

Hiding in Plain Sight: Louisiana Creole Folktale Style Reconsidered

American Folklore Society, Milwaukee, October 2006.

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A few years ago, Barre Toelken gave an address in which he reconsidered his understanding of the tales he collected from the Navajo, as well as his relationship with the tellers of those tales. I was impressed by the bravery of his willingness to rethink his own position and by the importance of the new understanding that resulted from that reconsideration. While working with a West African graduate student, I was compelled to reconsider some of my own work in a similar fashion. This paper will address the discoveries that emerged from that reconsideration.

When I first began collecting Louisiana French folktales in the early 1970s, I was concerned with documenting an oral tradition that had only been partially collected up to then. Among other considerations, I was intent on presenting the stories in a way that would respect their linguistic origins. My approach had a strong ethnolinguistic component, as well as an interest in the specificity of the *imaginaire* that was represented in Louisiana French oral tradition. I was interested in identifying and validating what might have been literature if the people who carried the stories were literate. An important aspect of that presentation involved the method of transcribing the stories. As I explained in my introduction to *Cajun and Creole Folktales* (1994), my transcriptions were based on the philosophy that “Transcribed language must function in the absence of the speaker.” I was concerned with the importance of rendering exactly the storytellers’ words in a way that communicated them most effectively to the reader. When this question was debated by Dennis Preston and Elizabeth Fine in the *Journal of American Folklore* around the same time (Preston 1982; Fine 1983; Preston 1983), I found myself siding firmly with Preston. Meticulous sound-by-sound transcription, including all hesitations and false starts, can be dull and difficult to read, while interpretive transcription requiring judgment calls on the part of the transcriber makes some purists uncomfortable, and adaptations designed to represent accent and/or dialect can turn transcriptions into an impossible word game for readers. An unfortunate number of published transcriptions wander aimlessly somewhere between literature and linguistics. Ideally, transcriptions with no linguistic intentions or pretensions primarily communicate ideas and information, not sounds, capturing as much as possible the ease and eloquence of the speaker. Transcriptions which try to do both linguistics and communication often stumble between the two. Literary or eye dialect tricks like ellipses and altered spellings often make statements unnecessarily confusing to readers, while the utterances were clear to the listeners who understood immediately the message of the speaker. My method was essentially simple: don’t leave any words out, don’t add any words not spoken, and don’t invent spellings only to render dialectal pronunciation differences except with dealing with a *son identitaire* (an element of linguistic specificity).

The Creole stories posed a special challenge, since the language is more distant from referential French than Cajun French. The Creole storytellers I recorded were more interested in getting me to understand their stories than in making a statement concerning linguistic purity. Though I had studied the language enough to understand it, the storytellers knew that my native language was Cajun French. Being all more or less bidialectal (Cajun French and Creole), they all made an unconscious effort to Frenchify

their Creole in order to communicate more directly and effectively. I am confident that I rendered their words as faithfully and as accurately as I could. However, when I recently relistened to the original recordings while working with Matar Gaye, a graduate student from the SeneGambian region of Africa. I found myself doubting that I had captured the whole performance as accurately. His study was based in part on the recent work of Gwendolyn Midlo Hall showing that area was the origin of a significant number of the slaves who came to Louisiana. As I compared the recordings with my original transcriptions, it became clear to me that I had left out an important part of the stories.

