

# Cultural Adaptation and Retention : The Narrative Tradition of the African-Caribbean Community of Toronto

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Article abstract

This article discusses strategies for cultural maintenance and adaptation as revealed through an analysis of oral narrative performances among members of Toronto's African-Caribbean community. Issues related to ethnic and linguistic identification in a contemporary multicultural society are examined in terms of "socialization and secondary enculturation processes" and, more specifically, in the light of traditional folktale material as transmitted in a new setting, to a new generation. The research involved was carried out with funding from the Government of Canada and York University.

# **CULTURAL ADAPTATION AND RETENTION: THE NARRATIVE TRADITION OF THE AFRICAN-CARIBBEAN COMMUNITY OF TORONTO**

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## **Introduction**

When an ethnic group finds itself confronted by the influence of a second, dominant one whose culture differs from its own, it ultimately risks the loss of its cultural heritage. Among the culture traits so endangered is the body of traditional oral narrative and the human interactive context in which it occurs, traits which have long been recognized, along with language, as primary definers of group affiliation and collective identity (Edwards 1985; Briggs 1988 ; Duranti & Goodwin 1992). This is particularly crucial in multicultural societies where ethnic groups of varying sizes occupying positions of unequal power and dominance interact on a daily basis. In such situations there is a tendency for the cultures of the less populous groups to become submerged. This results in the loss or modification of culture traits over time, as new generations experience new conditions of primary enculturation, and as secondary enculturation exerts its influence on new Canadians. In this short article, I will discuss the objectives of a research project designed to investigate the various strategies whereby one particular minority group communicates and valorizes its shared ethnic identity within such a situation of cultural adaptation and retention. In particular, I will discuss the significance of oral narrative discourse as a primary indicator of group affiliation and collective identity within the African-Caribbean community of metropolitan Toronto.

## **Traditional Narrative and the Discourse of Ethnicity**

A drum roll sounds loudly in the open air, as someone cries out "Roll the drum, Mister Drummer ! Roll the drum, Mister Drummer !" People gather around and others take up the call as the drum roll becomes increasingly intense. Old Man Joe steps forward and the drum roll ceases : a story is about to begin. "Does anyone know what an agouti is ?" A small voice responds from the gathered crowd : "Yes, Big Man Joe, it a big rat with hardly any tail and my daddy say how the meat sweet!" The crowd continues "Roll the drum, Mister Drummer !" and the beat recommences, then stops abruptly. Old Man Joe calls out "Does anybody know how the agouti lost its tail ?" In unison, the audience responds "No !" There is one final drum roll and the story begins :

Once upon a time, there was an agouti and a dog and they was two good friends. One day all the animals was going over to the other side to a party. But only animals with horns were allowed to go. Agouti told dog : "I bet you I could go to that party too." So Agouti made some horns and he went to the party. Now dog got jealous when Agouti was at the party and he bawled out : "Traitor on board ! Check your horns, traitor on board !" So when the agouti came back, he was making some rude remarks to the dog, and so the dog bit off his tail. So that's how the agouti lost his tail. Crick, crack !

Children in the audience call out : "Monkey break he back for a piece of pomorac." And the story ends.

The storytelling session presented above is a brief description of a narrative session documented in the summer of 1994 as part of a pilot project investigating the African-Caribbean oral tradition in Toronto.<sup>1</sup> The collector was a third-year Trinidadian student at York University, one of three I had trained and employed as research assistants during this period. Over the course of their work, these assistants collected some thirty hours of sound recordings representing nearly one hundred narrative performances, both in formal interview contexts and in informal, induced-natural and natural contexts. Many of these have since been transcribed and annotated.

