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ABSTRACT

"There are other ways to get happy," the slogan signifying "Say no to drugs!" is gaining attention within the African American community in the Philadelphia (Pennsylvania) area. "There are other ways to get happy" comes from learning about and understanding traditional elements of African American folklore. For those who seek to understand and appreciate folklore that has been passed down from ancestors, they will be able to pursue positive improvements of urbanization. The study of African American folklore has long concentrated on the verbal arts and music, but today more attention is given to everyday, non-verbal, traditions. How people group together and share similar non-verbal characteristics always has taken place among African Americans. Recently research has begun to observe significance in the way certain groups gather and has sought to describe the qualities that make groups enjoy one another. An example of this type of gathering would be a gospel choir that meets on a regular basis not only to sing but also to enjoy the pleasure of expressing themselves. The importance of these groups getting together offers a positive force that enhances the quality of their lives. Twelve citations are listed in the pamphlet along with topics relating to African Americans. (JAG)

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Philadelphia Folklore Project

"THERE ARE OTHER WAYS TO GET HAPPY":
AFRICAN AMERICAN URBAN FOLKLORE

JERRILYN MCGREGORY

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"There Are Other Ways To Get Happy": African American Urban Folklore

Dr. Rikki Light is a medical doctor in Philadelphia who proudly performs songs derived from her Gullah-speaking background. She is from the low country of South Carolina and Gullah refers to the speech patterns of the Africans brought there as slaves, many only a few years before the Civil War, who retained much from Africa in the way of speech, names, and other folklore forms. Prior to one performance Dr. Light proclaimed, "There are other ways to get happy!" This has been a sentiment I have often encountered while surveying community-based organizations for the Guide to Philadelphia Folklife Resources that we at the Philadelphia Folklore Project are compiling. Besides signifying "Say No To Drugs," the phrase "There are other ways to get happy" signifies the positive recourses there are to the urbanization process.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's article, "The Future of Folklore Studies in America: The Urban Frontier," contributed a theoretical frame to the study of urban folklore.¹ As it relates to the New York City experience this article greatly extends the parameters of urban folklore. However, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett pays most attention to oppositional forms and anti-structural activities. She states: "folklorists seek to discover indigenous solutions, the arrangements that inhabitants themselves evolve, often independently of the authorities, if not in defiance of the law itself."² Although her article identifies many essential emergent structures, it most often links urban folklore to street life and

expressions of alienation.

Other pervasive urban folklore forms collectively provide a very positive response to urbanization. There is a nonverbal tradition involving social interaction common among African Americans: a tradition of voluntary organizations that in many ways forms the backbone of the African American community. These groups answer the community's needs, demonstrating commitment and caring through the institution of festivals, charitable contributions, and youth-oriented programs. I have surveyed over one hundred such organizations for the Guide to date. Most often, these groups describe their purpose or function in the following terms: "to bring people closer together," "to provide self-esteem and enrichment," or "to provide an alternative view of the African American experience." Many of the community-based organizations I have surveyed are non-traditional in the sense that they seldom are officially documented in guides. They are also seldom mentioned in the folklore literature.

The study of African American folklore has long concentrated on the verbal arts and music.³ From the inception of the American Folklore Society, African Americans have been an important subject of study by folklorists. African American folklore was among the fields of study first listed among Society goals. Folktales and folksongs remain the most often discussed genres of African American folklore.

I contend that the everyday traditions of African Americans are mostly nonverbal and often emphasize group interaction rather than individual skills. Nonverbal folklore has most often been understood to include folk gestures, costume, food, and material culture. The term should be expanded

to include the social customs of a group, the collective spirit. The slave work song, the Haitian coumbite, and other sodalities speak to an African worldview encompassing social traditions. Yet, in folklore scholarship, even with the recent emphasis on performance, there has been a failure to integrate this worldview in the close analysis of the performance event.

In interpreting African American verbal performances the historical, cultural, and social contexts have most often been shunned or only perfunctorily described. The treatment of folklore forms as merely texts, static performances, or material culture objects reduces them to mere products. This item orientation fails to recognize the range of social activities which provide the natural context that brings these items to life. African American folklore is too dynamic to be limited in any way.

