

Same Form, Slightly Different Function: Senegalese Cumulative Songs as Contrasted to their Canadian and European Counterparts

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[I gratefully acknowledge the help of Ibrahima Bassen who first told me the tale discussed here, and Hypolite Tendeng who translated it from Jola Bandial into French for me. Both of these men, from the village of Seleki in Senegal, gave up many hours of their time to work with me on this project.]

Whilst working among the Jola Bandial people of southern Senegal, I had asked if they had any songs that talked about, or included the names of musical instruments. Ibrahima said that he would think about it and that I should come back a few days later. So I did go back, and Ibrahima started to tell me a story. I had asked for a song, but he started to tell me a story. As an “optimistic ethnomusicologist” I try to go with the flow! As the story began to unfold, a song was sung. Then the story resumed. Then there was another song. Then the story started up again. Then there was another song. Then the story continued followed by yet another song. Wait a minute! That’s the same song, just a little bit longer! Could it be? Might I have found a cumulative song in the middle of a story, out here in the middle of sub-Saharan Senegal?

The Story – in brief

A man had three sons and decided to divide his wealth (2 cows) between them and send them on their way into the world. The oldest two sons were each given a cow, and the youngest son received a stick. The story follows the journey of the youngest son who sets out and comes across a man trying to harvest fruit from a kapok tree. The fruit is too high for him to reach so the boy gives him his stick to use, and with each throw the man is able to knock fruit down from out of the tree. Alas, on his last throw the stick gets stuck in the tree and is lost. The boy begins to sing:

Fruit man, fruit man, give me my stick (x2).
The stick, the stick that my father gave me.
Father, father, (to) me who does not have the hair on a cowhide,
The hair on a cowhide, the hair on a cowhide that waves freely.
(Which literally means that he does not have a cow to his name.)

To replace the stick, the fruit man gives the boy some fruit and the lad continues on his way in the world. He comes across a cowherd and asks him what he is going to eat for lunch. The cowherd says he has nothing to eat. The boy tells him to eat some of his fruit. The fruit is so good, and the cowherd is so hungry that he eats it all. Seeing that all his fruit is gone, the boy starts to sing:

Cowherd, cowherd, give me my fruit (x2).
The fruit, the fruit that the fruit man gave me.
The fruit man, the fruit man who took my stick.

The stick, the stick that my father gave me.
Father, father, (to) me who does not have the hair on a cowhide,
The hair on a cowhide, the hair on a cowhide that waves freely.

To replace the fruit, the cowherd gives the boy . . . a dried up cow patty!
The boy continues on his way and in like manner meets up with a variety of people with whom he exchanges the one thing that he owns. Thus the cow patty is exchanged for some honey, the honey for some *ganac* (rice cake), the *ganac* for a shovel full of mud, the shovel full of mud for a fish, the fish for a branch of a palm tree, the branch of the palm tree for a clay pot, which, in turn, is exchanged for a *bahan* (a traditional drum).
At last he came upon a troop of monkeys who were in the midst of a funeral dance for a deceased friend. He found them using a *gabakan* (a type of bucket or pail made out of palm leaves) as a substitute for a drum.

He said to them: “What is this? When you drum for a funeral dance you use a *gabakan*? ”

The monkeys said: “But we don’t have a *bahan* (traditional drum).”

The boy told them to take his, and passed it over to them. The monkeys tapped and banged, and tapped and banged, and tapped and banged with great enthusiasm until at last . . . the drum skin broke!

Seeing this, the boy sang:

Monkeys, monkeys, give me my *bahan* (x2).
Bahan, bahan that the slippery place gave me.
Slippery place, slippery place, that broke my clay pot (x2).
Clay pot, clay pot that the potter gave me etc.

The monkeys said: “You are right, we must replace your *bahan*.” They took him to the cowshed where they kept the cows that were brought to slaughter for the funeral ceremony/dance. The monkeys said to him: “ You must tap the rear end of a cow. If it ‘poops’ and it sounds like this “tack tack” (dry), leave that cow. Keep tapping the cows until you hear the sound “tash tash” (wet) when it poops. When you find a cow with wet poop, take that cow.”

