



Black Onyx: Black Folktales

Curriculum Unit 83.06.07
by Gail Staggers

Introduction

Folktales are stories that give people a means for sharing their culture, history and values. This unit will use the folktales of the black American as a way of generating interest and pride in the black experience.

The black experience is rich, and the oral tradition of storytelling helps communicate this wealth. Studying folklore helps us to reach across time and space to arrive at an understanding of ourselves and of our ancestors that would not be found in history books. Instead of being dry, boring and impersonal it is more often uplifting poignant pieces of culture that make discovering our past more meaningful.

For years stories have been told and retold to suit the occasion. Whenever the need arises there is a folktale to teach moral lessons, explain the existence and the endurance of men and women, and to fulfill a need for answers to questions which are unanswerable.

This unit has several purposes, one is to find a link or similarities between African folktales and those folktales of the black American experience. If a link between the two cultures can be discovered, it will provide a means for generating pride and positive attitudes in people. The African link to the black American folktale will be an example of how a culture has survived time and distance. The second purpose of this unit is to research "living history and folktales." These living histories will be the most difficult but inevitably the priceless "gems" of the unit.

This unit will assist students and teachers in familiarizing themselves with the oral tradition of storytelling, and reflect the value of the black folk tradition. Folktales will generate race pride and race consciousness for students.

Personal interviews and lots of audio tape will be the mechanism for attaining these living folktales. The unit will also be used for finding similarities in theme with the folktales. Many of the folktales that were collected were put in thematical order, and transcribed to coincide with the oral presentation. Using the written and the audio summaries will motivate the students to find out more about their own personal and collective pasts. The use of folktales as a medium for teaching can be used for any grade level from the elementary to the secondary level; there are suggestions for application to either level later in the unit.

Folktales on both of these levels can be used as a tool for teaching history or values. For example, the use of puppetry is an exciting way to teach a folktale on the elementary level and is exciting on the secondary level where students can design puppets and dramatize folktales they have either read or that they have been told.

Several books of folktales and folklore exist and a common theme of collecting the tales appears to run true throughout them. It is a difficult and time consuming job to acquire tales or oral narratives in the flavor they are intended to be told. People either “clam up” or they try to dress up the stories in such a way as to make them presentable.

When approached about this particular project people who normally began talking about the old times seemed to become intimidated about their stories and all of a sudden developed amnesia. Part of the reason for this sudden memory lapse or resistance is that many of the tales are considered to be “in-group” and therefore not intended for the general public.

There are several reasons for this phenomenon. One of the important reasons is that the people who would normally tell these stories would speak in the vernacular of the tale. For example, if someone from the south were telling a tale they might use words and phrases and a speech pattern that people from the north might not be familiar with; and if it came from “up here” it might be seasoned with “street vocabulary” and therefore be seen as inappropriate. The second and perhaps the most important reason for black people’s hesitation to tell the story is that blacks feel their stories are not worth much, and have no value and are unimportant.

Racism has done such a good job to create negative self images in black people that it has filled us with the impression that the only people who can enjoy and empathize with our tales is a black audience; and anyone else listening in would only ridicule and laugh at our stories.

A third reason for black people’s hesitation is that telling “stories,” and this is what they are called (because the word folktales is seen as not applicable by the people who tell them) bares to all a piece of life. These stories expose values, humor and those things that have effected one the most and those things closest to one’s heart.

Many folklorists spend almost as much time describing their great search for folktales as they do transcribing the stories that have been told to them.

Zora Neale Hurston, a prominent black folklorist, writes a great deal about her search for the folktales of her hometown. She writes about the difficulty of collecting the tales she had heard many times as a child. She knew the material existed, however she was confronted with problems when she tried to collect the stories. Her discovery that “folklore is not as easy to collect as it sounds,”¹ is a problem for all folklorists even when the writer is known by the storyteller, and probably even more difficult for people going into areas where they and their purpose is foreign.²

Objectives

It is generally assumed that black folktales originated in Africa, and since the history of the black American originated in Africa it is probably not far from the truth. However, there are some folklorists who believe that the stories are European in origin.³

It is the contention of this unit that there is a link between Africa and Afro-Americans which is not clearly

defined; however, it does exist. The method for determining the connection between Africa and America is in particular types of stories. The story, or theme for a story used for this unit will be the mermaid story.

