

ANGUILLA CULTURAL EDUCATION FESTIVAL 2001

Feature Address delivered at Seminar on 22nd February

By Linda Lake

The oral Tradition and our development

Chairperson and Seminar Facilitator Mrs Ijahnya Christian, His Excellency the Governor, Honourable Chief Minister and other Ministers of Government, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, good morning.

“Hush mout’ no ketch fly”

Had I followed the advice of this local proverb I would not be in this “stew” this morning. Firstly, because I did not heed the warning of this saying I am today stuck with the arduous task of coordinating the Anguilla Cultural Education Festival 2001. In an article written by Mrs. Ijahnya Christian in her weekly column “Heartically Yours” on September 15, 2000 she invited us to “unearth Anguilla’s oldest stories and celebrate our oral tradition in the next Anguilla Cultural Education Festival”. After reading that article I contacted Ijahnya and expressed my interest in seeing the survival of the Cultural Education Festival. Consequently, I was told “I think you are the best person to coordinate the festival”.

Secondly, we wrote to Mr David Carty asking him to deliver the feature address here this morning. In seeking clarification about the topic ‘The Role of the Oral Tradition in

Caribbean Development' Mr. Carty expressed some apprehension. In discussing the topic, I shared with him my views, and Mr Carty expertly passed the buck by saying "Man, Linda, you got di ting well thought out ... Obviously, you have thought deeply about dis ... Why don't you do di feature address and I'll do somet'ing else". Hence, because of Mr Carty's ability "to pass the buck" and my inability to "hush mout" I am again stuck with the challenging task of delivering the feature address at this seminar this morning.

Today, I am going to address the topic "The Oral Tradition and Our Development". In my address, I'll try to give an overview of the oral tradition in Anguilla. By doing this, I hope to evoke memories, highlight similarities and differences between our countries and also sensitize you to the need to preserve our rich, but somewhat dormant cultural heritage. At this juncture I also wish to foster interest in mobilizing this dormant reserve of cultural traditions, thus making it vibrant. As I stated in my address at the official opening ceremony of this festival on Tuesday 13th February,

"The time has come for us to rescue our cultural heritage, and preserve some of our customs and traditions. Yet there is need for more than rescuing – there is a need to rescue rekindle, revive and restore our cultural traditions."

These cultural traditions include a very crucial and integral part of our development, that of the oral tradition and which is the focus of this seminar for the next day and a half.

The word "oral" refers to something that is spoken while a tradition is "any custom or belief that the people in a particular group or society have practised or held for a long

time". Thus the term "oral tradition refers to all the customs and beliefs of a group or society which is spoken rather than written". According to Patricia Ginton, who wrote about oral tradition in the Bahamas, an oral tradition is "a cultural phenomenon in which stories, songs, proverbs sayings and riddles are transmitted by or depend upon performance for their actualization". Ginton criticizes the way in which we discuss oral traditions of the Caribbean. She remarked "the common practice when discussing the oral traditions of the Caribbean is to speak of African "survivals" as if the art forms which make up these traditions are no more than ill-retained tribal memories, thus attributing little creativity to New World Peoples". [Caricom perspective January – June 1992) p. 70]

Children and the Oral Tradition

Firstly, we'll examine a very critical aspect of our oral tradition and discuss the pertinent role it has played and continue to play in our development. Most aspects of our oral tradition highlight the creativity of our people. This is clearly seen when we explore the area of children and the oral tradition. Various forms of the oral tradition provided a vehicle for children to safely and creatively express themselves. For example, children asked questions and coined answers which allowed them to use swear words in a manner which was imaginative, witty and humorous. One such example, which comes to mind is the question "what is vicks good for?" The reply, I will leave up to your imagination, or for you to research in your spare time. There are other examples, such as the song "A Soldier I will be, For curiosity..." Even though this song is patriotic in nature I have heard it transmitted orally, in a form that underscores the wit, humour and creativity in

our people. Such creations were never used in front of adults but were mischievously shared among schoolmates. On another level these creative versions of such patriotic songs were used to poke fun at, and express our derision of the colonial system.

Another feature of the oral tradition which highlights the creativity of our children is in the area of games. Some games allow children to express themselves through dance and movement. These include games such as, "Punchenella, Punchenella," Manowar, Manowar," There's a brown girl in the ring" and "Sally, Sally Water". Such creative expression is healthy and should be welcomed.

