billops Collection and the Schomburg Center have archival information on black ventriloquists and puppeteers. Other sources are the Apollo Theater and records of the Works Progress Administration.

Furthermore, some people—particularly folklorists—have written articles and books and made recordings (e.g., *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* and Folkways Records). A few folklorists, researchers, and organizations in New York City that are or have been involved in folk art programming with national, state, and local agencies are Dr. Barbara Hampton, Alan Lomax, Lynda Hill, Mind-Builders, and Genesis II. You should make a serious effort to tap these people and organizations to make sure they are participants or partners in the programs you plan. For example, Alan Lomax has one of the most incredible collections assembled from his father's and his own work over the years: tapes, field notes, films, and other research materials. I believe you need to begin to understand what is in his possession and learn how to use his collections for research purposes and as presentational items. For instance, if you are going to program someone who is performing and talking about the blues, you, and your audience, will be highly enlightened if you (and they, when possible), can listen to a tape that Lomax recorded of Sonny Boy Williamson talking about the blues. This material is here in New York.

One day while I was standing in the lobby of the Schomburg, I looked at the bust of Ira Aldridge, the first tragedian actor “honored and decorated by nearly every European government.” He was a master actor in performance history whose career began in New York with the African Theater (also recorded as The African Grove) in 1821. Then, there was “no career for him in America.” The tradition of African American drama emanates from the eloquence of the spoken word from preachers, narrators, and the world of play, from churches staging *tom thumb* and *womanless weddings*, *God's Trombones*, and pageant plays, and from scripted drama and performers drawing from folk idioms common in our communities. In the lobby I realized that a whole element of folk drama is not even being tapped. The research and programming that I have done with Youth Theatre Interactions in Yonkers is only a scratch-the-surface beginning. It was in the state of New York that *God's Trombones* was first performed as a staged theatrical production. When James Weldon Johnson recorded *God's Trombones*, he did it after the sermon and prayer had been in oral tradition for many years. So he is the documenter, not the author, which he clearly states in his introduction. I believe there are still a lot of folk artists who continue to perform in churches, with social organizations, at community theaters, and at get-togethers. Folk drama, as a performance art form, has been extremely important when looking at other genres.

Professional folklorists need to go through the New York folklore magazines. I have an old one at home and checked to see what people like Simon Bronner and others have written on the folk art tradition in New York and to find out who are the people they documented. Your research into and answers to concerns of “What has happened to these people or their art forms?” and

“How can you present revitalizing programs that include your findings?” will give new life to the folk arts.

Folklorists are in a prime position to do this. In the *New York Folklore* journal, Bronner (1977), in “Street Cries and Peddler Traditions: A Contemporary Perspective,” begins his article by stating “that our traditions have tended to idealize the rural aspects of our culture. The images of the rural itinerate artists in yankee peddler have long been tenants of our preconception” (p. 2).

One of the preconceptions of many folklorists, at least in the early recordings, documentation, and field research, is that many of the people they documented had to be either illiterate, blind, or impoverished (and I could provide a substantial list of other words). Most African Americans today have some form of education. So to find the noneducated person, forget it. This is not to say noneducated people do not exist. Just be careful of a preoccupation with going out in the field specifically looking for the intellectual and physical restrictive effects of living in America. Begin to see how a tradition works even though people are educated. There is a pressuring issue confronting many of us now: What happens when you have someone who learns whittling and carving from a grandfather and then decides to go to an art institute and get a bachelor's or master's degree? Are people who do this part of a tradition?

The answer as I see it is this: If they learned the art form from their grandfather or grandmother and still perpetuate the form as they learned it, then, yes, they are part of a tradition. That they are able to articulate what they have learned in another form through education merely exemplifies their ability. But if they went to school to learn how to carve or whittle, that is not part of the art traditions we are trying to identify. The same applies to me. I am from a family of storytellers. They are absolute raconteurs. I know these stories to their minute detail, but I have a Ph.D. Yet I can tell you the setting of how those stories were told to us, what the moral was (if there was one), where those stories were learned—in terms of how my grandfather especially taught me—and I do not think it has anything to do with the University of Pennsylvania or my teaching at UCLA.

Of course, people had less education in the past than they do today. What was common in one era is not [necessarily] the norm or the prerequisite of another. The street peddlers and criers, how many of them are there today? For example, Charlie Sayles, a blues harmonica player, does not play on Forty-Second Street anymore. We have to release the myths and place nostalgia in its proper place. As we approach the year 2000, more educated than noneducated people are around us, but traditions continue to exist among them. Hence, why do you revitalize these folk art traditions in the African American community? Because they have not died is the answer. These traditions are there and are important to the community. Further, a narrative (a story) goes with these traditions and helps us to understand the timing and place and the specialness of their existence.

I also believe that definitions need to come from the African American community about what is important to us. What is it that we want people to see about us in our community? And is this just a preoccupation of a field-worker who is determined to go and collect toasts in the dirty forms? Or, are toasts a reflection of our community because we find them to be stimulating, we like them, and we want the whole world to know?

Finally, because of its appropriateness today, I want to share with you something the acclaimed music director, composer, and arranger Hall Johnson said in *Opportunity* magazine in 1936:

Artistically, we darker Americans are in a most peculiar situation with regard to what we have to give to the world. In our several hundred years of enforced isolation in this country we have had plenty of time and plenty of reason to sing each other songs and tell each other tales. These songs and stories have a hidden depth of meaning as well as a simple and sincere external beauty. But the same wall which forced them into existence has closed in tight upon their meaning and allows only their beauty to escape through the chinks. So that our folk-culture is like the growth of some hardy, yet exotic, shrub, whose fragrance never fails to delight discriminating nostrils even when there is no interest in the depth of its roots. But when the leaves are gathered by strange hands they soon wither, and when cuttings are transplanted into strange soil, they have but a short and sickly life. Only those who have sowed the seed may know the secret of the root. (P. 28)

Only those people of African heritage—whether they are from Bermuda, Jamaica, or Trinidad or are descendants of enslaved or freed Africans of these countries or the United States, or wherever they are from—will know what it is they want people to see of themselves and determine how they come into unity. But it is up to professional folklorists, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds, to be able to identify what is in a given community. You cannot just take people's knowledge and things and put them on a stage. Somebody has got to sanction what has been identified, and it should be the people themselves.

That's revitalizing.²

Beverly Robinson was known as a theater historian, folklorist, producer, writer, director and professor in the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television. Beverly received her MA in folklore from the University of California, Berkeley and her PhD in Folklore and Folklife from the University of Pennsylvania. She was director of the African Studies Program at UCLA. Beverly was also known for her research for such films as *Miss Evers' Boys*, *Nightjohn*, and *The Color Purple*. Beverly passed away in May 2002.

Endnotes

- 1 "Us" was translated into Tut because of the informant's need and experience not to overtly verbalize group solidarity. Interviewed him in 1972 in Los Angeles, California. At the time, he was in his early 50s and hailed from northern Georgia.
- 2 The course, "Afro-American Folklore and Culture," was revitalized and offered during the regular school curriculum as part of my teaching career at the University of California at Los Angeles.

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