The boy tapped the rear ends of several cows but their poop was always dry and landed with the “tack tack” sound. But then, he came to a white cow and when he tapped her rear end he heard the sound “tash tash” and her poop was wet/moist.

The monkeys gave him this cow to take with him as payment for the *bahan* that they had broken. He climbed on its back and went home to his father’s house singing:

My cow/calf, run to my home! (x4).

And there you have it! The boy now has a cow—just like his brothers. And it was the stick that helped him to get that cow!

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Table 1

Format of Story

| Characters | Item given/Action | Boy Sings | Item received in exchange |
|--------------------|-----------------------|------------|---------------------------|
| Father to Boy | Stick | ----- | (Father receives nothing) |
| Boy to Fruit-man | Stick | Main song | Fruit |
| Boy to Cowherd | Fruit | Main song+ | Cow pat |
| Boy to Bee-man | Cowpat | Main song+ | Honey |
| Boy to Housewife | Honey | Main song+ | Ganac |
| Boy to Farmer | Ganac | Main song+ | Clay/mud |
| Boy to Fisherwoman | Clay/mud | Main song+ | Little fish |
| ----- | ----- | New Song 1 | ----- |
| Eagle | Steals fish from boy | Main song+ | Branch |
| Boy to Potter | Branch | Main song+ | Clay pot |
| ----- | ----- | New Song 2 | ----- |
| Slippery place | Falls/breaks clay pot | Main song+ | Bahan |
| Boy to Monkeys | Bahan | Main song+ | Cow |
| ----- | ----- | New Song 3 | ----- |
| Boy and cow | return home to father | New Song 3 | Stick has become a cow! |

The Song

As the action unfolds in this story, a new person, bird, spirit or animal is encountered, and an item is exchanged. Each new character and item is added to the main song, and all the preceding verses are repeated.

This is what is called a cumulative song—which can be thought of as an “add and repeat” song. With each verse, a new part is added, and everything that came before is sung again. Thus, each stanza repeats the previous one and has a new line added containing its own plot or information (as seen in the quotations above). Consequently, the last stanza, with the whole song included, becomes the longest one.

Final verse

Monkeys, monkeys, give me my bahan (x2).
Bahan, bahan that the slippery place gave me.
Slippery place, slippery place, that broke my clay pot.
Clay pot, clay pot that the potter gave me.
Potter, potter, who took my branch.
Branch, branch that the eagle gave me.
Eagle, eagle, who swallowed my little fish.
The little fish, the little fish that the fisherwoman gave me.
Fisherwoman, fisherwoman, who took my shovel full of clay/mud.

Shovel full of clay/mud, shovel full of clay/mud that the farmer gave me.
Farmer, farmer, who ate my ganac.
Ganac, ganac that the housewife gave me.
Housewife, housewife, who took my honey.
Honey, honey that the bee man gave me.
Bee man, bee man, who took my dry cow dung.
Dry cow dung, dry cow dung that the cowherd gave me.
Cowherd, cowherd, who ate my fruit.
The fruit, the fruit that the fruit man gave me.
The fruit man, the fruit man who took my stick.
The stick, the stick that my father gave me.
Father, father, (to) me who does not have the hair on a cowhide,
The hair on a cowhide, the hair on a cowhide that waves freely.

Marie-Agnès Thirard (2007), notes that songs in stories may be used, among other reasons:

- to review the action
- to have one character encourage another character
- to have one character praise another character
- to encourage audience participation
- to insert epigrams (pithy sayings) and clever remarks.
- to introduce a “play on words” (pp. 451-452)

The song we are looking at here, due to its cumulative nature, provides a complete review of the story told so far, but notice that it does not provide the ending of the tale.

This Jola Bandial song is an integral part of the story, binding it together by summarizing all the events each time there is a new addition to the tale. That the song is an integral part of the story is further evidenced by the fact that Ibrahima sang it to me in the context of the tale—he did not think of separating it from the tale. This is where the song belongs; it is not a stand-alone item, but a partner to the spoken word in a story-telling event.