For example, if one were merely to study the Garden of Gethsemene (a community garden in West Philadelphia) by measuring its plots, cataloguing its contents, and identifying it as a survival from rural traditions, one would miss master gardener Blanche Epps' oral narratives, beliefs, and gardening traditions. More importantly, even if Blanche was attended to in all these details, and even if her crafts, recipes, and biblical garden concepts were analyzed, other important ways in which the Garden of Gethsemene is significant would remain undisclosed. Blanche is no doubt the figurehead of the Garden, but the other gardeners, like Mrs. Lockwood, Sara Ruth, and Paul Lyons (or Lying Paul to his friends) would remain outside the realm of study, as would their resplendent contributions to the Garden of Gethsemene. Inside the gate of the Garden of Gethsemene, each of

fifteen gardeners contributes to a complete social world. Shared language and jokes are reminders of the shared world. (So, the statement that they all have "sugar" does not simply imply that they grow sugar cane, which they do, but that they all have diabetes and exchange remedies.) Each gardener has a unique reason for gardening. These gardeners could grow things in their backyards (and many of them do), but the shared community garden means more to them. In the biblical Garden of Gethsemene, Christ agonized over his fate, and there is equally as much agony for the gardeners at this West Philly site, with their many medical obstacles to overcome. They win their struggles every day they enter the Garden of Gethsemene because of the social bonds they have formed.

The urban setting is commonly described as a concrete jungle. While crime, drugs, and human tragedies are compounded in urban settings, the African American response has not simply been a negative one (just as slavery was an inhumane institution but slaves were not dehumanized). Community gardens are one visible contradiction to the stock symbolisms of the urban landscape. Through the interactions of these gardeners, we witness the restructuring of community ties. Among community gardeners are conflicts common to any group (factions, jealousies, etc). Moreover, these are the practical elements that make belonging to the group rewarding. As Blanche Epps has said about her fellow gardeners, "At times I could kill every one of them, but then nobody had better try to come between us or I'll take them all on."

Improvisation is the hallmark of all African expressive behavior and the city grants this propensity full sway. Thus, a once emergent form like gospel has been able to thrive. In Philadelphia, Evelyn Graves Ministries

stretches the boundaries of religious innovation relative to the conversion process. This is a drama ministry with a self-proclaimed goal of winning souls for Christ by "giving medicine to all who need it" through their theatrical productions. The folk dramas enacted here are more than the creative expressions of their author, Evelyn Graves. Often performed in a tent during the summer, the dramas evoke a revival meeting but use theatrics as the lure. Unlike popular theater which leaves interpretation to its audience, at the end of these productions, conversions are made. Through the comingling of drama, gospel, and the revival form, Evelyn Graves elaborates her vision within an inherited tradition.

The African American family has been greatly maligned. But numerous examples within Philadelphia illustrate that the family unit thrives as a social network. Elaborate family reunion committees direct activities which usually lead to annual celebrations. Each celebration is uniquely structured to meet the needs of its particular family. Some groups pilgrimage back to the southern homestead for a ritual return. Others travel throughout the country hosted by a different family branch each year conscientious of the different trails blazed by its members; while still others like the Chase/Dorsey/Taylor Family meet only in Philadelphia attending to the longevity of their family roots here. Elaborate family trees along with artistically created crests and seals provide multiple symbols of family history and lore. These events generally last for three-day weekends and almost universally involve performances by family members and a Sunday worship service. African societies are kin-centered, yet their family patterns also revolve around an extended family and fictive kin. Club '77 represents one family reunion group which always includes a

core of friends, part of a fictive kin network, who travel with blood kin to reunion sites.

The Black Bottom Association illustrates the penultimate in reunion groups for it is comprised of dislocated residents from a neighborhood disrupted by the University of Pennsylvania development. The last weekend in July up to 3,000 former residents and their immediate family members descend on Fairmount Park to renew old acquaintances. Participants bring all the comforts of home-- tables, chairs, play yards, grills and plenty of food-- to offer hospitality to all. One resident is reported to have rented a truck one year to haul her family members and all their gear. Greetings are the order of the day while a lot of the discourse centers on the changed landscape where home used to be.

Don Yoder interpreted folklife to mean "the total range of folk-cultural phenomena."⁴ As a way to understand African American folklore traditions, his definition offers theoretical appeal. Many of these social groups develop their own traditions and customs. For instance, consider The Lucky Ten Social Club which began as a sewing circle over sixty years ago for women who migrated from the same region in Virginia. (Their creation narrative now always begins that "they were ten women who considered themselves lucky.") Once these women realized that they were engaging in more singing than sewing at their get-togethers, they branched out and formed the Love and Trust Chorus. They instituted an annual pilgrimage back to their home county annually to perform. Two of the original organizers, Flossie Hargraves and Laura Barbour, remain involved in what is now a multigenerational club, including many descendants of the original

founders.

Even today, they continue to meet monthly in a social ritual which involves rotating the meetings alphabetically to the homes of each member. Each meeting begins with a devotional period when gospel songs are led by the Club's chaplain. Those members who choose to do so testify to their health, the well-being of family and friends, or give thanks to members for their sympathy in cases of bereavement, always speaking with the eloquence of a Sunday sermon. The meeting then becomes the orderly managed terrain of the President (according to Robert's Rules with practical shortcuts on some debated items).

