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Voice of Africa in the Diaspora

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Communication arts constitute one of the major value systems of the Black community. These arts are intimately interwoven into other major Black value systems such as survival, struggle, Black family and Black cultural identity. Their speech patterns also tend to imbue Blacks with a certain inward balance which equips them for effective interaction within the Black community and with the larger society. The literature of the Caribbean, partly presented here for analysis, is one variant of Afro communication arts.

The main objective of this presentation is to show the predominant use of pictorial imagery in the speech forms and thought patterns of Black people at all levels of sophistication; to show that the communicating, the thinking, the conceptualizing process of Black people by-and-large operate through the instrumentality of the pictorial image-making-process. This process and procedure seems to be operative along a continuum from the ghetto youth, to poets and preachers, to scholars and scientists. This use of imagery manifests itself in figures of speech, metaphors, figures of composition, in diverse syntactic uses, and figures of thought or perspective—the frame of reference out of which the thinker is coming. But at all the levels, and in all of these spheres, the instrument through which these various interests and concerns are articulated is, according to my findings, symbolic imagery. We see this to be true in every major Black cultural region: Africa, the United States, and the Caribbean.

Let me explain briefly what I mean by imagery through the process of comparing Black symbolic imagery with the standard use of imagery in literature. In Black use, the thought is generated through the use of a picture concept (visualization), rather than through the use of a notion or theoretical statement, or a theoretical formula. In Black imagery, a picture of the thing as it really exists is put before the mind and imagination.

In the Black method, one proceeds through visual thinking as against non-visual thinking. One may wish to represent this position as the concrete vs. the abstract, but this would not be accurate. In the concrete presentation of the Black concept, there is a whole lot of abstract thinking. On the other hand, it is not correct to talk about the Western thing as exclusively analytic, because it is not more analytic in method than the Black image. Further, in the Black use a thought is a living thing; a whole thing; a moving, walking, talking, doing thing—rather than

an abstract, conceptual model of the Western convention in which we are all trained. Let it be understood that I am not trying to set up a contradiction between the Black mode of thought and expression and conventional Western modes. If we are thinking beings, we will participate and master all levels of thinking. But there are significantly different uses and functions among the diverse models of the organization of human thinking. My concern, therefore, is with the identity of the Black function in respect to thought and speech as against the identities of other distinctive thought forms. Without such a concentration on the aspects of his own identity, it will be impossible for the Black man—or any species of man—to either understand or accept himself or to fulfill his mission and realize his function both to himself, to society at large and to the world to which he belongs.

Significantly, America's bicentennial was a celebration of identity, a search for home, for our role in the world; a nostalgia for family and a questing for "Who We Are." These topics and titles made headlines in the July 4th, 1976 journalistic literature in Washington, D. C.¹

Let me try to illustrate the predominant use of imagery at various levels of sophistication in the Black community. William Labov, the linguist, carried out many research projects in south-central Harlem in New York on the speech patterns of Black working class youth. Some of these were reported in the *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1972.² There, we find the conversation of

a working class youth. In one passage, for example, there are 420 words. Of the 420 words, 400 are literally images—pictorial images of one kind or another. Those 20 words that were not directly image words had no meaning except in relationship to the image words.

Here in one column are a few sentences from the sample conversation. In an adjacent column is a standard English rendering of the outline of the conversation by Labov. The topic of the conversation between the youth and his Black interviewer is life after death.

William Labov

- (1) *Everyone has a different idea of what God is like.*
- (2) *Therefore nobody really knows that God exists.*
- (3) *If there is a heaven, it was made by God.*
- (4) *If God doesn't exist, he couldn't have made heaven.*
- (5) *Therefore heaven does not exist.*
- (6) *You can't go somewhere that doesn't exist.*

Larry H.

JL: What happens to you after you die?

Do you know?

Larry H: Yeah, I know. (What?) After they put you in the ground, you body turns into—ah—bones, an' shit.

JL: What happens to your spirit?

Larry H: Your spirit—soon as you die, your spirit leaves you. (And where does the spirit go?) Well, it all depends. (On what?) You know, like some people say if you're good an' shit, your spirit goin' t'heaven... 'n'if you bad, your spirit goin' to hell. Well, bullshit! Your spirit goin' to hell anyway, good or bad.

