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Shuckin' and Jivin': Folklore from Contemporary Black Americans

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Daryl Cumber Dance

**Shuckin'
and
Jivin'**

**Folklore from Contemporary
Black Americans**

INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS • BLOOMINGTON

Introduction

THE PROHIBITIONS against education for Blacks during the time of slavery and during the period of segregation following emancipation have resulted perhaps in at least one advantage for Black Americans. Forced into a closed society, often largely lacking in literacy, Black Americans developed and maintained an oral tradition probably unmatched, and certainly not surpassed, by that of any other group in America. Their folklore reveals the history of Black people in this country and their psychological reactions to their experience. The similarities of themes appearing throughout their tales, from the slave anecdotes to the contemporary stories, suggest that for Black Americans basically very little has changed. The Black principals in the tales may face Old Massa in the slave narratives, they may confront Big Boss in the Reconstruction tales, they may encounter Mr. Charlie in the accounts of the period of segregation, or they may contend with a "Honkie" or a "Pig" in the contemporary anecdotes; but the sense of injustice and oppression and the need to vent their anger, to relieve their frustrations, and to fulfill their fantasies in a created world are much the same. As William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs have expressed it, "For white America to understand the life of the black man, it must recognize that so much time has passed and so little has changed."¹

Undoubtedly Black folktales are a form of amusement. They have served as a diversion for the storytellers and their audiences through the years, and one may anticipate many hours of entertaining reading in this book and in other collections of Black folklore. But through my comments I hope to call attention also to the political, psychological, and sociological meanings that lie beneath the humor in most of the selections presented here. Frantz Fanon has noted that, "when a story flourishes in the heart of a folklore, it is because in one way or another it expresses an aspect of 'the spirit of the group.'"² A careful reading of this work will, I hope, provide insight into the spirit of Black Americans—into their loves and hates, their joys and sorrows, their values and concerns, their hopes and fears. Insight into the true meaning of much of Black folklore is sometimes lacking even in many of the

white folklorists who have provided a valuable service in preserving and presenting this folklore, from Joel Chandler Harris, who contended that the teller of the Brer Rabbit tales "has nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery" and who suggested that Brer Rabbit is moved, not by "malice, but mischievousness," to Bruce Jackson, who insisted that "Shine expresses little hostility toward the whites."³ Such insight is lacking also at times among the Black storytellers who reveal in their lore frustrations and fears of which they themselves are not fully aware. Such insight is lacking among those Blacks who are ashamed of the tales because of their own fears and psychoses regarding themselves, their race, and their past. To those who would prefer to ignore and to suppress the folklore of their race, as their counterparts of yesteryear preferred to repress the blues and the spirituals, let me address the admonition of Niles Newbell Puckett: "Those who ignore the past never really understand the present; for the past gives shape to the present. . . . Such ultra-modern worshippers of race-pride would do well to visit again the great Kindergarten of Folk-Thought. . . ."⁴

In selecting material for this collection, I have applied Jan Harold Brunvand's definition of folklore: "*those materials in culture that circulate traditionally among members of any group in different versions.*"⁵ Included here are traditional prose narratives, anecdotes of local characters, folk songs, folk verses, and accounts of individual experiences which, to borrow a phrase from J. Mason Brewer, "possess a distinctive and unique folk flavor."⁶ Many of the accounts of individual experiences turn out to be in effect folktales. There is admittedly little balance among the varied types of folk material presented here. I did not aggressively solicit specific types of materials or specific tales, since I was interested in observing the kinds of tales, anecdotes, and so on, that people like to tell and voluntarily relate. With the exception of maxims which are not ordinarily recounted unless some specific act or incident motivates them, the prominence of certain types of folklore in this collection generally suggests their popularity among the people whom I interviewed.

The material included here comes from all sources. Some of the tales, for example, can be traced back to early European, Asian, and African origins. Others suggest white American and American Indian influences. Some undoubtedly stem from printed sources and from radio and television. But they have all become a part of the oral lore of Black Americans, who have adopted them as their own and who pass them on by word of mouth.

Numerous anthologies of Black folklore which have appeared through the years have contributed significantly to the preservation of Black American folklore. Collections often, however, reflect a certain selectivity that destroys their representativeness as general collections. (Many of them, of course, do not purport to be general collections.) Certain anthologies have limited themselves to specific types of tales—animal tales, religious tales, toasts, and so on. Other collections, which claim to be general, have omitted obscene tales or have published them in expurgated form. Still others have limited themselves to tales told only by selected groups of Black

Americans—for example, Black prison inmates, Black ghetto dwellers, Black rural folk, and illiterate and semiliterate groups. Others have merely taken tales from a variety of printed sources and brought them together in one volume.⁷ I have attempted here, however, to present a more general and more fully comprehensive collection than can be found among other publications. This book includes materials collected from both rural and urban areas, from informants of all ages, and from storytellers of all educational and economic levels, from the completely uneducated and illiterate to the most highly educated, from some of Virginia's poorest, most obscure, and most inconspicuous Black citizens to some of Virginia's most affluent and most prominent Blacks. Though the collection is limited to informants who now live or who once lived in Virginia, the tales which appear here are not exclusively Virginia tales, as innumerable texts given to me were first heard in widely scattered areas of the country. The material presented here is not new; a new folktale is a rare phenomenon. Certain tellers add new dimensions and original perspectives to many of the old tales, however. And several of the tales included here, as far as I have been able to determine, are appearing in print for the first time.

Some readers will no doubt be disturbed by the inclusion of certain of the obscene, crudely bitter, sardonic, and "sick" tales in this volume. The fact is that the myth of the "quaint," "delightful," and "darling" folktales is just that—a myth perpetuated by some folklorists (perhaps the more accurate term is *fakel*orists) through their selectivity or through their tampering with the texts they have received. Most folklore is, as Richard M. Dorson has noted, "coarse and obscene,"⁸ and this book honestly presents folklore as it exists among Black Virginians and among Black Americans generally.

