Entry on African Folklore

Babacar Mbaye

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/babacar_mbaye/30/
Africa and the Americas

Culture, Politics, and History
A Multidisciplinary Encyclopedia

VOLUME 2

EDITED BY
Richard M. Juang and Noelle Morrissette
Melissa Fullmer
Editorial Assistant

Transatlantic Relations Series
Will Kaufman, Series Editor

ABC CLIO
Santa Barbara, California  Denver, Colorado  Oxford, England
Copyright © 2008 by ABC-CLIO, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, except for the inclusion of brief quotations in a review, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
p. cm. — (Transatlantic relations series)
3 v.
Includes bibliographical references and index.

DT31.A43 2008
303.48'2706—dc22

2007035154

12 11 10 09 08 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1.

Production Editor: Kristine Swift
Production Manager: Don Schmidt
Media Editor: Jason Kniser
Media Production Coordinator: Ellen Brenna Dougherty
Media Resources Manager: Caroline Price
File Management Coordinator: Paula Gerard

ABC-CLIO, Inc.
130 Cremona Drive, P.O. Box 1911
Santa Barbara, California 93116–1911


This book is printed on acid-free paper ☺

Manufactured in the United States of America
FOLKLORE, AFRICAN

African folklore is part of the oral tradition of black culture. They are oral traditional tales of Africa that have survived and been transformed by African American and Caribbean storytelling and cultural practices. When they needed to write about the literature of their ancestors, West African intellectuals of the 1960s turned to the griot to preserve the age-old traditions of African storytelling. The griot, whose inherited wisdom was acquired through legacy, age, and experience, was the only person who could keep the African past from falling into oblivion at a time when modernization was casting its shadows over the continent. A troubadour par excellence, the griot was an erudite poet whose knowledge and wisdom came not only from his function of historian and genealogist, but also from his role of diplomat and diviner. He retained sacred knowledge of the unmatched arts of praise-poetry, story collecting, reciting, and negotiating.

The griot was traditionally a public servant, counselor, and artist at the service of the royal authority and the people that it governed. His fate depended on the survival and prosperity of the king or queen next to whom he would walk, ride, and run, even during wartime. This unity between the griot and royal personages was manifested in the continuing relationships between the families of the griots and royalty. In the empires that used to be in current Mali, Guinea, Senegal, and the Gambia, “it was understood that a son would succeed his father as griot to a particular line of kings.” When author Djibril Tamsir Niane went to collect information about the epic of Sunjata Keita, Guinean griot Djeli Mamadou Kouyate told him, “The hero’s father, Maghan Kon Fatta, the king of Mali, had as his griot a certain Gnankouman Doua; when the king died and Sunjata succeeded to the throne, he inherited as griot the son of Doua, Balla Fasseke Kouyate” (Niane, 1965, 9). Djeli Mamadou Kouyate rendered the exact words that Maghan Kon Fatta had spoken to his son Sunjata before he died: “In Manden each prince has a griot; the father of Doua [that is, Duga] was my father’s griot; Doua is my griot, the son of Doua, Balla Fasseke, is to be your griot” (cited in Austen, 1999, 34). These statements demonstrate the vital role that the griot plays as a historian and keeper of oral tradition in Africa. By transmitting unwritten knowledge of the past, the griot becomes the purveyor of African oral tradition. Djeli Kuyate’s repetition of the word griot, his emphasis on names, and the distinctive tonality, cadence, and rhythm in which he narrates Maghan Kon Fatta’s last words to his son are patterns of the old poetic tradition from which contemporary African oral strategies derived. The manner in which the griot recites or interprets traditional epics, such as that of Sunjata, helps us understand the origins and characteristics of African discursive strategies. In this epic, Sumanguru Kante, king of Sosso, old Mali, had a conversation with his new griot, Bala Faaege, whom he had taken from his rival, Sunjata. Sumanguru told Bala:
What is your name?
The griot replied, "My name is Nyankuma Dookha."
Sumanguru said, "I am going to take your name from you;
And apart from those with special knowledge,
No one will know your name any more.
I shall name you after my xylophone.
What I am going to do to you,
That is what I shall make your name.
The third will be your surname
Your first name is Balo;
I will cut your Achilles tendons;
Your surname is Kuyate."
They call him Bala Faasege Kuyate.
(cited in Austen, 1999, pp. 36–37)

This epic, which was narrated by Malian griot Demba Kanute in the early 1970s, reflects the importance of orality and understated meaning in traditional African poetry. As the tone of the conversation between Sumanguru and Bala Faasege suggests, in traditional African epic poetry, the importance of the word depends on the way meaning is encoded and expressed in a verbal exchange. When Sumanguru tells his new griot Balla, "I am going to take your name from you," he intends to go further than just removing the civil name and identity that Bala had in the past. Sumanguru envisions to completely eradicate Bala's previous status as griot of the Keita family by transforming him into the bard of the Kante household. This shift of identity requires substituting Bala's previous allegiance to the "Dookha" for a new commitment to the "Kuyate." Once complete, this transformation of Bala's status, which shifts both his royal and ethnic loyalty, is irreversible. The unalterability of Balla's new social position accounts for the seriousness and solemnity of Sumanguru's tone when he says, "I will cut your Achilles tendons." What Sumanguru does here is not to perform the act literally but to signify on his intent to kill the old personality of his new griot in the same way a knife would have cut through the "Achilles tendons" of a person. While he has no intent to hurt Bala, Sumanguru wants to sever Bala's "tendons" metaphorically, signifying his affective conviction that no one other than Bala deserves to become his griot. The understated meaning of Sumanguru's words is a central feature in African oral poetry. Behind the literal aspect of words, the griots convey subtle and implicit meaning through the use of symbolic images.