However, the highlight of the meeting is the savings ritual. This occurs when members deposit funds into their rainy day, vacation, and Christmas Club accounts. There are three treasurers (a miscellaneous, vacation, and grand treasurer) suggesting the importance of savings to the group. This structure closely aligns itself with the fusion found in African societies of political, economic, legal, and religious institutions. Merging Robert's Rules of Order, the thrift club, impending incorporation, and the devotional, these women manipulate structures within their own framework with demonstratable ease.

Many of the members are infirm, and these meetings are an enriching social outlet. Once the meeting adjourns, festive foods are served. (At least, in the African American community, the serving of chittlins implies a festive occasion. Deli trays and finger foods do not qualify as appropriate cuisine for the monthly meetings). Moreover, the club illustrates an arena

where African American women display verbal competence in a speech community where public speaking remains mostly a male domain.

Most urban dwellers belong to a social group-- a club, church, union, and/or team. These social units amply fulfill the individual's need for routine social interaction and complete a sort of folk year. The modern folk year entails regular enactments which take into consideration one's leisure time. These enactments occur at the same time each week (Sunday worship); each month (the third Saturday); or same month each year (December). Therefore, these recurrent events add predictability and continuity to the calendrical year for many individuals.

I have represented here only a few of the social groups with agendas of their own operating in the confines of Philadelphia. Although far removed from the bee and frolic, they are multivocal in their activities, exhibiting the need for group interaction, and revealing new accoutrements and ritualized routines. These social rituals warrant holistic study because they stand to reveal a significant part of African American life and culture.

Almost every African American organization I surveyed intertwines music, dance, and verbal skills as in times immemorial. Therefore, the verbal arts and music are salient features of urban life but the enactment of these evolves from the social context in which they are performed. By emphasizing an African base for these forms of sodalities, I mean to show them not as merely African survivals of social folk customs, but as viable functioning parts of modern society harking back to an African worldview

grounded in social traditions. This is not to suggest a monopoly by Africans and African Americans on social interaction. In every society things are done best when a number of people come together-- as in bees, frolics, matches, and so forth. I do suggest that African people come together with a certain style of single-minded rejoicing. The same absorption that produced gospel kinesics and antiphony (call and response) also informs the totality of the invented social rituals that I have described.

Philadelphia Folklore Project

NOTES

¹Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "The Future of Folklore Studies in America," Folklore Forum, 16 (1983) p. 183.

²Ibid.

³There are many references indicative of this trend, eg., Henry Krehbiel, Afro-American Folksongs (New York, 1914); Elsie Clews Parsons, Folk-Lore of the Sea Islands, South Carolina (Cambridge, MA, 1923); Howard Odum and Guy Johnson, The Negro and His Songs (Chapel Hill, 1925); Zora Neale Hurston, Mules and Men (Philadelphia, 1935); John W. Work, ed., American Negro Songs and Spirituals (New York, 1940); Arna Bontemps, ed., The Book of Negro Folklore (New York, 1958); Samuel B. Charters, The Country Blues (New York, 1959); Richard M. Dorson, American Negro Folk Tales (New York, 1967); Roger D. Abrahams, Deep Down in the Jungle (Chicago, 1970); William R. Ferris, Blues from the Delta (London, 1971).

⁴Don Yoder, "Folklife" in Tristram P. Coffin, ed., Our Living Tradition, (New York, 1968) p. 47.

PHILADELPHIA FOLKLORE PROJECT

RESOURCE LIST: publications and resources on local folklife currently available

Books/ pamphlets:

Philadelphia Folklife Resources: A Guide to Local Folk Traditions. Lists 301 groups and individuals actively involved with folklife, 102 community-rooted folklife events, and 1000+ different folk art forms (from dance to needlework, gardening to ritual). Includes: festival calendar, lengthy bibliography of Philadelphia folklore, index. Compiled by the PFP. Edited by Jennifer Michael. 1991. Reprinted 1992. xiv + 184 pp. \$12.50

Uses of Tradition: Arts of Italian Americans in Philadelphia. By Dorothy Noyes. Foreword by Richard N. Juliani. Describes transformations in Italian American folklife. Illustrated. 80 pp. 1989. \$15.00. To order: write Univ. of Penn. Press, PO Box 4836, Hampden Station, Baltimore, MD 21211. (Free with PFP membership).

