

“I Know Just How He Feels”: Deep Concerns in Young People’s Lives

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This essay is written in the ethnographic present. It is based on research in South Carolina carried out in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the cooperation and consent of the residents of the John’s Island Community. All lines from the games and songs were sung during the presentation October 18, 2019, 2:30 P.M. at the American Folklore Society Annual Meeting in Baltimore, MD. The description of the Vulture’s gait and the Ranky Tanky body shake were demonstrated.

People will ask what is Folklore used for? Parents use maxims and proverbs to admonish their children, politicians and legislators use sayings to make a point; there are many examples so familiar that we may not perceive them as folklore, such adages as: “God don’t love ugly.” “Every goodbye ain’t gone.” “Don’t count your chickens before they are hatched.”

The young people of the African American Sea Islands on the coasts of North and South Carolina and Georgia turned oral narrative into physical movement every day. One of the accomplishments of the call-and-response singing and movement is to demonstrate one’s movement acumen and singing abilities. Adept movement and wordsmithing are necessary, much admired, and valued skills that Africans brought with them from their home countries and within their legacy.

Like their African cousins, the pre-teens and teens carried their younger siblings on their hips as they moved around the community. They are included in the life concerns of the family and community early. They go to work in the fields in addition to their baby sitting or carrying duties and work around the house with their mother or grandmother as soon as they are able. When they have a chance to play, they have small narratives that inform their songs, “plays,” and dancing games within the context of

their lives. Sometimes, holding the hand of their young charge, they jumped, danced, and moved through the instructions contained in the text of the game.

They sing about drawing water, going to the brickyard, and encouraging each other to dance inventively, "Let me see your motion." The story of the borrowed and unreturned hatchet, the tragedy of Uncle Jessie and his lost crop, the account of Miss Julianne John's illness, decline, and death all reflect what the deeply rural lives of marginalized people, far from help and medical care, are like. They sang also such songs as "Little Johnny Brown" which is a young peoples' sized practice of the African "Buzzard Lope" dance which on an adult level is the re-enactment of the scavenger vultures attacking the corpse of the departed, as in nature, the vulture is programmed to do.

Bunkum, Bunkum

This game starts out, on one end of the line of players, with the spoken request: "Neighbor, Neighbor lend me your hatchet;" the reply from the other end of the line soon comes "Neighbor, neighbor step and get it." The story continues with a brisk singing of "Na na thread needle" during which the dancers go through the pattern, sometimes called rattlesnake, where the players work through the line of all those involved as an indication of the complexities of life and community relationships. Proclaiming "I lost my needle," the word has been introduced that reveals the next twist of the plot—*lost*. The lender asks for his Hatchet back which evokes the reply "Neighbor, neighbor I ain't got it." Lender is not pleased as the loss of valuable tools like a needle or an axe is a calamity which affects their ability to function and some restitution is required to calm the waters. The group, which functions somewhat as a Greek chorus commenting on the action, begins a ritual to sort out the problem. They sing "Wind up this bunkum, bunkum" while the line of players winds up into a coiled

knot. Once properly knotted, they sing "Shake down this bunkum, bunkum," and the whole knot jumps up and down together. By this time, they are all laughing and out of breath which leads to their singing "Unwind this bunkum, bunkum" indicating that peace is, more or less, restored while they unwind the knot.

Here comes Uncle Jessie
A running cross the field
With his horse and blanket/buggy
And I know just how he feels,

Now Step, Uncle Jessie, step, step
Step, Uncle Jessie, step, step

Here comes Uncle Jessie
He's looking very sad.
He's lost his cotton and corn
And everything he had.



Image 1: "And if you want a fella, I'll tell you what to do, you take some salt and pepper and sprinkle it in your shoe."