Nearly a dozen Creole storytellers shared stories with me between 1973 and 1979. I was intent on capturing good quality recordings of these stories and tried my best to isolate them so that they would be as uninterrupted as possible. Thinking to honor their stories with a certain formality, I put a tight frame of textuality around them. This included recording as far away from the air conditioner, the refrigerator and the television set as possible. It also included recording them with as few other people around as possible. I also refrained from injecting my own words into their stories, as much as possible. But in the case of Bernice Wiltz, Norris Mitchell, Westley Dennis and Wilson “Ben Guiné” Mitchell, I was sometimes unable to keep other voices out of the performances, including my own. I knew, of course, that audience participation was an integral and expected part of storytelling, especially in the African and Afro-Caribbean tradition. Prompted by my editor and longtime friend and colleague, Carl Lindahl, I included as much contextual and performance information as I could in the presentations and annotations. But I did not show much of these influences in my transcriptions. Matar Gaye noticed that there was a difference between what was said and what was transcribed. In his dissertation, he examined the African influences in Louisiana Creole culture. As part of this consideration, I had suggested he take a look at the Creole stories in my collection, and he found a number of thematic similarities between these and the oral tradition he knew from his native Senegal, including the obvious retention of Bouki as the trickster’s foil, and a few basic tale types. I pressed him to explore deeper influences, including style, especially in a videotape of Ben Guiné shot by Louisiana Public Broadcasting in 1978, including the body language, the cadence, the musicality of the voice. One of the things Matar noticed immediately was the lack of what he would have considered appropriate audience participation in this Afro-Creole tradition. I had tried dutifully to remain quiet and out of the shot, while Ben was trying desperately to engage me in responding to his stories, asking me over and over, as he always did, “To comprends ça? To comprends ça m’apé dit toi, hein?” tugging at my arms and legs, and breaking out of performance (cf. Hymes) a number of times to comment to me on various issues, such as the nature of the black tobacco that his character was chewing, and even how the film crew was recording his stories when they didn’t speak Creole.

When Matar mentioned this, it immediately occurred to me that there might be more to this. I suggested he compare the published transcriptions with the original recordings. When he consulted the Creole tales in the book, he had wondered why there was so little African stylistic influence in them. When he listened to the original field recordings, he noticed that this stylistic influence was indeed there. It was simply not represented in the transcriptions, as a few comparisons of the transcribed texts and the original recorded performances clearly show.

When I recorded Bernice Wiltz in her kitchen in Parks, her husband and a neighbor were sitting nearby. They enjoyed the story and reacted in the way they had always done when Bernice told stories. But when I transcribed the tale later and eventually prepared it for publication, I eliminated the men and focused exclusively on Bernice's performance. What I failed to take into consideration was that everyone in the room was part of the performance. In my annotation to her tale about the contest between the owl and the small bird, I alluded to its apparent African origins, including a reference to a version collected earlier by Elizabeth Brandon in Vermilion Parish, "Le Conte du Moqueur et Hibou" (II, p. 354) which has the birds singing as follows:

Moqueur: Si bi yo ta la la.
Hibou: Kou ta la la
Bin à fenallé ta la la.

I also referred to versions collected by Alcée Fortier in the New Orleans Creole community, "Mamzelle Moquère" (no. 14, pp. 34-36), as well as by Joel Chandler Harris, "The Wise Bird and the Foolish Bird" (*Nights*, no. 66). The songs transcribed by Harris are in a language that apparently represents the remnants of an African language:

Sma't bud: "Tay-tay tenando wanzando waneanso"
Fool bud: "Tay-tay tenando wanzando olando"

Harris himself was convinced of the African origins of this tale. My annotation was based on linguistic and historical-geographic issues. Not only did I not consider the performance or contextual influences, I left them out of my transcription of the tale.

Hibou et z-oiseau / Owl and the Bird (Bernice Wiltz, Parks)

Il n-avait Hibou et pi un z-oiseau en haut un arbre. Et là, c'était-- N-arbre-là té gain un creux. Et creux-là té gain des petits des-vers en dedans. Ça fait Hibou et pi z-oiseau dit, "Mo pari mo ca chanter mieux que toi."

Hibou dit, "O non! O non!"

Ça fait, Hibou commencé. Li fait comme ça "Cou cou tralala! Cou cou tralala!"

Ça fait, il té resté là. Le z-oiseau dit comme ça, "C'est mo kèn tour. Cri-cri! Cri-cri! Cri-cri! Cri-cri! Cri-cri! Cri-cri!"