Philadelphia Folks and Their Lore. Educational supplement produced with the Philadelphia Daily News. Articles, games, quizzes, reading lists for kids (ages 5-18), teachers and parents. Illustrated. 16 pp. \$3

Stand By Me: African American Expressive Culture in Philadelphia. Roland Freeman, Glenn Hinson and Jernilyn McGregory. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Office of Folklife Programs, 1989. 32 pp. Excerpts of photographs and texts. FREE with membership only.

Preserving Traditions: Continuities and Changes in Philadelphia Folk Arts. Exhibit catalog, 1990. 16 pp. \$2.

Works in Progress. Newsletter of the Philadelphia Folklore Project. Published 3x/year. Subscriptions included in membership (\$25/year. Members also receive news mailings and other benefits. Call 215-238-0096 for information.) Back issues available for \$2 each (1:1-3:2) and for \$4 each (3:3-6:3):

1:1 (1987) Research on Italian crafts traditions, family business project, survey of folklife, folklore month. 8 pp.

1:2 (1988) African American folklife, Better Homes and gardens (Philadelphia gardens and yard art), Italian American material culture, Khmer and Lao New Years. 8 pp.

2:1 (1988) Sweet Sixteens (quinceaneras), Italian American needlework and publicity, African American traditions. 8 pp.

2:2 (1989) Mummies' fancy costumes, Cecil B. Moore: a master lawyer's legend, folk puppetry. 8 pp.

2:3 (1989) Ironworkers topping out, Puerto Rican décimas, Urban gardening, hooter LaVaughn Robinson. 10 pp.

3:1 (1989/90) Folklore Month, Quilts, Kwanzaa. 8 pp.

3:2 (1990) Khmer dance, Lithuanian folksongs, Myer Adler's recycled arts (Jewish traditions). 8 pp.

3:3 (1990) Special exhibition issue: Passing on Traditions: Sixteen Master Folk Artists. Profiles of all sixteen master-apprentice partnerships funded by the PA Council on the Arts 1984-1990. 12 pp. \$4 OUT OF PRINT

4:1 (1991) African American wood carving, Cambodian folklife, why folk arts aren't safe. 12 pp. \$4 OUT OF PRINT

5:1 (1992) Translating the truth: the case of *Commonwealth v. Thuy*, Khmer foodways; Gospel in and out of the African American community. 12 pp. \$4

5:2 (1992) Truths of ODUNDE, Paintings of Eang Mao, The story of the wolf and the shrimp, folklore and multiculturalism. 12 pp. \$4

5:3 (1992) 500 years of resistance and survival: "You, Me and Them: Photographs by Thomas B. Morton (special exhibition section with essays and images, From Angkor Wat to MTV, The greedy family (Khmer story).. 16 pp. \$4

6:1 (1992/3) ្រ្រ New year/boun pi mai Hmong courting songs, New Year issues, Banh Tet/Vietnamese New year, Brief history of Cambodian New year celebrations in Philadelphia. 16 pp. \$4

6:2 (1993) Special ODUNDE issue: Origins of ODUNDE; Testimonies; Uses of public space; The drum preferred; Sydney King's dance studio. 16 pp. \$4

Working Papers (Only those still in print are listed):

'There Are Other Ways to Get Happy': African American Urban Folklore. Jerrilyn McGregory. PFP Working Paper #2, 1989. 10 pp. \$4

'It's Just Like Being at Home': The Structure and Style of Folklore in Philadelphia's Family Businesses. James Abrams. PFP Working Paper #3, 1989. 14 pp. \$4

Taking Time and Proceeding With Caution: Time and Process in a Cambodian Life History Documentation Project. William Westerman. PFP Working Paper #6, 1991. 16 pp. \$4

Multicultural Views: Traditional gardens, palm-weaving, Khmer arts, and mummery. Essays on four types of local folklife, with transcripts of video soundtracks, introductions, suggestions for further reading and an introduction commenting on multiculturalism and folklore. 25 pp. \$4

Videos: (All are videotaped slide programs.)

The Palm Weavers. Introduces the Italian American folk art of weaving beautiful, ornate decorated palm bouquets as Palm Sunday observances. 1990. 10 min. \$20

Everything Has to Sparkle: The Art of Fancy Costume Making. Explores the artistry, aesthetics, ingenuity and creativity of mummers' costume-makers. 1990. 14 min. \$20

Blanche Epps: In the Garden of Gethsemane. Introduces the skills, strategies, and savvy of a master urban gardener who turns her Southern African American roots into eloquent "survival skills." 1991. 9 min. \$20

Welcome to America: Arts of Being Khmer in Philadelphia. Explores the transformations of Cambodian arts, with special attention to traditional weddings. Based upon photographs from local Cambodian families. 1991. 9 min. \$20

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