

REFLECTIONS ON ORAL TRADITIONS

from Griot/Djali

Poetry, Music, History, Message

by Amiri Baraka

So the word, Griot, the poet, musician, historian, story teller, is getting known all over the world. Though “French” as transmitted “symbol,” it is the best known for the W. African Djali (or Djeli, but Djeli ya, also means the Djali’s act, his “getting down” to take us up and out),... Africa is a continent, there are many cultures, from West to Central to East as from South to Central to North. To say African anything, is like saying European anything... where you talking about?... the question....

The Griot has always been with us, even in the U.S., listen to Lightnin Hopkins, Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong (“What Did I Do, To Be So Black & Blue?”) or Al Hibbler flying in his Dukeplane, or Billie, God knows, or Larry Darnell, “Why you fool, you poor sad worthless, foolish, fool!” Or Stevie, Aretha, Abbey, Sun Ra. You wants some Djali, and the Djeli Ya, the get down, like we say. Well, begin with the Djeli Roll Morton, who invented Jazz (you mean “I AM!” the come music? JAZZ). He said that? Or Dinah and Ella singing (getting hot as the sun). “It must be Djeli, cause Jam don’t shake like that!” ...

That is, let the story of the Griot, get you Djali, make you understand you is as old as you is new. And what you don’t know is how you blow. It’s why we blue, because we blew. But then get down with the Djali, Mr. B say. “Djeli Djeli Djeli,” what is needed is what the Griot/Djali provided, information, inspiration, reformation, and self determination! Mama Sky, we cried, hook us up with the Electricity. Turn us ON. That city of our deep desire.

Amiri Baraka has written more than twenty plays, thirteen books of poetry, seven nonfiction books, three jazz operas, and a novel. His “Wise, Why’s, Y’s,” a long poem in the tradition of the Griots, was published by Third World Press in 1995. These comments were excerpted from his essay in the volume Jali Kunda, edited by Matthew Kopka and Iris Brooks (Roslyn, NY: Ellipsis Books, 1996)

Singing the Poem: Native American Oral Traditions

by Maurice Kenny

In an unbroken continuum the oral tradition reaches down to our day. Medicine people, elders, singers, poets, storytellers and even children carry this strong commitment, this obligation, to ensure the longevity of the oral tradition. Among them are such native people as Leslie Marmon Silko, Joy Harjo and Peter Blue Cloud. I myself sing the poem. It is a song not far from prayer itself, often in vocables — sounds without equivalent meanings, sounds which have untranslatable meanings, but sounds felt and understood by the traditional Native American participating listener.

This orality is the true, the pure lyric. It is not for the eye; it must be seen with the ear, heard in the heart, felt in the spirit. It is not necessarily intellectual, but it is rich in meaning, idea: the *adowe*, thanks to the Creator for life and to all the creations for the gifts of food, water habitat, clothing, light, etc. The emotion, or passion, is often mesmerizing. It can have healing properties. However, that is not to say that because you are a poet or singer you are also a healer, or medicine person. The poet studies metrics, images, metaphor, cadence; the healer studies herbs, ointments, prayer, the flight of the hawk, the coil of the snake, the blush of the berry, the very essence of the spirit. Both may be visionaries, revealing vision through the oral chant.

The chant is part of a glorious, cleansing, ceremony. It differs only slightly from the high Roman Catholic Mass which traditionally contained prayer, song, and its own particular *adowe*, and was conducted by what could be a healer, known as a “priest.”

There is nothing more stirring than an oral poem or prayer, especially when it is accompanied by water drum and the sound of a hundred or more feet dancing, touching earth, the mother of us all, exciting the participatory listener to near frenzy, then further to a visionary state of being.

For the most part, the Anglo world, the non-Indian, non-tribal world, has lost the sense of tribalism and will probably never regain that communicative and spiritual experience, which indeed is shameful, tragic. Cultural roots must be respected, guarded and practiced, or the contemporary lifestyle will cloud and destroy this primal awareness, sensations that touch the essences of life. Contemporary Indian roots are deep, though feet shod do not touch the earth. Many Native Americans, their feet shod, no longer touch earth either, allowing the root to dry and turn to dust. Without roots, humankind is nothing.

Maurice Kenny is a Mohawk poet and this piece was excerpted from his comments at Poet's House in their Oral Traditions series in 1991.

One Bead at a Time: Oral Traditions of the West

by Kim Stafford

We were coming across the flats west out of Salt Lake, and I started to think about the way things get done well. I thought how the desert does silence really well. And the moon does a nice soft light on the sage. In the morning, if it's not too cold, the things the birds do well is to sing and to make a smooth pattern through the wind when they fly. And then I got to us. I thought, "What do we do well, we humans?" I feel one of the things we do best is language, braiding it for meaning and delight. For me, cowboy poetry is one of our best artifacts, one of the best tools in our kit, one of the sweetest locations of delight in the use of language.

I was up in Idaho one time, and at the end of a class we had, a fellow came up with a little package, and he started telling me a story.

"When I was a kid," he said, "I lived up around Lapwai, in that Lawyer Canyon. I was always the one in the family who had to go sit with Grandma in the evenings, because she got lonely and she lived up in this little side canyon where she couldn't get TV, or even radio reception. She got lonely in the evenings, so I'd go sit with her. I got kind of mad about it at the time, because my brothers and sisters always got to watch TV and all, but she told me stories, and over the years I was glad it worked out that way.