JL: Why?

Larry H: Why? I'll tell you why. 'Cause, you see, doesn' nobody really know that it's a God, y'know, 'cause, I mean I have seen black gods, pink gods, white gods, all color gods, and don't nobody know it's really a God. An' when they be sayin' if you good, you goin' t'heaven, tha's bullshit, 'cause you ain't goin' to no heaven, 'cause it ain't no heaven for you to go to.

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The concrete visualized and emotionalized expression of the youth contrasts starkly with the theoretical and syllogistic formulations of the standard English version. The youth's speech pattern is all imagery: picture words like rotting bones, all color gods and bullshit; instead of the lifeless phrase "there is or there is not," a god or a heaven. The Black idiom pictorializes a sort of life force in the shape of "It ain't no heaven for you to go to." In addition to picture words, there are action pictures like "you see," "I mean"; the abstract act of knowing is represented as a concrete act of continuous doing, e.g., "does'n nobody really know," and "don't nobody know"; the verb "to do" gets pressed into service frequently. Picture persons embody a thought or an action, e.g. I, you, they, nobody. Events are not only personified but are also meaningfully situated in space and time e.g. "After they put you in the ground" and "When they be sayin' if you good, you goin' t'heaven." One could say with accuracy that the sample speech excerpt from the Harlem youth was totally conceptualized and totally communicated through the use of imagery.

The level of thought in the sample passage is also extremely high from the viewpoint of logic. I emphasize this aspect not by way of an apology for Black imagery but because many people assume a dichotomy between metaphor (imagery) and logic. As Labov makes clear:

*"Our work in the speech community makes it painfully obvious that in many ways, working class speakers are more effective narrators, reasoners and debaters than many middle class speakers who temporize, qualify and lose their argument in a mass of irrelevant detail. Larry's answer is quick, ingenious and decisive. The reader will note the speed and precision of Larry's mental operations. He does not wander or insert meaningless verbiage. It is often said that the non-standard vernacular is not suited for dealing with abstract or hypothetical questions, but in fact, speakers of the Black English vernacular take great delight in exercising their wit and logic on the most improbable and problematical matters."*³

The thrust of Labov's comment is similar to one made by John Illo in reference to the logical incisiveness of the imagery of the rhetoric of Malcolm X:

Rhetoric is . . . poeticized logic, logic revised by the creative and critical imagination . . . In the rhetoric of Malcolm X, as in all genuine rhetoric, fig-
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It is not merely the ghetto speaker who habitually speaks and thinks in images. As indicated before, more sophisticated people also make a habit of this communication process. As an illustration, let us take the celebrated "I Have A Dream" speech⁵ of Martin L. King, Jr., preacher, scholar, activist. For the purposes of this analysis, the excerpted portion of the address contains six paragraphs, each paragraph contains a different message, the content of each message is communicated in terms of symbolic pictorial imagery and in the form of pictorial imagery only. *Without this imagery, there is no message*; and since the message is addressed to the understanding of all Black people, this means that in their view the world imagery is an instrument of awareness, of conceptualization and of understanding. It is an effective strategy of cognitive operation.⁶

The first paragraph of the speech consists of a single line of five attention capturing words; "I have a dream today." This is all pictorial imagery. It states the content of the presentation and it announces intent with regard to the plan of development of the speech. The second paragraph consists of one sentence, six lines and six metaphors—an average of six metaphors per sentence. Here is the third paragraph with its nine lines, four sentences and eight distinct metaphors (underscored) averaging at least two metaphors per sentence:

This is our hope. This is the faith with which I return to the South. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope—to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

Dr. King equates the thematic content of his dream with the firm hope and the certain faith of his people that "we will be free one day." The theme of dream and hope and faith recurs three times; each repetition introduces a new elaboration. The developmental strategy of repetition provides a rhythmic base which supports a superstructure of mounting metaphor; the metaphors orchestrate in lively counterpoint: a stone of hope out of a mountain of despair, from jangling discords into a beautiful symphony, pressed into jail together yet standing up for freedom to-

gether. The speaker's use of the terms "we" and "together" causes his hearers to identify with him and with each other in a common historical experience. Through this identification, the message was communicated with maximum effectiveness.