While both the narrative texts and the interactive contexts within which they were performed were extremely interesting in their own right, one of the most critical findings of this project was the revelation that, in many ways, the African-Caribbean culture of Toronto is a "hidden" one. Certainly, it possesses a public dimension which is shared with the larger, multi-cultural society during such events as the international Caribana festival and through the performances of professional storytellers. However, much of what constitutes the private or domestic dimension of this culture is frequently invisible to those outside the community. Many aspects of this hidden dimension are revealed in the content and through the performance, in specific cultural contexts, of traditional narratives which express the reality as perceived and experienced by this community, and which constitute a "discourse of ethnic identity" specific to this culture group.

The African-Caribbean narrative project initiated in 1994 received major funding from the Secretary of State of Canada for a two-year period in 1995.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, its primary objective is to investigate the complementary processes of cultural retention and change as they influence the dynamics of traditional narrative discourse among members of the African-Caribbean community of metropolitan Toronto. Briefly summarized, this project adopts the perspective that any cultural discourse contains evidence of the values, norms, and world view of the group which produces that discourse. Consequently, it should be possible to discern the social (and societal) concerns of the group as

1. York University Internal Research Grant : "Pilot Project on African-Caribbean Narrative Tradition and Ethnic Identity" (1994).

2. Secretary of State of Canada Research Grant in Ethnic Studies Ref. 0464C (1995).

they are reproduced in that discourse, particularly in the content of narrative discourse and through the interactive context of its realization :

When members of the same culture who have undergone identical processes of enculturation come together in a narrative situation, they bring with them a common frame of reference...which facilitates comprehension and allows the focus of the communication to centre on the experience, or action, of the narrative protagonist. [Butler 1990:113]

Or, as Glassie points out so eloquently, the story “envisions the universal (human nature) through the particular...[and] connects the immediate situation...to the culture. That connection is the stories’ axis of meaning” (Glassie 1982:42). Since oral narrative discourse is a primary indicator of group affiliation and collective identity, the collection of a broad, representative corpus of traditional narratives and the ethnographic analysis of the contexts within which they are performed should indicate how the community has moulded a cultural discourse to cope with the new sociocultural environment of the Toronto urban context. This would lead to the identification of various strategies whereby a minority culture group communicates and valorizes its shared ethnic identity within a situation of cultural adaptation and retention. Moreover, the analysis of cross-generational variations in narrative content and performance context will address the degree to which this ethnic community is adapting to urban Canadian society; the extent to which such adaptation is tempered by traditional cultural expression of a collective identity; the degree to which variation in different contexts of enculturation are (or are not) resulting in the cross-generational disintegration of the African-Caribbean world view, and the creation of a new cultural perspective; the degree to which traditional allegorical and didactic narrative forms reflect the social and societal tensions felt by an immigrant group in the midst of a culturally and racially diverse environment. The results of this research will constitute the previously mentioned “discourse of ethnic identity,” as opposed to a simple enumeration of cultural texts and narrative genres.

### **The Oral Tradition**

Of the rich oral traditions to be found in Caribbean culture, the so-called Ananse Stories are among those which most clearly reflect the African origins of the majority of this region’s population. The term “ananse” derives directly from the language of the Akan-speaking peoples of Ghana, the Ivory Coast and Sierra Leone, and translates literally as “spider.” Among the Ashanti in particular, the spider-like Ananse is a trickster figure, and narratives outlining his exploits constitute a tale-cycle of considerable size. As Ruth Finnegan notes in her *Oral Literature in Africa*, such tales often portray the animal characters displaying human personalities and emotions and present them “thinking and acting like

human beings, in a human setting" (Finnegan 1970:346). In this way, these tales often function not only as sources of amusement but also as satires serving as didactic devices illustrating the consequences of human frailties (Okpewho 1992), as shown in the following example collected by a student assistant in 1993 :