As part of the oral tradition games also play a great role in the area of language acquisition. Through games children learn language patterns, increase their vocabulary, learn directions, alphabet and counting patterns etc. One only has to listen and observe children playing clapping games such as 'Miss Mary Mack' to realize that this is a great tool for teaching rhyme and rhythm. Teachers need to use such games in the classroom and I can guarantee you that their teaching would be more effective and learning more enjoyable. Today, one hardly sees children skipping but rhymes such as "The Queen of Hearts she made some tarts" is an excellent game for teaching young children to count and to say their alphabet. Likewise, "Sally, Sally Water" is good for teaching directions, while "Fishes Swim" is an unprecedented and fun way to teach the different species of fish.

During my school days and before my time almost everything was done in a fun way. For example, we had a way of counting the plaits in a girl's head. No girl wanted to have her hair plaited in four for then she would be called a thief. The saying went something like this "Rich man, poor man, beggar-man, thief, lawyer doctor ...". One plait meant you were going to be rich, two meant you would be poor, three you would be a beggar-man and so on. Many of us, including elders in their nineties still reminisce about playing such games, while others fondly speak of games such as "Bidly, Bidly, hold fast" and Green Grabble, Green Grabble" (probably gravel). Such games also ensured that social contact was maintained, thereby fostering a sense of unity and closeness.

Another interesting aspect of the oral tradition in which children featured prominently relates to the composition of ditties and rhymes. I was surprised just recently to hear my five year old reciting this one:

"Snail, Snail, put out yuh horn, Di guinea birds eating all yuh corn."

In discussing these with my mom, she provided me with one of her time, which goes like this:

"The humming bird is a pretty bird

Sitting in he rocking chair

Combing out he coolie hair"

While reminiscing with my brother on this aspect of our culture, we remembered another which we usually recited when we discovered a fat brown worm which we called "Billy Button". Usually we would chant: "Billy Button , Who wuk fuh nuttin, Show me St Martin". In response to our chanting, Billy Button would "wuk up" and point his had in

some direction. Whether it was always accurate in locating St Martin I cannot recall. This component of the oral tradition played a very significant role in our lives as children.

Ofentimes, these ditties reflected our natural environment and provided glimpses of the intimacy we shared with nature. In retrospect, we also seemed to entertain the idea that our chanting would have an enormous effect in charting the course of nature, as when we chanted on rainy days: "Rain, Rain, Go away. Come again another day. Me and Sally want to play."

Not only were these games played in Anguilla, but if you take time to share with your Caribbean bothers and sisters, I am sure you would realize that they too played them, maybe with a slight variation. I was fascinated at the opening event in Island Harbour to see elders such as Mildred Vanterpool, Maude Richardson, Margaret Ruan and Ben Ben Smith playing "Pong Finger". This was a learning experience for all of us at that function, but I found it especially intriguing since I had recently read about that game in a book about the Caribbean. Undoubtedly many of the games we play and the things we say have their origins in our African heritage, but more specifically in West Africa. Many, too, I am sure can be traced back to our European connections. These include game songs such as London Bridge and Yankee Doodle among others.

I share the same sentiments echoed by Mrs Dulcie Richardson who delivered the feature address at the last festival in 1999. She emphasised "the game songs that children played in the 1940's and 50's need to be preserved [and]... should be researched, revised and

recorded for posterity. "Cultural Preservation and Development in Anguilla, p9. Feature Address.

Proverbs and Sayings

We take time now to examine some of our local Proverbs and sayings. Like their counterparts elsewhere in the African Diaspora, Anguillian proverbs are characterized by their pithiness, social commentary, and monitory or warning aspect. This warning element is the most salient in the Caribbean version of the art form. A proverb such as "wha sweeten goat mouth, bitter (sour) he bottom" warns of dire consequences for those who over indulge themselves. A proverb such as "you never see fowl pooch till wind blow" reminds us that there is more than one aspect to a person, and that sometimes it only takes a little ruffling to see the nasty side of an individual. As is the case with most proverbs, these sayings also exemplify the use of metaphorical language to make the message more vivid.