"Then when I come to graduate from high school, she gave me this beaded belt buckle, made by an old lady named Viola Morris up there, a Nez Perce woman. Grandma said, 'Now, Dan, I'm going to give you this buckle on one condition. In your life when you meet someone who deserves this beautiful thing, you will give it away without hesitation.'"

At this point Dan handed me the little bundle. I opened it, and it was that buckle.

"I've met the person who should have this now," he said to me, "and on the same condition — when you meet someone who deserves this beautiful thing, you'll give it away without hesitation."

"Dan," I said, "how am I going to recognize that person?"

"Well," he said, "I did."

And that was that. That man taught me how we make it through the world — by receiving what comes to us with gratitude, carrying these gifts we have for a time, and then passing them on without a second thought. If we do this right, we know more will come to us.

There was an old-timer on the dry side of the mountains who told me about going away to college in the city when he was young. He knew he would get homesick, he said, so he got himself a little matchbox and filled it with sage. When he was sitting in the lecture hall with a couple hundred other agricultural students, taking notes, and he got a little dizzy and disoriented — the way the city will do to you — he would quietly take out the little box and hold it up to his face to smell the sagebrush. And then he'd feel a lot better, and put it away. Every time he visited home, he'd freshen that little bit of sage, and every time he got lost in the city, he'd pull it out.

That bit of sanity that's portable over time and distance, that's what we need. And that's what a cowboy poem, done right, can give.

The way they do it up in Lapwai, some of the Nez Perce people carry a little bag inside their shirts. It holds powerful things that are connected to experiences the people have had, places they have been, maybe certain people they have known.

I was up there visiting an old woman, Louise High Eagle, and I came away with this little bag she sold to me.

"Well," I asked her, "what am I supposed to put inside this little bag?"

She will never look you in the eye. That would be impolite. She looked down and spoke softly. "That's for your life to tell you what you put in there," she said. "You will know."

So I carry my matchbook filled with sage, and I carry my little bag, and sometimes when I'm at the Root Feast, out at Warm Springs, I might put a chokecherry seed in my bag, to remember. Or if I'm at a place in the desert that teaches me something, I might put the tip of a pine needle in the bag. If I'm in a cafe and have a good, deep conversation, I might put in a grain of salt.

When your boots are full of water and your hatbrim's all a-drip,
And the rain makes little rivers dribblin' down your horse's hip,
When every step your pony takes, it purt near bogs him down,
It's then you get to thinkin' of them boys that work in town.

[from "Rain on the Range" by S. Omar Barker, in
Cowboy Poetry: A Gathering, ed. Hal Cannon (Salt
Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1985)]

I'm circling around the subject of poetry, but I hope those of us who live with metaphors and seasons and lost relatives and other distant but immediate things will understand. Cowboy poetry works like that little bag, like that matchbox, like that buckle, like a story that brings good people along with you — just over your shoulder or in your heart as you walk through life. The way a horse carries a rider through the wilderness, a poem carries wisdom through time, from a distant place to where you live now.

A poem like S. Omar Barker's "Rain on the Range" [see above] brings a fragrant and delicious piece of suffering from out on the range into the room where you sit listening or reading. It carries that other place to you like a horse carrying a rider.

My last story for cowboy poetry is about Indians again, and growing up, and the little bag of treasure. I was up on the Duck Valley Reservation a couple years ago with some folklorists, looking at the cradle boards the Shoshone people and the Paiute people had made. It turned out the woman we were visiting had just finished a cradle board. It had taken her quite a while to make, and she had it sitting on the couch. I was just about to sit down when I turned around and saw it there. I had almost crushed it. I stood and gazed.

It had a tiny beaded bag hanging from the dream shade. They would prop the child in the cradle board up against a juniper tree, and the dream shade would keep the sun out of the kid's eyes, and that little beaded bag would sparkle there.

"What's that?" I said, pointing to the little bag. I was impertinent, but I couldn't help it.

"That's where we put the umbilical cord after it falls off," the woman said. "It stays with the cradle board as the child grows. Then when the child grows a little more, you take that beaded bag and you go bury it somewhere. That's so the kid will never go too far from home. It sort of keeps them around."

Suddenly I remember Louise, the old lady in Lapwai who sold me the little bag to wear under my shirt. A year after my visit with her, I was there again.

As a writer, I keep asking myself: How do I take the simple, passionate things close to me and turn them into language that lasts long enough to give a reader a chance to understand, and change? As a writer, I ask myself this all the time: How do I take the prickle in my nose at twenty below, or the ache of an old love gone, or the gift from a friend that keeps working on me, or a story from an old lady I cannot repay, and turn those things into something that will help me survive, and then will survive me? How can I turn those things into a poem, a story, a love message to us all, a letter that will help us value our lives daily, locally, always?

That's the question for those who set out to make something fine in poetry, cowboy or otherwise. I don't have an answer, but every time I write, I feel the friction of trying.

*Kim Stafford directs the Northwest Writing Program at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon. He is the author of numerous books of essays and poetry including *Places & Stories* (a collection of poems). These comments were excerpted from Stafford's 1989 Keynote Address at the Cowboy Poetry Gathering.*