Once upon a time, Ananse and him wife live together and they had a big goat. Ananse wanted to eat the goat but him not want to share it with him wife. So one day Ananse 'faam' sick, so him ask him wife to go and call the doctor. The wife took the long road to the doctor and Ananse dress up really, really quick and run to the doctor through the short cut. And pretend so him is the doctor. So when the wife got there, she told the doctor about the situation. The doctor say "Do you have a fat goat ?" The wife said "Yes." The doctor say "Well, all you have to do is go home and cook it and give it all to him." The wife said "Yes." Then she took off home and Ananse hurry up and take the short road home go lay down in the bed. When the wife reach home, Ananse say "What did the doctor say ?" The wife say "Well, him say me for make the goat and give it all to you." So Ananse feel good now, but while the wife cook the goat, Br'er Tucumba<sup>3</sup> come over and see Ananse in bed. Ananse get ready get up out of bed now for eat goat. Br'er Tucumba take the goat from Ananse and put him underneath the basket and give the bone to Ananse. Br'er Ananse look at Br'er Tucumba just eat the goat, eat the meat and say "Out of me big, big goat all this me get ?" Tucumba say "What you say, boy ?" Ananse say "Oh, me say the bone sweet, sir, it sweet." Jack Mandora me nuh choose none.<sup>4</sup> [Male, Jamaica, 35-45]

While Ananse still is identified as the spider-trickster per se in Caribbean oral tradition, in fact, the entire body of transplanted animal tales is often referred to collectively as "Ananse Stories" (or "Nancy Tales"). As Elder points out in his work on Trinidadian folklore : "nansitories [sic] are really animal tales generally speaking but since these stories may contain morals and guide-words, some of them are generically...legends, especially where they deal with the origin of natural phenomena" (Elder 1972:8). There have been a number of collections and studies of the oral tradition of the African-Caribbean population (e.g., Abrahams 1983; Beckwith 1924 ; Dance 1985; Flowers 1980 ; Tanna 1984), many of which have examined the connection between the contemporary Caribbean narrative tradition and its African antecedents (e.g., Edwards and Sienkewicz 1990). However, there has been little, if any, important ethnographic or folkloristic research conducted in Canada on the second stage of what has become a two-leg immigration experience. For several decades, Toronto has experienced a major influx of immigrants from the Caribbean Islands (Henry 1994), and these people have brought with them a rich oral tradition which has yet to be explored in a systematic manner.

3. Br'er Tucumba is an imaginary animal-character who symbolizes in African-Caribbean culture those slaves who would spy on their fellows and act as informants for the white overseers.
4. This closing formula is regularly employed in Caribbean narrative tradition both to indicate the termination of the narrator's performance and to announce a return to the conversational frame of interaction. According to Dance, in the Jamaican tradition, it also serves as a kind of narrative disclaimer whereby the narrator renounces personal responsibility for the tale's contents (Dance 1985: xxv).

As I have suggested, African-Caribbean traditional culture is in many ways a hidden culture. As is the case with most recently transplanted ethnic groups in the increasingly multi-cultural Toronto, its public dimension is revealed and shared with the larger community during popular festivals, and professional artists do perform popularized versions of their oral traditions in public contexts. However, most of the markers of ethnic identity are necessarily and by definition part of the private domain.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, one of my research assistants informed me that, on several occasions, potential informants would decline to participate in the project, and would even go so far as to chastise the collector by saying "You don't want to tell them everything about us." In an urban context such as Toronto where institutionalized racism is a not very well-disguised reality, and where racial tensions do unfortunately predetermine action and reaction, it is obvious who is being referred to as "them." It is because of this that a major objective of this project is to explore these interracial tensions as they find expression in traditional narrative discourse. Being insiders themselves, the research assistants had access to this "hidden" cultural dimension, and while the Ananse Tale cycle was chosen as the initial area of investigation because of the relatively harmless nature of its subject material,<sup>6</sup> my assistants were also able to obtain evidence of the persistence of this much more essential, hidden cultural world view. Three examples are particularly noteworthy. First, there exists a body of narrative commonly referred to as "Big Boy Stories." These narratives are humorous stories similar to European numskull tales, wherein the hero, Big Boy, inadvertently outwits or makes fools of individuals in positions of authority, such as teachers, priests, judges, police officers, and so on. Such tales are noted in some collections of Caribbean folklore, but more often than not are absent because of their perception as rude, ribald, or disrespectful. In her collection of Jamaican narratives (Dance 1985), Dance remarks that informants tend not to offer these to collectors because they don't wish to offend or because they consider such narratives to be inappropriate. A "polite" example of this cycle follows :