In Dorson's book, *American Negro Folktales*, the use of mermaids in folktales is seen as showing a European influence upon Black folktales. The mermaid tales he used showed the mermaid as being an underwater witch, and as previously stated definitely European, whose use in Black folktales came as a result of slaves being exposed to the tales by their masters.⁴

For the purposes of disputing this theory an interesting event occurred when the "living histories" were collected. An eleven year old Nigerian girl, Jenny Onubu consented to being interviewed for this unit and proceeded to "tell" me stories from Nigeria. Many of Jenny's tales were very bloody; however, there were some interesting ideas in her tales. For example, she tells two stories about mermaids. Jenny's stories might also be accused of being influenced by other factors, therefore another source of observing the African influence on the Black folktale looking for the African mermaid stories is the story of *Akim the Mermaid* found in the book of Nigerian folktales *Auta the Great and Other Nigerian Folk Stories*.

Jenny's story needed to be transcribed because of the difficulty of understanding her accent. For that reason Jenny's story and several of the other stories collected for this unit will be transcribed for purposes of better understanding the stories and also so that they can be better utilized for the classroom.

The oral tradition for the Black American has its roots in Africa where history is orally recorded. Oral history is an important aspect of black history particularly since black folktales, have an important place in the history of Black Americans:

"A few things in the lives of slaves belonged to them in a more intimate and personal way; these were things which illustrated peculiarly well the blending of African traditions with new experiences in America. For instance, folklore was important to them . . . Some of it preserved legends of their own past; some explained natural phenomena or described a world of the spirits; and some told with symbolism the story of the endless warfare between black and white men."⁵

The tales of Brer Rabbit, Brer Bear and Brer Fox give to the reader a means of understanding how the black man coped under the oppressive "peculiar institution." When students study Black history, they have difficulties relating to how black people survived spiritually under the system of slavery. Folktales can provide them with a means of observing how people who are oppressed survive. It also gives them a positive sense of pride in the mechanics of survival. Folktales help students overcome a sense of helplessness and anger that is a side effect of racism in America. Folk stories provide a model for understanding those values that a people live with and also reflect the social values, the society, the politics, and the culture of the people.

Education is a discipline whose worth and objectives are, at times, ambiguous. Folktales have an interesting way of dealing with this. One of the folktales found in Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men*, is that of a farmer whose child has recently returned from school. The child has come back to the farm and the father wants him to write a letter, in the process of writing this letter the father tells the son that he wants him to write a particular sound that the father makes when he wants his horse to go. The sound cannot be written by the boy who in turn tells the father that he cannot duplicate a particular sound. At that time, the father questions his son as to what the boy has learned in school if he cannot spell the word he wants.⁶ This story helps the reader look into the values of education.

A story collected for this unit implies a similar assumption and amazement about education. An old woman

wanted one of her children to write a letter:

“Tell Dr. Teal that I has his money and I goin’ to pay him his money. Mattie—tell ‘im that I doin’ fine and the chirren doin’ fine, an we gots no complains. Now Mattie, you write his name on de paper.

“Mama, how do you spell Dr. Teal?”

“Lord God, Mattie, you don’ hav to spell ‘im, jus write ‘im on de paper.” ⁷

General Procedures

In order to assist the student in this anthropological search they will adhere to the following procedures.

1. They will read folktales included in the book by Julius Lester, *Black Folktales*.
2. They will read comparative tales that deal with the same story or with a similar theme.
They will design questions from the stories that will help them in their own search for folktales. For example, when they read “The High John” tales in *Black Folktales* they will then
3. read another “High John” tale either from Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men* or from Richard Dorson’s *American Negro Folktales*.