Both the story and the song are solo performances. The audience is not encouraged to join in with the singing—but they are paying very close attention and will quickly correct the singer if he makes a mistake, or has a momentary lapse of memory.

I was delighted with this song/story discovery—the more so because it was a cumulative song, and because the way the song was being used (the performance role it was playing) was quite different to what I was familiar with in Canadian culture.

The overt role or function of the cumulative song in Canadian, American and many European cultures is to:

- amuse
- entertain
- encourage group singing (challenge the singers’ memories and articulation skills)
- transmit and reinforce culture

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It is worth noting here that anthropologist/folklorist Alan Dundes (1986) has discovered a complete absence of either native or borrowed cumulative folktales in the American Indian culture.¹ This may mean that there is also an absence of cumulative songs.

On a more covert or sub-conscious level these songs play a role in developing:

- memory skills
- a sense of sequence
- the ability to think/sing in reverse sequence
- an awareness of pattern in songs/music
- an awareness of repetition (of words, phrases, melody or rhythm)

From a performance perspective, the North America/European tradition today seems to be that a cumulative song is a group-singing event. Everyone sings along and tries to get all the repetitions in the correct order without breaking the rhythm. There is much laughter when someone “messes up!” Sometimes actions are added to reinforce the words, and/or to help remember the sequence, and/or to provide more opportunities in which to mess up—with much resulting hilarity. Thus, while there may be a specific leader who begins the song, everyone is expected to participate in the singing and actions, and it is very much a participatory event.

There is evidence that in the past, in European tradition at least, these songs were used as teaching devices. The teacher would point to a pupil who would be expected to sing the verse without error. It gets harder of course as you get further into the song—one of those times when you definitely want to be picked first, and not left until last!

Table 2

Comparison of function and performance

| | | |
|------------------------|--|--|
| Function | N/A & Europe | Jola Bandial, Senegal |
| Overt | amusement, entertainment, transmission of culture. reinforcement of culture. test of audience/group skills | amusement, entertainment, transmission of culture. reinforcement of culture. test of soloist skills |
| Covert develops | memory skills a sense of sequence singing in reverse sequence an awareness of pattern an awareness of repetition | memory skills a sense of sequence singing in reverse sequence an awareness of pattern an awareness of repetition |
| Performance | Group participation Audience = singers Audience polices words Song is the performance event xx | Solo performance Audience = listeners Audience polices words Song is part of story-telling event Moral of story/song discussed |

The cumulative song clearly holds, or takes the same form in the North American/European cultural context as it does in the Jola Bandial context, but the manner in which it functions in the performance context is somewhat different. Within the North American/European context of today, the cumulative song is an entity unto itself. It is a stand-alone song which can be sung by anyone, anywhere, at anytime—although generally speaking it is sung for amusement when groups get together at camps and the like. Today, it is often relegated to children to sing, being popular in schools, Girl Guides, Scouting and church settings. But do not be fooled, the child within the adult loves to join in as well!

By contrast, in the Jola Bandial setting the cumulative song is a part of a bigger whole—it is one of the ways used to communicate within a specific story-telling event. It is tied to the story-telling event. It is an integral part of the story-telling event. It does not stand alone.

A final noticeable difference in performance function is the emphasis placed on the “moral of the story”. In Senegal, a tale is rarely told without the moral being mentioned and/or discussed. Any time I have recorded a story, the teller and members of the audience have always made a point of ensuring that I understand the moral intent of the tale. One could, of course, argue that the moral belongs to the story, but since the song is part and parcel of the story event, I contend that the moral belongs equally to the song.

The moral of the song/story presented here was given to me as “do not underestimate the power of small, seemingly insignificant things” and I was reminded that each of the small items exchanged in the story lead, in the end, to the boy receiving a cow. I believe there is also a secondary moral to this tale. When I asked Hypolite (my translator) for a title for this song/story he said straight away “The Patient Boy.” This was not what I was expecting, but, the boy does indeed display patience throughout the tale and his patience is rewarded at the end with the prize cow.