The fourth paragraph of the address contains five lines, one sentence and six metaphors—or an average of six metaphors to the sentence. The fifth paragraph contains sixteen lines, sixteen metaphors and more, and eight sentences—an average of two metaphors to a sentence. The sixth paragraph contains eight lines, one sentence and fifteen metaphoric expressions—an average of fifteen metaphors to one sentence. That's Black speech and Black communication. It is important to note the use of images predominantly in Black thinking patterns and Black communicating patterns. Cynics might quibble, at the level of poetry and preaching, what could one expect but imagery. That would be a silly remark, because, poetry is the mother of speech, and as far as Black America is concerned the Black preacher is the architect of Black speech.

In the use of imagery as an instrument of Black thought and Black communication, it is not just merely the working class ghetto youth, not merely the poet, not merely the preacher who apply it. The Black scholar and the Black scientist are also great exponents and practitioners of this skill. Currently, I am engaged in a comparative analysis of 75 pieces of writings of 75 Black scholars selected from the U.S., Africa and the Caribbean and spread over 7 or 8 disciplines. Some of these disciplines include hard sciences like biochemistry and biophysics and mathematics.

My tentative finding thus far is that the Black scholar uses on the average between one and three metaphors per sentence per scholar, and per discipline—regardless of national origin or cultural region. Take John Hope Franklin, for example, his book "From Slavery to Freedom,"⁷ chapter one, "A Cradle of Civilization." The first paragraph comprises six sentences each averaging one and two-thirds metaphors; the second paragraph averages one and three-tenths metaphor per sentence; the third paragraph one metaphor to each one and two-thirds sentence; the fourth paragraph one metaphor per sentence and so on. I have recorded similar tallies from Benjamin Quarles' "The Negro in the Making of America"⁸ and John Blassingame's "The Slave Community"⁹ and Harold Cruse¹⁰ on revolution; also from the writings of W. E. Dubois, Charles S. Johnson and others. The tally for African and West Indian writers on his-

tory, philosophy, sociology, literature and political science, for example, is equally striking.

Black scholars in different disciplines, from different generations, countries and different regional Black cultural origins did not conspire to exploit identical or similar writing strategies. In many instances, they do not even know each other—and some have long been dead. But what emerges, namely, is the predominant use of symbolic pictorial imagery as an instrument of thinking and communicating. This is very significant. An interesting corollary to this finding is the suggestion of the unicity or the unitary origin from one place, namely, Africa,¹¹ of this type of thought and speech pattern among all Black peoples wherever they happen to be in the white world today.¹²

If the use of symbolic imagery is a preferred communicative resource among peoples of African descent, Edward K. Braithwaite exemplifies this value system in his scholarly article¹³ on "The African Presence in Caribbean Literature."

In his opening paragraph, Braithwaite announces the key image of the piece, which embraces everything else that is going to be developed. The key image is that implacable connection of Africa with the Caribbean and the New World, both climatically and geologically, through the great seasonal African trade wind—the harmattan.

"Even before the first slaves came—bringing, perhaps, pre-Columbian explorers—there was the wind: an implacable climatic, indeed, geological connection. Along its routes and during its seasonal blowing, fifteen to fifty million Africans were imported into the New World, coming to constitute a majority of people in the Caribbean and significant numbers in the New World."

This opening paragraph contains five sentences and three metaphors, averaging one and one half metaphors per sentence. The cognitive thrust of the imagery is all in the powerful enigmatic metaphor of the great wind blowing and bringing many millions of Africans along its routes from Africa to the New World and the Caribbean. A metaphor full of movement and information! The deeply spiritual character of the African connection with the New World is symbolized by the elusive nature of the wind. So elusive and yet so inescapable a connection! Braithwaite's symbolic thought form or reference frame is the reconnection or, at least, his profound concern about the reconnection of the Caribbean with Africa. In his

pressively descriptive and dramatic in structuring of the projection and the progression of intercontinental movement.