The primary text for this unit is *Black Folktales* by Julius Lester. This particular book was chosen because of its simplicity, availability and its style. All of these factors make this book accessible to the student. *Black Folktales* is organized with particular regard to origins, human relationships, love, heroes and people. Within these themes there are several other books of folktales and folktales themselves which deal with these themes.

In the Origins section Lester gives four tales “How God Made Butterflies,” “Why Apes Look Like People,” “Why Men Have to Work,” and “How the Snake Got Its Rattles.” These tales can be compared with other tales from other places which share a similar theme. Lester’s tale of “Why Men Have to Work” can be read with Hurston’s “Why the Black Woman Works So Hard.” ⁸

In Lester’s tale, men work so hard because long ago everything was given to man. If he was hungry he only needed to reach up and there was a piece of sky for him to eat. When the sky became tired of this it moved out of the man’s reach so that he had to work to eat.

Hurston’s tale says that a black woman was ordered by her master to collect a box that had been placed by God in the middle of the road for thousands of years, and when she opened the box, the only thing she found inside was hard work and that is why she works so hard today.

Explanations providing reasons for men and women working is also the kind of tale a student should be able to collect on his/her own. The question that the student could ask in a student questionnaire would be, “Why do people work?” The question could also be asked, “Do you know a story about why people work or how they work?” In this way they might come up with an interesting tale to be used in class.

The next tale on the origins of men and women in the Lester book explains why men and women look like they do. Lester's book compares man's appearance to that of an ape. Hurston's comparable tale explains, "Why Negroes are black." ⁹

Finding correlations between *Black Folktales* and tales by other folklorists will be an important activity for the class. In this case, students may ask the question, "Why do black people look like they do?" They will perhaps come up with a folksy explanation from family or friends which they can collect.

The tale, "Keep on Steppin'" which is found in *Black Folktales* is just about the same tale as "Remember Youse A Nigger," which is found in the Hurston book.¹⁰ There is a great moral lesson to be learned. The lesson and the example are very clear. The kind of tale might prompt a student to make inquiries about tales which deal with strong people who continue on in spite of the adversities they encounter. The question might be posed, "Tell me something about a strong person?"

Using this very simple form of survey allows the student to acquire some expertise at asking questions, it also provides them with a general idea of what they are looking for before they begin.

This method of research for students was developed after several attempts to collect folktales. The method is quite simple because students will undoubtedly meet some difficulty in getting the tales if they don't make sure that they are looking for specific things. Even though they might discover something quite different from what they expected to find.

Folktales can be educational as well as enlightening and exciting way for students/teachers to learn and grow.

This unit contains an audio tape of several black folktales that were shared by several people from the New Haven area, a Nigerian eleven year old girl, and several other folktales. These folktales can be used in conjunction with teaching this unit. A few tales have been transcribed so that they can be understood when the tapes are used.

Sample Lesson Plans

Lesson I

Objectives To establish a sense of pride and race consciousness around the black experience.

Methods

1. Listen to the tape on Mermaids as told by Jenny Onuba.
2. Read the transcript of Jenny's Mermaid tale.
3. Read the tale on mermaids from the Dorson book.
4. Read the tale on "Akim the Mermaid," from *Auta the Giant Killer*.

Note s The tales have been transcribed for two reasons. The first reason is to assist the listener in

understanding what is being said on the tape. All of the tales are told in a “voice” that adds the flavor of the culture and should not be changed for academic purposes, but simply understood. “Voice” is an important element of the folktales because it lends itself to the colloquialisms and tone of a specific area. (Because of the “voice” used on the tape some of the words needed to be explained (but not changed) on the tape.)

The second reason for transcribing the tape is so that when they are used in the classroom the teacher may find new methods along with the methods suggested in this unit for teaching folktales.