Big Boy is a youth that ride a donkey to school and the donkey. Big Boy call him donkey Ijiji (ee gee gee). But Big Boy can't read so when Big Boy go in school, him tie donkey which part him can see it. When him look through the window and him can see donkey. So teacher go to Big Boy say "Spell 'egg' !" Big Boy look through the window and donkey get away. Big Boy say, "Ijiji !" Teacher say "Very good !" [Male, Jamaica, 30-35]

5. Berry and Laponce point out that "we often know quite well how the dominant group views a minority [but] we often lack knowledge of the reverse attitudes and opinions." See J.W. Perry and J.A. Laponce, "Evaluating Research on Canada's Multiethnic and Multicultural Society." In Perry and Laponce, eds. 1994, *Ethnicity and Culture in Canada : The Research Landscape*, pp. 14-15, Toronto : University of Toronto Press.

6. Longer folktales, or Marchen, will not be investigated during this project, largely because I wish to explore the more "conversational" narrative discourse which may arise relatively spontaneously during the course of everyday verbal interaction. This is not to suggest that Marchen may not contain ethnic identity markers, but the performance context in which they occur tends to be more structured, the range of potential narrators more limited, and the texts themselves more conservative and "self-conscious."

Secondly, there would appear to be among the Caribbean-Canadians of Toronto a considerable body of stories referred to by some Caribbean-Canadians as “Duppy Tales,” a culturally specific variety of revenant narratives. MacEdward Leach noted that the word “duppy” was an African word still found in West Coast African languages today (Leach 1961). Such narratives typically take the form of personal experience accounts and describe encounters with these supernatural beings and the strategies used to escape from their malevolence. Given the particular resistance of the sacred world view to extra-cultural influences (Mathieu 1991), the status of this supernatural narrative tradition in Africa, the Caribbean, and Toronto will provide direct evidence of the ways in which the processes of secondary enculturation and adaptation influence cultural discourse. Moreover, preliminary results indicate that while the use of the term “duppy” among adolescents and young adults tends to be relatively uncommon, and texts deriving from their Caribbean origins infrequent, many of the basic themes and details of experiences of this sort are remarkably similar to tales handed down through the Caribbean oral tradition. Thus, while change has taken place, there is nevertheless evidence suggesting the retention of a cultural essence in these “new” narratives. A traditional “duppy tale” follows :

But there was this, was a duppy, ghost. These people went to bury a ghost/a man. And he was a obeah man or whatever he was and they didn't chain him down right. So all the people who, who went to the funeral and all the people who owe him money him decide say in the night him going come out and him roll down, whatever they call him—rolling ghost—and him roll and take them along with him as him go along. So they say if you hear the rolling ghost or duppy down the thing, him going come and get you. So we always, you know, when you hear people say “You never hear the rolling ghost last night !” But we never/we always say “Thank God we never hear him” cause if you did hear him you could always end up going with him. But though/we never owe him anything too, so I suppose that's why it never quite work for us. [Female, Jamaica, 20-25]

Similarly, there is a strong indication that there persists in Toronto a strong adherence to “obeah,” a faith based in part on an African spiritual belief system. This is a taboo topic for many, and while there is no denying its controversial status, I have examples of oral testimony assuring me that obeah is still actively pursued by practitioners known as “Obeah-men.” Again, this area of knowledge is withheld from outsiders, and even often emphatically denied within the group itself. Since the sacred domain is an essential component of any group's cultural world view, it is a primary determinant of shared identity (Mullen 1978; Butler 1990); consequently, this study will investigate the dynamics of belief, practice, and narration concerning this supernatural belief tradition in the Toronto context. The following narrative is particularly interesting in that it clearly illustrates the narrator's ambivalence towards what he recounts :