One will note in reading these tales that the contemporary selections, particularly those from younger correspondents, are frequently more blatantly hostile, sadistic, and obscene than are some of the older tales. Many of those young people, witnessing the continued plight of their Black brothers in America, noting the persistent strength of racism in this country, and feeling discouraged by the slowness and ineffectiveness of integration, have become frustrated and disillusioned by the hypocrisy, the insanities, and the horrors they view daily in American government and society (as well as in world affairs), and their bitter pessimism finds expression in perverse and sardonic tales, which have their bases in some of the veiled attacks in earlier narratives. Frequent obscenities and lewd tales are not, of course, unique to Black folklore but are common to folklore generally. In the Black community they serve the same purpose as in other groups—that of expressing aggressiveness and rebellion against societal repression. A brief apologia for the obscene tales appears in chapter fifteen.⁹

Except for an occasional comment in the Annotations, I do not deal with origins. More important than the origin of an item are the reasons for which Black Americans adopted it as their own and the implications of any variations they may have added to it. The point, it seems to me, is to view the types of folklore that have a wide appeal to people and to discover the

functions they serve to the teller and to the listener. My approach is consistent with Alan Dundes' philosophy of the study of folklore: "It is how a people thinks and how individuals perceive themselves in relation to the world they see around them that folklorists ought to be investigating."¹⁰

I have made every effort to present the actual texts, to transcribe them word for word from the taped version.¹¹ I have corrected the events in an item when an informant noted an error in the chronological order during the course of the interview. I have incorporated into the text corrections and additions provided later by the informant and have omitted obvious repetitions. Where necessary, I have placed clarifying information in brackets. In those cases in which words or passages were unintelligible and in which clarification could not be obtained (either because the informant could not clarify it or could not be reached), I have inserted the word *unclear* in brackets.

It is important to note that practically all of the tales included here were delivered in dialect. Even the most sophisticated joke tellers usually revert to dialect in closed company. Indeed, the tales lose much of their flavor in standard English. As Chapman J. Milling aptly averred, "a Negro story not told in Negro dialect is about as successful as a honeymoon shared by the mother-in-law."¹² I have thus given careful attention to rendering the dialect faithfully. Of course, speakers are not always consistent in their use of dialect; the same speaker may, for example, pronounce a final *g* at one time and drop it on another occasion. I have attempted to reproduce the informants' exact pronunciations and not to force any false consistency onto the dialect.

I have struggled diligently to convey to the reader some sense of the oral performances of the tales, which were colored by dramatizations (described in brackets) and frequently characterized by a rhythmical, musical, and rhyming delivery, with a variety of fascinating tonal variations, sometimes difficult, and often impossible, to render in writing. The transcriptions cannot do justice to the facility with which some of the informants mimicked the sounds of animals or captured a fervent religious service with the chants and shouts of the minister and the impassioned responses of the congregation. Indeed, it is unfortunate that some of the tales which, because of the effectiveness of the delivery, elicited the most uproarious responses from audiences appear rather dull in print. Would that I could recapture those performances on paper! I hope those who take up this book will imaginatively reinvest in these tales the energy that charged them in their initial telling.

Annotations for each item, which appear at the back of the book, provide information about the collection of the item and indicate other printed sources. I have keyed references to Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* and to Ernest W. Baughman's *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America* because they are the best known, most commonly used, and most easily accessible indexes. Both of them suffer certain limitations in the areas of African, Afro-American, and erotic

materials, however. African materials and erotic materials are better covered in the two following indexes, which, because of their lack of general use and of availability, I have not keyed: Kenneth Clarke, "A Motif-Index of the Folktales of Culture Area V West Africa" and G[ershon] Legman, *Rationale of the Dirty Joke: An Analysis of Sexual Humor*, respectively.¹³

Brief biographies of most of my major informants are included in the book. A few informants preferred to remain anonymous. My greatest frustration is that I am unable to convey adequately either the pleasure of meeting some of these fascinating Virginians or the thrill of their masterful presentations. Whether illiterate or well educated, whether rich or poor, the informants whose texts appear here have much in common: they appreciate their folk heritage and they preserve it; they delight in telling a good tale and they are adept at it; and they are all intelligent. A good storyteller is invariably witty, creative, and eloquent. During my interview with Charles E. Hayes, a ninety-six-year-old informant, someone asked me if I wanted tales and other items from *old* people. Mr. Hayes quipped, "What she needs is people who know something!" Attend these people who know something, peep in on them as they are shuckin' and jivin', and perhaps, like me, you will come away knowing more as a result.

NOTES

1. William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, *Black Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), p. 31.

2. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 64.

3. Joel Chandler Harris, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, rev. ed. (New York: D. Appleton, 1947), pp. xvii, xiv; Bruce Jackson, "Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me": *Narrative Poetry from Black Oral Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 36.

4. Niles Newbell Puckett, "Race Pride and Folklore," in *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 4 (reprinted from *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* 4 [1926]).

5. Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), p. 5.

6. J. Mason Brewer, *American Negro Folklore* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1968), p. 227.

7. Some of these anthologies are very poorly annotated or are not annotated at all. A few fail to provide any information about the sources of their tales and are therefore of almost no value to the study of Black folklore.

8. Richard M. Dorson, *American Folklore* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 4.

9. For additional discussions of the social and psychological functions of erotic humor, see G[ershon] Legman, *Rationale of the Dirty Joke: An Analysis of Sexual Humor* (New York: Grove Press, 1971); and Sigmund Freud, "Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious," in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, ed. A. A. Brill (New York: Modern Library, 1938).