The brief story tells the stark tragedy of the farmer losing his food for the year and the cotton crop to sell as well. Interestingly the next verse may provide a solution, or not: "Now if you want a fella, I'll tell you what to do, Just take some salt and pepper and sprinkle it in your shoe." (see Image 1, above)

Miss Julianne John

The Julianne John song and dance appears in Barbados as well as the Sea Islands. The young ladies gather to make a social visit singing "I come to see Miss Julianne John, Miss Julianne John, Miss Julianne John and how she is (Barbados - " how she are") today." (see Image 2, below) The reply indicates normalcy "She is ironing." It could be she is washing the dishes or whatever activity suits the singers that particular day. The singers retreat expressing joy at hearing all is well, "I'm very glad to hear that." Miss Julianne John, it is reported in subsequent verses, "is lying down sick," "taking an operation," "The doctor don't expect her to live," and she ultimately dies after each of these inquiries brings a negative, worsening situation. The chorus, again with singing commentary on the outcome, sings "I am very sorry to hear that, hear that, hear that, I'm very sorry to hear that, " followed by the practical question "So what you going to bury her in?" The answers are a catalogue of possible color choices and the uses of those colors as they are rejected as suitable options. "Yellow is for babies," "Blue is for Sailors," "Red is for fire" and so on. Finally, the color of choice is white as Miss John has transformed into a ghost (duppy in the Caribbean) and chases her well-wishers away.



Image 2: Youths perform, "I come to see Miss Julianne John"

Little Johnny Brown

"Little Johnny Brown," a game which the young people enjoy, is a pint-sized version of the "Buzzard Lope" which uses a piece of cloth to stand in for the corpse. "The Buzzard Lope" is a funeral dance of African provenance which was danced by grownups in the community and which re-enacted the coming of the vulture to pick at the corpse thus fulfilling the carrion bird's function in the grand scheme of things. The corpse is represented by a bandanna or a man's handkerchief; it is called a comfort, as in bed comforter, and is manipulated by the dancer who is playing Johnny Brown as he moves through the game. The whole group sings: Little Johnny Brown,

Spread your comfort down.
Little Johnny Brown,
Spread your comfort down.

"Johnny Brown" places the cloth in the center of the ring after making one turn around the inside of the circle. The lead singer intones: "Fold one corner;" the (ever present) chorus replies "Johnny Brown." Meanwhile Johnny Brown follows instructions and folds a corner. After he folds four corners, he is told to "take it to your lover," repeated twice and the chorus says firmly "Johnny Brown" after each one. As he stops in front of one of the other players, he is told to "Take it to your lover," (chorus) "Johnny Brown." The lead singer tells him to "Show her your Motion." The two players dance facing each other. He is then instructed to "Lope like a Buzzard," (chorus) "Johnny Brown." I do not know if you have ever seen a Buzzard lope; it is a loose-limbed sideways gallop with the shoulders working to imitate the wings of the buzzard with the arms spread out. At one point when we were doing this game, Bessie Jones's, renowned singer of traditional African American songs and games, granddaughter, Vanessa, did a buzzard lope, piercing gaze and all, that was masterful in its evocation of the bird's actual motion. Her grandmother dispatched her in my direction; it was a memorable experience. The next instruction is "Take it to your lover," (chorus) "Johnny Brown." The Johnny Brown player hands the folded cloth to the player who steps into the ring as the next Johnny Brown and begins the ritual again. The former Johnny Brown takes his place in the circle and the game continues. When the game continues, as in the "Buzzard Lope" for adults, there is a certain resolution of the process of life and death and some closure for the participants.

What does the Folklore do?

To get back to the question at the beginning of this article—What does the folklore do? The games reflect the labor of daily tasks in such song texts as “Draw me a Bucket of Water” (the hauling of water and extracting of frogs from bucket):

Draw me a bucket of water
For my oldest daughter.
We got none in the bunch,
We’re all out the bunch.
Go under, sister Sally.

In subsequent verses, each member of the original square formed by the dancers, is folded into the “bunch” and that is followed by “Frog in the bucket and I can’t get him out!” recited four times as the whole linked circle jumps or gallops sideways to a certain amount of excitement and breathless acknowledgement of each other.