Because of the transatlantic slave trade, which resulted in the forced transportation of millions of Africans to the Western world, African folklore found its way in the Americas. In order to preserve the memory of their homelands, ancestors, and cultures, the enslaved Africans held tightly to the folktales and worldviews that they either brought from Africa or learned from their forbears in the Americas. These Africans passed down knowledge of the tales from generation to generation, making it possible for scholars to find their traces in the rich literature of blacks in the Americas.

The African influence in the folklore of the Americas is visible in the similar ways in which tales are told on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. A few examples are in Zora Neale Hurston's book of folklore, Mules and Men (1935). Here, Hurston's storytellers develop rhetorical devices that are traceable to cultures and places in Africa. Such devices include opening formulas and calls-and-responses. Examples of opening formula in Mules are the sentences, "Well, once upon a time was a good time" in "The Turtle Watch" (p. 84) and "Ah got to say a piece of litery [literary] lust to git mah wind on" in "How Jack Beat the Devil" (p. 47). These phrases are analogous to the ones
used in Wolof and Fulani folktales, where they serve to arouse the audience members to listen attentively and participate in the process of the storytelling. The Wolof storyteller begins his or her narrative in a similar way with the formula “leb-on” (there was a story) to which the audience responds “lup-on” (it happened here).

Like the African American formula, the Wolof version invites the audience to listen attentively and participate actively in the process of storytelling by answering to the teller’s calls. In *Talking and Testifying* (1977), Geneva Smitherman found in the African American church a call-and-response exchange in which the preacher tells the audience, “Y’all don’t want to hear dat so I’m gone leave it alone,” to which the congregation responds by saying “‘Naw, Tell it, Reb! Tell it! Tell it!” A similar verbal exchange occurs in Wolof storytelling. Here, the teller establishes a rapport of communication by saying “Am-on a fi” (it happened here) to which the audience responds by saying “da na am” (it was so). The sentence “Naw, Tell it, Reb! Tell it! Tell it!” that Smitherman described as a usual formula in African American sermon, rap, comedy, and storytelling is visible in James Baldwin’s *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1953), when the congregation in the Temple of the Fire Baptized responds to Gabriel’s call “Woe is me!” by shouting “Yes! Tell it! Amen! You preach it, boy.” This pattern of call-and-response in the African American sermon is consistent with the Wolof communicative exchange described earlier.

Moreover, the African influence in the Americas is visible in the trickster figures of Brer Rabbit and Brer Dog that Hurston depicts in *Mules* to represent the unequal power relations between planters and slaves during slavery. One example is the tale “What the Rabbit Learned,” in which Brer Dog seeks revenge against Brer Rabbit, who had taken the former’s girlfriend, Miss Saphronie, from him and cut his tongue during their previous conflict in “How Brer Dog Lost His Beautiful Voice.” In “What the Rabbit Learned,” Brer Rabbit and Brer Dog were walking peacefully in the bush, as if no grudge existed between them, when, all of a sudden, the Rabbit heard the sound of barking dogs. Noting that Brer Rabbit was frightened by the sound of the hounds, Brer Dog told the Rabbit, “Ain’t we done held a convention and passed a law dogs run no mo’ rabbits? Don’t pay no tention to every lil’ bit of barkin’ you hear” (pp. 146–147). The Rabbit, who knew that some trick was being played against him, responded, “Yeah, but all de dogs ain’t been to no convention, and anyhow some of dese fool dogs ain’t got no better sense than to run over dat law and break it up.” Saying this, Brer Rabbit took off, remembering the old-time saying “Run every time de bush shake” (p. 147).

The intelligence, charm, wisdom, and verbal dexterity that Brer Rabbit exhibits in his capacity to outsmart Brer Dog in the bush signifies on the subversive strategies that slaves developed to outwit the slaveholders and slave catchers who chased them when they ran away from plantations. The wisdom that makes Brer Rabbit “run every time de bush shakes” alludes to the intelligence that the African slaves in America such as Frederick Douglass and Solomon Northup demonstrated by running away or hiding in secret places whenever they were chased by cruel slave owners. Such subversive strategies of resistance derive from the vigilance that African tricksters like Leuk, who is Brer Rabbit’s grandfather, used to survive oppression in the mythological
world of Ndoumbelane. In Birago Diop’s “The Tricks of Leuk-the-Hare” (1966), Leuk charmed a princess and escaped her father’s plan to execute him by simply telling the king, “Bour [your majesty] . . . you cannot kill the father of your grandchild!” (81). The wisdom and verbal skill that Leuk used to subvert a stratified traditional Wolof society is the source from which Brer Rabbit and the African slaves in the Americas drew in order to outsmart their oppressors.

African folklore has a rich history that is traceable from the traditional epic of Sunjata to the contemporary literature of blacks in the Americas. In both Africa and the Americas, folklore has served as an important means of entertainment, education, and cultural survival. The Africans who survived the Middle Passage have used it to preserve their past and resist domination. In this sense, black writers of the Americas have inherited the role of preservers of the past that griots used to play in Africa.

Babacar M’Baye

See also: Ananse; Dadié, Bernard Binlin; Exploration and Explorers, Africa; Flying Africans

References


FRENCH EMPIRE

The French Empire grew rapidly in the Atlantic between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries, competing heavily with the British Empire. The French laid claim to substantial territories in North, West, and Central Africa, North America, and the Caribbean, particularly what is now the nation of Haiti. French merchants, in search of new markets and potential sources of raw materials, were attracted by Africa and the New World. The French Empire relied heavily on the transatlantic trade started by European merchants in the fifteenth century and involving the export of manufactured goods from Europe to Africa, the shipment of African slaves to the New World, and the sale of American-grown crops to Europe.