Some additional moral “learnings” that could be drawn from this story include the importance of:

- giving/taking
- exchanging
- helpfulness
- accepting/making the most of what you are given
- being willing to let go—to give things up

I had never heard of a moral connected to a North American/European cumulative song until I recently read a review of an illustrated book entitled *There Was An Old Lady Who Swallowed A Fly* by Simms Taback. This book was reviewed by Jill Murphy (c. 1998) who said:

There are so, so many details to make you laugh in this glorious patchwork of riotous colour. "WHOLE COW DEVOURED" shrieks a newspaper headline on one page. In our last view of this staggering consumer the old lady lies on her side, feet in the air, umbrella falling, glasses still perched precariously on the end of her nose. The horse was one animal too much, and she has expired. The very last page shows her tombstone, and above it, in letters in the night sky is the moral of our tale: "Never swallow a horse."

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I recently discovered that people in two other ethnic groups in Senegal and the Gambia—the Jola Kassa and Jola Karon—also know the song/story that I have presented here. Although told in different languages, the story takes exactly the same form—the cumulative song and the spoken word being partners in the story-telling event.

I found another example among the Igbo people of Nigeria. The story was different, but made the same use of the cumulative song to review and reinforce the action and events. (Okpewho, 1992).

Thus we find that this cumulative song/story form phenomenon exists in 4 different language groups in West Africa:

| | |
|--------------|------------------------|
| Jola Bandial | Senegal |
| Jola Karon | Senegal and the Gambia |
| Jola Kassa | Senegal |
| Igbo | Nigeria |

Personally, I have never heard a cumulative song used as part of a story-telling event in the North American/European context—only ever as a fun, stand-alone song. Neither have I ever heard a cumulative song sung as a fun, stand-alone song in the Jola Bandial context—only ever as a part of the greater story-telling event, and always as a solo performance that was policed by the audience who would prompt, or correct the storyteller as needed.

This combination of story and song is a legitimate folk tale genre known as “cante fable.”

Donald Haase (2008) defines the cante fable (also “cantefable” or “chante fable”) as “a narrative sequence that contains alternating prose and verse.” He added that “examples occur in the traditional literature and folklore of many languages—including Japanese and Chinese in the East, Irish and Icelandic in the West, and Hindu, Arabic, and others” (p. 158).

Writing for the *Journal of American Folklore* back in 1942, Herbert Halpert, noted that “few American versions of the *cante fable* . . . have been reported from the English-speaking white population although the form was known in England. As I have suggested elsewhere, it is likely that efforts by field workers would remedy this lack (p. 133).”

Halpert went on to point out that “readers of this Journal are, of course, aware that the *cante fable* is not uncommon in American Negro tales” (p. 133). This style of oral narrative would have been brought over from Africa during the era of the slave trade to North America (16th-19th centuries), it being a well-established form in many African countries.

While it appears to have been common among the descendants of the African slaves, it does not seem to have been as firmly established among the descendants other ethnic groups, including those of immigrant populations from Europe. Further, by 1971, Peter Crossly-Holland, writing for the journal *Ethnomusicology*, noted that “cante-fable (is) a form that is becoming increasingly hard to find in the oral tradition of Europe today” (p. 31).

Definitions of the cante fable note that the main part of the narrative is told in prose while the songs or verses represent the speech of the characters at the high points of the story, at a point when “words of wisdom” are shared, or, perhaps, as a finishing flourish. Often the songs contain information crucial to the story, and may appear in the form of “magical utterances, riddles, threats etc.” (*Oxford Dictionary of English Folklore*, 2003.) Nowhere, in the written definitions of the cante fable, have I found reference to the use, or inclusion of “cumulative songs”, and, until recently, the only examples I had found, came from the African setting.