The use of proverbs also played a great role in the disciplining of our children and in transmitting values to them. For example, in communicating the need for thriftiness and conservation children were always reminded "willful waste, woeful want" or "waste not, want not". The international proverb "you never miss the water till the well runs dry" is overused in this respect, but is also used to foster in children a sense of appreciation for what they have presently since it may not always be available. Proverbs such as "Long

rope for mawga dog” or “Long rope for mawga goat” “Today fuh me, tommorra fuh you” and “Every dog got he Friday, and every hog got he Saturday” are used to remind those who may have done us an injustice that his/her turn will come. This can be succinctly penned as “Time will tell” or “what goes around comes around” and “what goes up must come down”.

As mentioned earlier our proverbs, sayings and expressions rely heavily on metaphorical language. This creates vivid imagery and ensures that the message is communicated. Sometimes, though, these metaphors have a mysterious quality such as in the expression ‘Yuh hands jus like busy-lick -um’ (busilickum) meaning “Yuh too fast” or “Yuh like to touch too much. Another such saying is “Yuh mout goin’ jus like chunclapper” referring to someone who is always chatting. Still another mysterious saying is “yuh could push yuh mouth up on Doo Dawn mountain”. Where in the dickens is Doo Dawn mountain? Or who or what is busy-lick -um or chunclapper for that matter? These expressions are very colorful and creative. The expression “I’ll hit yuh so hard yuh’ll believe di devil in hell horse kick yuh” is so powerful that it is an effective tool for inducing immediate fear in the person on the receiving end.

Some of these sayings do not exist for their content message, but for their value as metaphorical intensifiers. An example of this is “when chicken grow teeth’ as in “I’ll forgive you when chicken grow teeth” which means never. Of a similar nature is the question we frequently ask children when we need a favour – “If ah plant yuh, yuh goin grow?” This saying may actually engender the response “If yuh water mi”. Sayings such

as these are striking because of the richness of their imagery and has found their way in the whole fabric of our society.

There are many such examples that need to be recorded and documented for future generations. The recording process is already in progress, but the formal documentation and publication is still some way off and will depend on a number of factors including the availability of funds to finance such a project.

Music, Song and Stories

No overview of the oral tradition in Anguilla is complete without mention of Wally Hughes, that great composer, singer and musician of Sandy Ground. By all accounts Wally was the social commentator of his day. He was the parallel to our modern day calypsonians. His lyrics were sometimes entertaining, sometimes informative, and sometimes satirical in nature. Wally's lyrics give us a glimpse of what was happening in his day and deserves to find a place in Anguilla's Hall of Fame as far as folklore and folksongs are concerned. From my research, I have a mental picture of a man who was 'ready and rearing to go' and took advantage of any opportunity to compose a song.

Mr David Carty in his book "Nuttin Bafflin" share with us the sentiments of the people who lived in the day of the doctor-warden-magistrate-revenue officer era; the days when smuggling was rampant in Anguilla. In those days the doctor acted both as warden and magistrate. Folklore has it that there was nothing much for this individual to do in his

capacity as doctor-magistrate-warden except to catch smugglers so he sometimes occupied himself with this necessary evil. Wally thought it necessary to compose a song that highlighted the feeling of the people towards the doctors in general, but particularly against Dr Jacque Cramer who served here in the early thirties. According to one elder, with whom I spoke, the people did not like Dr Cramer and he was therefore an unpopular character. Wally's song amplifies this.

Doctor Button was here
 He had to run for his life
 Doctor Jones was here
 He had to cry to his wife
 Now Doctor Cramer come
 He dodging round with his gun
 But one of these nights
 We going make such a fight
 Dat son of a gun got to run.

Nuttin Bafflin p. 27

Just a few weeks ago, I had the rare opportunity to meet the late Dr Cramer's wife (who has since remarried) but who had lived with him during his working stint here in Anguilla. She is now Mrs Auralie Trestrade and was visiting the Don Mitchell's collection at the Library. For me it was like "Oh mi Gawd" You are Dr Cramer's wife! We have a song about him". Having such a rare opportunity, I could not help sharing this song with her. To her, this was very amusing at this time. May be not so in the 1930's.

Wally's contribution to the folklore of Anguilla is invaluable and deserves to be researched in greater depth. It is my understanding that he still has a sister alive, who lives in North Hill and that some persons may actually have works composed by him. These works need to find their way in the archives of Anguilla when we open these doors in the near future.