Worksheet

1. Name of folktales:
2. Source of the tale (primary source or secondary source). Describes:
3. Theme (Is there a moral or what idea does the tale deal with?):
4. Compare the three folktales required to be read. (Remember to use the name of the tale, its source and theme.):

Lesson II

Objectives To find a practical use for the folktales to be studied.

Methods

1. Make a simple puppet or junk puppet.
2. Read the folktale.
3. Rewrite the folktale using dialog.
4. Use the puppets to dramatize the dialog.

Lesson III

1. Students are to prepare a list of questions that can be used in a search for folktales (family and friends would be the source).
2. Sample questions” a. Who did you look up to when you were my age?
b. Did you have a favorite person who told you stories?
c. What kind of stories did they tell you?
d. Do you remember one of those stories?

These questions should be prepared as a group project after they have read and listened to several folktales.

Lesson IV

Objectives *Understand that folktales have themes and ideas that change as time passes and as they are told and retold.*

Methods

1. Listen to one of the tales on the tape.
2. Each student is to retell the story changing one idea as it is told around the room. This exercise should be recorded as each student retells the story.

Or

1. One student is told the folktale separate from the group. The tale is then whispered by each student to another student. When the last student hears the tale it is to be told out loud. This is an excellent way of helping students to understand how tales change from person to person.

Lesson V

Objectives *The purpose of this lesson is to understand what “voice” is. This should be used in conjunction with the audio tape.*

Methods

1. Begin discussing the places that students were born or where their parents were born. List these places on the blackboard.
Talk about accents that different people from different places have. For instance, people from Boston say some words differently from people in Connecticut. Use a word like car (cah), or
2. far (fah). Give more examples, perhaps of a person who is from Brooklyn (again give examples of what some words might sound like). Other places or accents that can be mentioned would be California—Valley girls, Jamaican, or the South.
Stress that you can tell where people come from by the way they speak and the words they
3. use—give examples: sub (sandwich), Connecticut; hoagie (sandwich), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, etc.
4. Ask students for words that are used in one place that have a different meaning in another place.
5. Begin discussing the places that students are from and where their parents are from. Do the people in that place speak differently from the people in this place? Define what “voice” is.
6. Describe the “voice” used in the tape.
7. Listen to the type—choose any tale.
8. Give students transcripts of the tape after they have listened to it first. Do each tale individually.

Transcripts

Cassette recorded by Jenny Onobu, of Nigeria. (Ages almost eleven years old. Language (native): Idoma). Recorded at the Educational Institute for Learning and Research, 65 East 96th Street, New York, New York, June 2 and 6, 1983.

Jenny: In Nigeria one man is my daddy's friend. That man went to that place in the river. I always go there too. But one day the lady, the man, I'm sorry I say the lady. The man saw a mermaid coming out. The man saw the mermaid and then, but the man is (soldier ? . . .) and the man took the (?) . . . off the mermaid.

In one part of Nigeria called Makodi. I been to there two times. They make food, call that food AKLA (ochra?). This food, the time and one day the mermaid saw the ladies making this food. Another time and the mermaid come out of the river and dress herself like a lady who is making . . . saw Akla . . . they cut. And they say this lady, you know how to make this food very well. And the people think is a human, but is mermaid.

And one day, one man come out and one man just come out from the car and says "I want to buy this Akla." And the mermaid say, "Is finished." And the man started fighting with the mermaid and the man . . . (saw in the lady's dress??). "This lady is not a lady—is a mermaid." And if the time . . . they throw the mermaid in the river. And the man who beat the mermaid is sleeping and the mermaid come to the man's bed, take the knife and cut the man's neck. And the lady, (the man's wife) come and start shouting. And the people think the lady kill the husband and they kill the lady back. End of mermaid story.

I want to tell you another one.