Ça fait, chaque fois li té chanté, le z-oiseau té chanté, li té rentré dans le n-arbre. Li té attrapé un des-vers. Ça fait, Hibou continue, "Cou cou tralala!" jusqu'à so la voix-là vini faible. Li chantait un et faisait son cinq ou six fois. En dernier li vini, li té près peut plus chanter. Li dit, "Cou cou tralala. Cou cou tra. . .la. . .la."

Z-oiseau dit, "Mais on dirait toi peux plus chanter."

Li dit, "Non, non, mo peux plus chanter."

Mais z-oiseau t'apé nourri li-même, mais Hibou té pas apé nourri li-même.

Quand ça a tourné garder, z-oiseau recommencé chanter encore, "Cri-cri! Cri-cri! Cri-cri! Cri-cri! Cri-cri! Cri-cri!"

Quand li fini chanter, Hibou té commencé, "Cou cou tra. . .la. . .la!" et li tombé "Boum!" par terre. Li té plus chanté du tout.

Ça fait, z-oiseau gagné li. Ouais, z-oiseau gagné li.

Here is what actually happened.

[recording of Bernice Wiltz's story]

There is more that meets the ear than meets the eye. A deeper transcription would indicate the responses of Bernice's husband and neighbor who were an integral part of her performance. There are other examples of this phenomenon. In a story told by Norris Mitchell about why the rabbit chases the dog, his friend Westley "Kit" Dennis provides the same sort of audience response. My annotation notes that this Creole storyteller uses Cajun French throughout most of the story but reverts to his native Creole dialect in the speech of the animal characters. The transcription does not represent Kit's interaction.

10. Le chien et le lapin / The Dog and the Rabbit (Norris Mitchell, Scott)

Ça, c'est pour le chien et le lapin. Ils étaient des grands amis dans le temps. Ça fait, ils ont été ensemble. Il y a un homme qui les a engagés, les deux. Ils ont travaillé. Ça fait, l'homme les a payé chacun leur chèque. Et ils ont parti.

Ils ont arrivé ayoù il y avait une rivière pour passer. Le chien lui dit, "Lapin, comment on va passer sur de l'eau-là?"

Lapin dit, "Mets ton chèque en bas ta queue et puis nage jusqu'à l'autre bord."

Ça fait, le chien le regarde, il dit, "Comment tu dis ça?"

Ça fait, Lapin a fait comme ça. Lapin a mis son chèque et lui, il a mis le sien et ils ont parti à nager. Mais là, il y avait une lame d'eau qui vini. Une lame d'eau qui les a foutus dedans. Ça fait, il a été voir s'il pouvait trouver son chèque mais il était *gone*. L'eau avait pris son chèque.

Lapin était là-bas. Il dit, "Dépêche-toi!"

Ça fait, il a parti derrière Lapin, mais Lapin était sur la butte. Le chien dit, "Tu connais mon affaire? Mo perdu mo chèque!"

"O," Lapin dit, "gros sacré imbécile! Mo dit toi mettre-le en bas to la-queue. Là, de l'eau sé pas prendre ton chèque. Mais," il dit, "ça, c'est une affaire quand même!" Lapin, lui, il a *gone* et Lapin a la queue blanche. Ça fait, Lapin a levé sa queue et puis il a *gone*.

Il a regardé Lapin, il dit, "Tu connais une affaire? C'est lui qui a volé mon chèque!" Et il a parti après.

Et c'est pour ça il course Lapin jusqu'à aateur.

[Excerpt from Norris Mitchell's performance]

Ben Guiné tried for years to haul me into his performances, since I was the only one around while I was recording his stories. He was such a masterful storyteller that he often succeeded despite my best efforts to stay out of them. He knew much more about Creole storytelling than I did. I wish he were still around today so that I could show him that I am finally starting to get it. It took a little help from a Senegalese graduate student who intuitively understood this essential element about Creole storytelling and asked a few good questions. This is why I teach, and why I continue to do fieldwork, too, because they keep me in a position to learn.