Within the frame of reference of the key image of the African connection and the symbolic imagery of basic Caribbean concern for reconnection with Africa, the author systematically develops his 28-page essay on the African presence in Caribbean literature. He uses both theoretical analysis and penetrating cultural and historical description visualized. Visualization, that's the point at which the imagery comes in. Who says that Black folks and Black scholars cannot scale the heights of abstract thought and do it in the most perspicacious, gracious and elegant of ways? Braithwaite's piece is dominated by a passion for wholeness. The author refuses "to allow the deprivations and fragmentations imposed upon African culture by the slave trade and plantation systems to alter our perception of the whole."¹⁴

Braithwaite's essay distinguishes four kinds of written African literature in the Caribbean: literature of rhetoric, literature of African survival, literature of African expression and literature of reconnection. To the literature of rhetoric, those writers are relegated who have neither Black nor African feeling but find it convenient to use some African words. The Africanism of such writers, Braithwaite comments, amounts to no more than the wearing of a mask; it is superficial, it has no depth. The literature of African survival celebrates African survival in the Caribbean. Certain writers dedicate themselves to that celebration. The literature of African expression has its roots in the folk and it attempts to transform folk material into literary experiment. Writers of the literature of reconnection try to relate the African experience to the Caribbean and to the New World—those Caribbean writers in particular who have either visited Africa or have, like Braithwaite himself, lived in Africa. Reinforced by the profound experience of Africa, these returning writers, Braithwaite says, constantly reach out to rebridge the gap between Africa, the Spiritual Motherland, and the African descent peoples of the Caribbean and Afro-America.

Braithwaite's survey of Caribbean literature of survival reveals the following uses of African imagery; litanic style forms, fragmented phonetics, tonal language, song/dance/movement language, philosophic symbolism in which poems and folk songs bring the metaphysical and the mundane into a single unity of life; the surreal images of the literature of folk

The Caribbean literature of African expression discloses, according to Braithwaite, the following: the power and the progressive use of imagery; African emphasis on rhythm and on the involvement of self in the imagery; the use of "nation language" or Afro-dialect; the cult of the word as *sound*, its sound value, as, for example, when words are concocted to make onomatopoeic sense or non-sense; the concretizing or the grounding, that is, the fleshing out of ideas; imaginative visualizations; Afro puns and the calypsonian miming of words. Noted additionally are improvisation with its repetitive rhythmic phrases of introduction; and the use of adaptive literary mechanisms to reinterpret and to re-evaluate the Caribbean experience, and the coining of new words around the sound of old nation-words. Braithwaite calls this nationizing the European language forms.

Finally, in the category of authors listed as writers of reconnection, the main characteristic is the live and creative identification with the African roots. Braithwaite finds this trend closely connected in time with the "Black Power" revolution. He names some well-known writers in this category: Nicolas Guillén, Aimé Césaire, Léon Damas. In this category, Braithwaite considers Paule Marshall to be especially significant.

The African presence in the Caribbean throws light on certain uses and functions of Black symbolic imagery. Five of these may be noted: (1) Imagery is a socially institutionalized channel of communication; the superficial literature of rhetoric exploits this medium—knowing that Caribbean peoples identify with it and are responsive to its use. (2) In the Black use of symbolic imagery, their kind of medium is often the message; the image seeks to identify things and to define them: the speech of the Harlem youth gave a philosophical demonstration of this. (3) Symbolic imagery operates as an instrument to motivate and to socialize adults as well as children; the excerpts from Larry's discourse and King's dream address exemplify this. (4) Black Symbolic imagery functions to develop and to sustain a sense of the spiritual and the value of human feeling; the image process is knit into family and kinship feeling and is allied with perspectives of cosmic religious origins. (5) The addictive use of imagery is a cue to activate the memory and the force of the total historical and cultural Black experience; this symbolic recall of the total past is a major creative element in the cultural identity feelings of African descent people in the diaspora. 3

Braithwaite too, recognizes the African presence in our society "not as a static quality, but as root—living, creative, and still part of the main." For him the Black man in the Caribbean is almost a physical projection of the Black man in West Africa. Admirably, he cites brief passages from Paule Marshall¹⁵ to make his point. For instance, Fergusson, the cane factory mechanic from Barbados is:

A vociferous strikingly tall, lean old man, whose gangling frame appeared strung together by the veins and sinews, standing out in sharp relief beneath his dark skin. . . . His face, his neck, his clean shaven skull had the elongated intentionally distorted look to them of a Benin mask, or a sculpted thirteenth century Ife head. With his long, stretched limbs he could have been a Haitian Houngan man.