One time I went to swim with my friend Viki and my friend Esta and my sister's daughter Ada. We went to there to wash our clothes and swim. And I'm washing my clothes and my clothes started running away. But I'm asking my friends . . . the clothes I'm washing. My friend say she don't worry. But look at the clothes. I'm trying to cry and my friend say, "Look the clothes is running away." I say, "But who trade(?) there? She don't know. My friend hold my leg. I look. I look and haven't see anyone. But I look inside and I see the real mermaid f . . . (?). I started shouting after the mermaid disappeared.

Cassette recorded by Margaret Staggers, on June 30th, 1983. Mrs. Staggers was born and raised in Plantersville, South Carolina, and recorded stories here that she remembers from her childhood. (The remainder of Margaret Staggers' transcript can be obtained, by request, from the Yale—New Haven Teacher's Institute office.)

Margret?

Yes Mam.

Is that you gal?

Yes Mam.

Come here momen (moment). You goin' to the village?

Yes Mam.

I want to send wid (with) you for sumpin' (something). I want sumpin' from that village so bad. I been a wish and wish that someone come by hyeah (here) goin' to the village. Come heah (here) momen! Get me a nickle wud (worth) of sausage, and a nickle wud of cheese. Get me a bun. And a let me see, what else I wanna (want to) send for. I think I want a bottle of dope (soda), and a ain' anudder (another) nickle in dey (there) ane (any)? Get me a piece of cheese and you take dat udder (other) nickle. Oh, thank you God, thank you Jesus.

That you gal? Oh gal, I too glad to see you dis mornin'.

Sister Margret home?

Yes Mam.

What you do de (there) now?

I leave her makin' some bread crust.

Oh, I mean to call Sister Margret yesterday cause I had a message for her and I forgot all about that woman dis mornin! Oh, I got to get over dere (there) and talk to that woman dis mornin!

Hey Julia. How you dis mornin' gal?

Oh, I ain't coin' too good Sarah. I had this headache on top of me that bothered me so bad.

Oh, my God hav mercy I ain' doin' too good myself, but I yah (here). I de yah (be here). You know I thank God for this thing today cause I de yah. Cause I could a been gon (gone) you know. Too much a people a wait for dis day but dey gon. Too much a people a wisht they had been here today but de(the) gon. But you hav to thank God. You ain got nothin' but a head on you to bother you. God, I got too much a ache and pain sometime I don't know where to put myself.

Eva dere?

Yes, Sarah, Eva in yah (here).

Oh God, come here Eva. Gal, I too glad to see you dis mornin'. I want you to write a letter fo me.

Alright, mam, I'll be right out wid my paper and my pencil.

Eva, I wan you to write a letter for to Doctor Teal for me dis mownin'. You tell Doctor Teal I say I'm comin' down dere and I'm gonna bring dat money. And tell Doctor Teal I say I woulda been don dey (down there) but I just didin' had the money. Tell Doctor Teal he don' hav ta worry bout me cause soon as I get dat money I'm gonna put dat money in him hand.

How do you spell Doctor Teal?

Oh God, Eva—you ain hav to spell 'im just put 'im on dat paper.

Hey Sister Mary, how you dis mawnin' (morning) gal?

I ain' feel too good dis mawnin'. Clara been sick all night. I been up all las night.

Oh, das too bad Sister Mary. Clara sick and you ain had nothin' to giv Clara?

Yeah, Sister Lena, I giv Clara everthing I coulda find to give Clara. But Clara jus didn' feel good las night and de gal wooden (wouldn't) say nothin'. I ain know what wrong wid de gal, but it be too sick las night.

So how Floy come along Sister Lena?

Well, Floy de dere (be here), Floy de dere. Still in dere. I don' know you know. Dem chillun (children) don' talk to you no more you know? Dey jus a sit dere, but I know Flora ain' feel good. Cause when Flora don eat I know Floy ain' feel good. You see Floy got dat head on top a him and dat head be botherin' him all de time. You know? An I don't know what it is but de doctor say it sumpin' dey can't do no good wid, you know. But I try to giv Floy everythin' I can to give Floy to try to help Floy to feel better. But Floy dis a sit dere.