I go tell you a story and this is a true story. Now when I used to go Junior Sec, there was this girl and she was bright, bright. I guess everybody did jealous the girl because she was bright. You know how they does have gift exchange at Christmas right ? Well, we has this gift exchange and everybody exchanged their gifts. And when she opened her gift, it was a mirror. She looked into it and she was blind instantly. I ain't telling you something that they say. I telling you something what I see! I don't believe in it, but I telling you something that I know. It's out there, but I don't believe in it. [Male, Trinidad, 25-30]

Here, the narrator insists on the truth of what he witnessed and then immediately draws an important distinction : he says that he doesn't believe in obeah, but is telling what he knows. The dimensions of belief and truth are extremely complex in oral narrative tradition, and what at first sight may seem contradictory may, when considered in light of the underlying cultural world view and evaluated discursively rather than textually, prove to be integrally consistent (Butler 1990).

Three sub-groupings establish the initial social parameters of the proposed research : those adults who were born in the Caribbean and had lived the better part of their lives there before coming to Canada with their children ; those youths who were born in the Caribbean and who came to Canada with their parents at a young age; and, finally, those whose parents came from the Caribbean, but who were themselves born in Toronto. The rationale underlying the selection of these three preliminary foci is evident. Since this project proposes to apply the paradigm of cultural retention and change in order to determine the extent to which traditional narrative discourse continues to be practised in a new and very different social milieu (i.e., urban Toronto), it is necessary to conduct such cross-generational analysis to establish the patterns and direction of cultural adaptation. For example, one possible set of permutations might reveal the following pattern of cultural adaptation : the older adults, having established a social network of interaction, continue to engage in the traditional activities for which they had received their primary enculturation; the second group retains a passive knowledge of the traditions and performs narratives occasionally with selected peers ; the third group, being farthest removed from the Caribbean narrative tradition and receiving primary enculturation in a context of minimized adaptation, possesses a narrative tradition derived from the urban context into which they were born and bearing little resemblance to that of their parents. Of course, this represents but one hypothetical and no doubt overly simplistic pattern; it is anticipated that the actual results of the project will reveal a much more complex pattern of relationships between the variables to be investigated.

Finally, it should be noted that while distinctive categories of traditional narrative are significant, considerable attention will be accorded personal and family narratives, and narratives dealing with known but unrelated individuals, as these encode the everyday experiences of group members and are constitutive of the discourse of individual self, group affiliation and cultural identity (Glassie 1982; Butler 1990).



## **The Performance and Communication of Traditional Narratives**

Apart from the question of the transmission and subsequent retention of narrative types, the project includes a performance dimension. Based on the corpus already collected, it has become evident that certain performance “keys” (Reusch and Bateson 1968 ; Goffman 1974; Bauman 1977) are variable in the Toronto tradition. One such performance key of particular significance is the use of a special language, in this case, the regional patois, during narrative performance. Language variety has long been a marker of relative social identity and status in hierarchical societies, and the case is no different in the Caribbean. Indeed, because of the historic and cultural circumstances related to the origins of social-class differentiation in this region, and the association of particular varieties of English with the African population, most Caribbean people of African descent are bi-dialectal, speaking a more “standard” variety of English in out-group contexts of interaction, while reserving the use of their “non-standard” linguistic variety for in-group communication. More recently, however, with the move towards social equality and the development of a politics of empowerment, the use of regional patois has, for many, become a source of pride whereby outsiders are excluded from the culture group, and their own identity as a distinct culture group is reaffirmed. The relationship between this traditional performance marker and narration in the Canadian context is another important avenue which has to be explored if the relevance of traditional cultural mentifacts in new environments is to be determined. Finally, since narration is both a social and cultural phenomenon, the ethnography of communication (Gumperz & Hymes 1964) will serve as a guiding paradigm for the identification and analysis of the culturally appropriate contexts of traditional performance, and for the analysis of the principles of narrative authority which determine prescriptions and proscriptions as to who may perform, for whom, and in what contexts.