Just a few weeks ago however, I uncovered the written records of the three cante fables quoted below, collected from the American Midwest in the late 1940s/early 1950s, in which cumulative songs were a major component —“Polly, Nancy and Muncimeg,” “Fat Man, Fat Man,” and “The Old Woman and Her Pig” (Roberts, 1956).

Polly, Nancy and Muncimeg

In this story the dying widow divides the inheritance among her three girls, giving Polly the house and garden, Nancy the rest of the land, and to Muncimeg nothing except an old pocket penknife and gold ring. When the youngest-best is in trouble throughout the story, and she is eight or ten times, she exclaims—*Law me, my mommy's old pocket penknife and gold ring*

And she escapes difficulties, changes form, or is able to leap rivers. She is sent by the king to steal three valuable objects from the old giant. The giant has an exclamation that is cumulative with each visit. The last is this:

I told you Muncimeg, I'd pay you for this;
You drowned my old woman,
Yu stold my horse, you stold my gold, [sic]
You caused me to kill my dog and cat,
You caused me to break up all my dishes;
I told you Muncimeg, I'd pay you for this! (p.74).

Fat Man, Fat Man

One time there was an old man, an old woman, a little boy, a little girl, and a little monkey. The old woman sent the little girl to the store to get a loaf of bread. And she went out there and she said, “Fat man, fat man, what makes you so fat?”

He said,

I eat a bowl of gravy,
Drunk a cup of coffee, [sic]
Eat a loaf of bread,
Eat you if I can catch ye.

Each in turn goes to buy bread, the fat man sings his cumulative song, catches and eats them. Until finally, the monkey comes along.

Well, that little monkey he went to the store. He said, “Fat man, fat man, what makes you so fat?”

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He said,

I eat a bowl of gravy,
Drunk a cup of coffee,
Eat a loaf of bread,
Eat a little girl,
Eat a little boy,
Eat an old man,
Eat an old woman,
Eat you if I can catch ye.

He took after that little monkey. And he run and climbed a tree. And that old fat man went up after it and that old fat man fell and busted open. The little girl come out and said, “Tee, hee, I got out.”

The little boy said, “Tee, hee, I got out.”

The old man said, “Tee, hee, I got out.”

The old lady said, “Tee, hee, I got out.”

Then the little monkey said, “Tee, hee, I didn’t get in to get out!” (pp. 83-85).

The Old Woman and her Pig

Roberts gives only the last “cumulation”, to show the elements in the story and the way it was performed:

The gun wouldn’t shoot the cat. She said to the hammer,
Pray, hammer, break the gun,
Gun won’t kill the cat,
Cat won’t catch the rat,
Rat won’t gnaw the rope,
Rope won’t hang the butcher,
Butcher won’t kill the ox,
Ox won’t drink the water,
Water won’t squinch the far [sic],
Far won’t burn the stick,
Stick won’t bang the dog,
Dog won’t bite the pig (pp. 85-86).

These are all fascinating and exciting discoveries, but they also raise several questions for me:

- Does this phenomenon of cante fable with a cumulative song component still exist in North American /European oral tradition?
- Does it exist elsewhere in Africa?
- Does it exist on other continents?
- Is this phenomenon an ancient oral form which once existed in many parts of the world, but which met its demise with the arrival of the printed word and the development of a literate population?
- Are we in danger of losing this particular oral narrative form from Senegal?

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¹“It is interesting to note that one of the most striking structural differences between European and North American Indian folktales concerns the number of motifemes intervening between a pair of related motifemes, such as lack and lack liquidated. The number of intervening motifemes may be considered as an indication of what may be termed the “motifemic depth” of folktales. American Indian tales have far less motifemic depth than European folktales. In the latter, Lack (Propp function 8a) and Lack Liquidated (Propp function 19) are widely separated whereas in American Indian tales a lack is liquidated soon after it is started. It is possible that the lesser motifemic depth of the American Indian tales may account in part for the absence of either native or borrowed cumulative folktales among the American Indians, inasmuch as cumulative tales often consist of an extensive interconnected series of lacks to be liquidated within the frame of an initial lack and final liquidation of that lack” (Dundes, 1986, p. 423).