Notes

1. Hurston, Zora, *Mules and Men* , Negro Universities Press, p. 18.
2. Ibid., p. 23.
3. Dorson, Richard, *American Negro Folktales* , Fawcett Publications, p. 22.
4. Ibid., p. 23.
5. Stamp, Kenneth R., *The Peculiar Institution* , p. 367.
6. Hurston, Zora, *Mules and Men* , Negro Universities Press, p. 34.
7. Story as told to Gail Stagers by Margaret Stagers.
8. Hurston, Zora, *Mules and Men* , Negro Universities Press, p. 102.
9. Lester, Julius, *B lack Folktales*, Grove Press, p. 153.
10. Hurston, Zora, *Mules and Men* , Negro Universities Press, p. 88.

Student Reading List

Courlander, Harold. *A Treasury of Afro-American Folklore* . New York: Crown Publishers, 1976.

Dance, Daryl Cumber. *Shuckin ' and Jivin '* . Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1978.

Dundes, Alan. *Mother Wit From the Laughing Barrel* . New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1973.

Haley, Alex. *Roots* . New York: Doubleday, 1976.

Hurston, Zora Neal. *Mules and Men* . New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969.

Lester, Julius. *Black Folktales*. New York: Grove Press, 1969.

Bibliography

Abrahams, Roger D. *Deep Down in the Jungle* . Chicago, Illinois: Aldine Publishing Company, 1970.

Urban black narrative folklore from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Excellent as a source on the trials of collecting folklore.

Abrahams, Roger D. *Positively Black* . New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1970.

More collections of urban folktales.

Courlander, Harold. *A Treasury of Afro-American Folklore*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1976.

A collection of oral literature, legends, tales, songs, religious beliefs, customs, sayings of people of African descent.

Dorson, Richard M. *American Negro Folktales* . Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, 1967.

Collection of black folktales with an interesting introduction which links black folktales to a European past.

Dorson, Richard M. *African Folklore* . New York: Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1972.

Collection of African folktales from several tribes.

Dundes, Alan. *Mother Wit From the Laughing Barrel* . New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1973.

Selected readings and interpretations of black folklore topics, such as: folk medicine, folk stories, folk heroes and folk traditions.

Dance, Daryl Cumber. *Shuckin ' and Jivin '* . Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978.

Folklore from contemporary black Americans—a good survey of black folktales—can be used in the classroom.

Emmons, Martha. *Deep Like the Rivers* . Austin: Encino Press, 1969.

Stories told to Martha Emmons by friends over many years.

Feldman, Susan. *African Myths and Tales* . New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1963.

Collection of African folktales.

Goldstein, Kenneth S. *A Guide For Field Workers in Folklore* . Pennsylvania: Folklore Associates, 1969.

The aim of the book is to help guide people in the collection of folklore.

Haley, Alex. *Roots* . New York: Doubleday and Company, 1976.

The history of Alex Haley's family from its African roots.

Hughes, Langston and Bontemps, Arna. *The Book of Negro Folklore* . New York: Dodd, 1958.

Collections of Black American and African folklore.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Mules and Men* . New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969.

Excellent collection of rural tales from Ms. Hurston's home in Florida.

Jackson, Bruce. *The Negro and his Folklore in Nineteenth Century Periodicals* . Texas: American Folklore Society, University of Texas Press, 1967.

Collection of folktales from periodicals of the nineteenth century.

Lester, Julius. *Black Folktales* . New York: Grove Press, 1969.

Collection of black American folktales.

Morgan, Kathryn L. *Children of Strangers* . Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980.

The stories of the Morgans, a black American family from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Stampp, Kenneth M. *The Peculiar Institution* . New York: Vintage Books, 1956.

A study of the institution of slavery in the United States.

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