## **Narrative Discourse and Cultural Identity**

Apart from the theoretical perspectives outlined above, which will guide this research project, a number of works related to the issue of immigrant culture, identity, and change are of significance. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has proposed a model which divides immigrant culture into three levels : the culture of the country of origin ; the culture of the immigrant experience; and the culture of the ethnic experience (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1983). More recently, Lucille Guilbert, in her work on the Vietnamese immigrants in Quebec, has demonstrated that these are not successive stages in the evolution of the group as it accommodates to its new social context. Rather, she demonstrates how these “levels” are actually complementary components in a larger complex which characterizes the culture

group (Guilbert 1990). The extent to which each of these components contributes to the development of a distinct sense of identity can be derived only from the analysis of the discourse of relationships, which itself can be derived only from the analysis of empirical data of the sort suggested in this paper. By paying special attention to the emphasis on cultural identity entailed during a critical period of cultural transition and intercultural contact, it will be possible to investigate narrative discourse as a communicative system directed towards the "re-creation and transmission of cultural patterns of knowledge and social interaction" (Duranti 1988).

As a level of communication acting beyond the level of the utterance, discourse represents a link between cultural cognition and cultural reality, a form of shared cultural knowledge and assumptions which, if absent, renders effective intracultural communication impossible (Stubbs 1983). In light of this, it follows that a shared ethnic identity is not possible without the construction of a discourse which communicates the essence of such an identity and serves to unite speakers according to a set of shared assumptions of cultural self. Such a discourse allows speakers to display an "interlocking system of meaning in communication" (Stubbs 1983), a system which serves to constitute them into a culture group with a shared community of interest. Discourse, then, is a coherent system of meanings realized in texts which reproduces cultural relationships and exerts ideological influences at the community level. However, where some approaches restrict analysis to the level of the text *per se*, a dynamic, process-oriented approach considers such texts within the immediate context of their performance and relates them to the broader context of the culture which produces them. A number of recent studies have dealt with the construction of national or cultural identity in discourse (Carbaugh 1988 ; Polanyi 1989; Johnstone 1990; Butler 1990). Some have examined how a discourse of identity deriving from the traditional values and world view of the past is applied to create a sense of continuity between this cultural past and the temporal present (Briggs 1988). Apart from Manning's work on festival in Toronto (Manning 1984), nowhere has this paradigm been applied to the situation of new Canadians of African-Caribbean descent in the urban context.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

It has been suggested by some that one should not expect immigrant ethnic communities to be overly rich in traditional cultural materials, as that portion of the population most attached to its cultural identity, such as gifted narrators, is less likely to leave its country of origin to seek a new life elsewhere, a perspective quite unsupported by ethnographic and folkloristic research. Moreover, such a view ignores the fundamental nature of cultural identity as one shared, albeit differentially, by all members of the group, preferring instead to

privilege the so-called "talented" or "professional" storyteller. It also fails to recognize the integral relationship between productive and receptive communicative competence, whereby stories are not only performed in a culturally appropriate way, but also recognized as appropriate by the recipients of the narrative, thereby closing the circle of reciprocity which defines collective identity. The oral narrative traditions of new Canadians are often neglected by scholars interested in socialization and secondary enculturation processes, with the result that the very discourse which might prove most revealing in our understanding of the immigrant experience is overlooked. Understanding the discourse of ethnic identity as I have defined it briefly here can, I feel, offer much insight into how such groups adapt to new social conditions while at the same time retaining distinct cultural identities of their own.

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