The Houngan or voodoo priest of Haiti is a recognized projection of African values in the Caribbean. Paule Marshall uses the resemblance between the Haitian and the Barbadian to relate the Barbadian to his African ancestry. Braithwaite comments: "So her (Paule Marshall's) Bajans (Barbadians) become more than Bajans; they develop historical depth and cultural possibility."¹⁶

In conclusion, let me outline some of the major patterns of difference between Black and standard Western usage of symbolic imagery. First, the use of imagery in Black speech is not a matter of occasion but a matter of routine. Next, the Black image is intensely affective; its affectivity is a directive or culturally patterned affectivity and not mere happenstance. Also, the Black symbolic image is oriented to conceptualize and to define rather than to seduce or to cosmetize. Then again, the Black symbolic image introduces the self into the objective analysis of objects, events or ideas. Finally, Black symbolic imagery mediates a wholeness approach or a cosmic approach to learning.

There is a current expression, namely, the whole life approach, which is quite helpful, but it does not say quite the same thing as the wholeness approach or the cosmic approach. The Black mind sees a thing as a connected whole, as against the view of the things as a build of isolated particulars. It is a global vision as against the pinpoint vision. This doesn't mean to say or to suggest that Blacks cannot pinpoint the specifics. We are talking about an approach to learning, not about a synthesis approach, because,

which have been broken apart. The wholeness approach is a habit of seeing things whole before they are seen as broken apart. Instead of seeing 10 things as 10 separate units, the Black perspective tends to see 10 things as 10 parts of a single whole. This is the approach to the integral versus the approach to the fractional; one wishes to read the dial clock rather than the digital clock; one wants to envision the ecology rather than the cell, because, the cell behaves one way outside of the ecology—and in a totally different way when put back into the ecology. The cosmic approach captures human behavior in the ecology of the total human environment. Black symbolic imagery details the human experience with flashing pointedness as well as with emotional intensity. This may be an attempt to identify with the whole truth. □

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Reference

- ¹ See the *Washington Post* bicentennial magazine and the July 4th editions of the *Washington Star* and the *Washington Post*.
- ² William Labov's article, *Academic Ignorance and Black Intelligence*, *The Atlantic*, June 1972, Vol. 229, No. 6.
- ³ Labov, p. 63 of article cited.
- ⁴ John Illo, *The Rhetoric of Malcolm X* in *Columbia University Forum*, Spring 1966, pp. 5 ff.
- ⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., *I Have A Dream* in *Black Light*, edited by Spratt, Hallmark editions 1973.
- ⁶ *African Systems of Thought*, Third International African Seminar, 1960, International African Institute and Oxford University Press, 1966.
- ⁷ John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, Vintage Books, New York 1969.
- ⁸ Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Making of America*, Collier Books, New York 1971.
- ⁹ John Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, New York, Oxford Press 1972.
- ¹⁰ Harold Cruse, *Black and White—Outlines of the Next Stage*, in *Black World*, January, 1971, pp. 32, 33, and 34.
- ¹¹ *African Systems of Thought*, already cited.
- ¹² Leopold Senghor, *The Spirit of Civilisation or The Laws of African Negro Culture*, in First Conference of Negro Writers and Artists, Paris 1956, pp. 51-64.
- ¹³ Edward K. Braithwaite, in *DAEDALUS*, Spring 1974, Vol. 103, No. 2.
- ¹⁴ E. K. Braithwaite, article cited, p. 74, in *DAEDALUS*, Spring 1974.
- ¹⁵ E. K. Braithwaite, in article cited, p. 99.
- ¹⁶ E. K. Braithwaite, *African Presence in Caribbean Literature*, p. 100.