The following song has been introduced with a spoken exchange about the lending of an axe, and followed with this lively, rhythmic dancing “sewing” of the line, thus concerned with sewing and wood cutting:

Nana,
Thread needle,
Nana
Thread needle,
I wants my needle,
Thread needle,
I lost my needle,
Thread needle.

Green Sally Up (cooking).
Green Sally up, green Sally down,
Green Sally bake her possum brown.

Other laborious tasks are minding their younger siblings and working in the surrounding fields, activities which are not as much mentioned in the games and songs.

The Uncle Jessie game presents a method to resolve the farmer's losses. The song offers sympathy and notification of Uncle Jessie's disasters and provides a small ritual with the salt and pepper in the shoe in hopes to bring about a helpful denouement (in the possible arrival of the "fella" to help with the work). The Julianne John game not only provides manners instruction, but also a review of a long list of color values and what each is best used for during the discussion of suitable burial outfits. Furthermore, they recount Julianne's decline from health to illness and death. Her transmogrification into a ghost in the Sea Islands and duppy in the Caribbean is noted, and the players react in a suitable manner by running and screaming, letting out some of the tension in the situation. Moreover, "Little Johnny Brown" furnishes a practice session for setting the universe to rights after a loss. The girls rejoice in songs like

We are the little Miss Walk-um, Walk-um
We like to walk, walk, walk

The boys join in on

Down in the Valley,
Two by two, my baby, two by two

And

Head and Shoulders, baby one, two, three
knee and ankle baby one, two, three

Truly joyful dances.

Not only do they exercise themselves, they sing as they play and dance which is good for their cardio-vascular systems, provides recreation, and development of leadership skills plus sheer amusement as well. They love "Ranky Tanky":

I gotta pain in my head, Ranky Tanky
Gotta pain in my shoulder, Ranky Tanky"

The chant continues on down through the anatomy finishing off with a complete body shake to “I gotta pain all over me, Ranky Tanky,” repeated as often as their fancy strikes them. It gives them a chance to move themselves all over and to demonstrate their inventiveness.

Their belief systems unfold and evolve as they work through the catalog of the colors in “Julianne John,” as the *Bible* works through the so-called “Begats” and *the Iliad* through the catalogue of the ships. These lists or indexes supply the records that form primary documentary histories of cultures and groups. Bibles and Epics, such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, begin with oral recitation placing them squarely within the realm of folklore. These games and songs recorded the daily history of ordinary people who found their way through the vicissitudes of life as they enacted the “plays” and told their stories as they coped with their lives and losses in an ethnographic present.

The film *Sundiata*, which is based on the African epic of the great King whose military skills built the Empire of Mali, shows one of the young boys telling the story of Sundiata to his friends up in a tree. He is passing on the history of Sundiata. The kind of tree is possibly a Baobab that the men keep counsel under in West Africa. The youngsters are already gathering, the boys becoming men in preparation to tell them something important. They translate the impact of life around them by telling the stories as they embellish them with song and dance. They are busy acting out these dramas with actions and gestures, which is why the games are called “plays.” The enactments are play for young people, but they also contain small scenes which are plays in the dramatic sense. As the domestic history is reflected in the pieces of the quilts taken from textiles harvested from clothing and household goods, the games reflect the ups and downs of life, and the passing on of the histories, as the young people sing, dance, and enact the “plays” and stories.

The young players make them their own and thus meet their own joys and sorrows through a psychological filtering which may be related to PTSD as we know it now. Their minds convey them back to the images of loss and destruction which inures them to seeing and, at various stages, understanding so they can shield themselves through having accustomed their minds to the complex nature of life in their communities and culture. Early in their lives, through dance and song, they are acquainted with some of the worst events life can bring. These dancing games provide the rehearsals for the future, and they may be seen to be gaming the system rather than playing games in the usual sense of play and game. These plays and games provide just a few examples of how folklore can have serious and significant roles in their lives.

Mary Twining Baird, retired professor of English and retired Director of Graduate and Undergraduate programs of Humanities, Clark Atlanta University, looks for the deeper significances of the all-important verbal mastery of the African-descended population of the South Carolina and Georgia Sea Islands.

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