Allow me to share with you what I thought was a great story and one which I think needs to be further researched and documented. The story is told of a revenue officer who worked here prior to 1967. He lived at Snake Ranch in Blowing Point, the first Customs House there. This revenue officer was in love with a young lady, several years his junior. It is reported that this young lady was in love with someone else, and knowledge of this got to the revenue officer. One night he showed up at her home unexpectedly and got confirmation of this alleged affair. The story goes on that he got Wally Hughes to compose a song about this indiscriminate young lady and her lover. From what I gathered, this song was practiced to perfection and turned into a dance. Then one Saturday the "spurned" revenue officer held a parade which began at Snake Ranch and ended at the home of the young man.

The song went something like this (and I'll use my own name here)

"Linda was very eyeable

But she was not very reliable ..."

That man has earned the name of the revenue officer and today bears this as a nickname.

The way in which we attach nicknames to people is another fascinating feature of our

oral tradition. Unbidden, however, this parade has formed part of our folklore and is known as the Pee-Pee Dance to our elders. As one of our local proverbs say “call no name, bear no blame”.

Stories such as these have hardly been transmitted, maybe due to the fact that the persons involved are still alive, but in my mind they need to be researched and documented in their oral form. They form the fabric of a good “written” story, but will lose some of the authenticity when written down. Such bits of Anguillian folklore will indeed be lost forever if they are not documented now as our elders are rapidly passing on.

I tried unsuccessfully to ask one elder about the Pee, Pee Dance at our “String and Sing Event in Blowing Point last Friday, but she quickly gave me the eye indicating that this was a delicate subject and indeed out of bounds. I got the message that in today’s language would read “Don’t even go there”.

Roger D Abrahams in his book, “African American Folktales” offer some explanation for this. He argues:

“Personal problems and eccentricities are seldom faced head on. Instead those used to operating in an oral manner learn from experience how direct and personal talk can adversely affect the harmony of the community... People who live in one another’s lap all the time cannot afford to be so direct or so openly confrontative in their rhetoric” (Abrahams, 1985, p. xix)

Calypso

We move on to discuss calypso as part of our oral tradition. From around the early seventies, calypso as an art form was introduced to Anguilla through the medium of Carnival. Today, it has become an integral part of our oral tradition. Our calypsonians are our social commentators. They entertain us with their lyrics, but they also inform us about what's happening on the socio-political front. Consequently, they are often the target of victimization or favoritism depending on whose side they are on. At this time I want to salute our past and present calypsonians and other musicians who has undoubtedly contributed in no small measure in ensuring that Anguilla has gained international recognition.

Speaking of international recognition, I must single out Bankie Banx, who has been awarded the title "Artist of the Millennium" by the Sunshine Theatre. Bankie, though not a calypsonian has done exceptionally well for himself and Anguilla on the international front in regards to music. His annual "Moonsplash" has definitely marketed Anguilla on a large scale in the international world.

Other bearers of the oral tradition

Any discussion of the oral tradition in Anguilla is incomplete without mention of persons Feddy Carty on his fife, Judge Gumbs on his kettle drum proclaiming his prophecies of doom, Ma Killy of The Valley and Florrie and her family in North Side. According to one admirer, "Florrie used to bring Anguilla to a standstill with her performances". She

was a famous serenader in her day. The legacy of Florrie lives on in her grandchildren, nieces and nephews who themselves are talented actors and actresses.

Today, Sunshine Theatre almost enjoys a monopoly on the stage, except for the All-ah-wee young theatre players who are also giving them stiff competition. Prior to these groups, there were the Malliouhana players a group of talented young actors who produced the play Malliouhana which told the story of Anguilla – the Rock.

I realize at this time that I have not explored the whole area of string band music, riddles jokes and even the shanties that were an integral part of those communal events such as launching of boats and the jollification. But unfortunately, time does not permit me to do this. These, however, have all played their part in promoting a sense of unity and oneness in our communities.

Today, the unspoken desires of most of us here, I'm sure is to revisit those days. That may not be possible, but I implore you to do whatever is within your power to empower our youth by educating them about our cultural heritage and by transmitting our oral traditions to them. This I hope will instill and develop national pride! Remember knowledge is empowering!