

Review article
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TWO BOOKS ON CARIBBEAN PROVERBS AND A SHORT ADDENDUM TO THE TOPIC OF CARIBBEAN AND AFRICAN PROVERBS

This review article first discusses the book by Desrine Bogle on proverbs found in the Caribbean. Then it describes the relatively unknown 1975 work *African and Afro-American Proverb Parallels* by Theophine Campbell, where she compiled lists of proverbs found across the Caribbean. These two sources are noteworthy comparisons of proverbs across the Caribbean, but Campbell adds comparisons to African proverbs. I mention, but do not discuss, Allsopp's recognized book of Caribbean proverbs with African parallels (2004). Following this, I add to the field of Caribbean-African proverb comparison by adding some examples from my own list of African proverbs. This demonstrates that there is much work still to be done in comparing Caribbean proverbs with African and European proverbs.

Desrine Bogle. *The Transatlantic Culture Trade: Caribbean Creole Proverbs from Africa, Europe, and the Caribbean.* New York: Peter Lang, 2020. 100 p. ISBN 978-1433157233 (Hardcover), ISBN 978-1433157257 (eBook), [https://DOI 10.3726/b14121](https://doi.org/10.3726/b14121)

When slaves were kidnapped from Africa, they brought over many parts of their cultures, including proverbs. The preservation of African proverbs in Caribbean cultures has long been recognized, e.g., in 1884 Burnside noted that many proverbs used by the descendants of African slaves in the Caribbean were not

from English, but from their own heritage and the same proverbs were also heard in French and Spanish sections of the Caribbean (1884:137).

Desrine Bogle is unusually qualified to compare proverbs across the multilingual Caribbean, having learned English as a child, then studying French and Spanish, earning her doctorate at Université Sorbonne Nouvelle. This equipped her to read a wide variety of existing published collections of proverbs from individual language communities, e.g., Haiti, Jamaica, Barbados.

A clear contribution by Bogle is that she shows and highlights that many of the same proverbs are found in both English-based and French-based creole languages. She lists 111 proverbs that are documented in both English-based and French-based creoles. (She lists each separately, so her numbering system shows 222.) She described her goal, “This book will expand studies which highlight the commonalities in the Caribbean region rather than the differences” (xiv). Clearly, her focus in doing this was proverbs. She also wrote a section on “Pan-Creole Worldview”, an additional contribution to her broad Caribbean outlook. “Creole speakers share many similar traditions and customs. Caribbean Creole culture transcends its linguistic boundaries as defined by territorial borders. Unfortunately, most are unaware of how much they have in common” (33). But she is also alert to the opposite end of the spectrum, “To counterbalance the homogenizing effect of globalization, concerted attempts must be made by small nation states such as those in the Caribbean to maintain and preserve intangible cultural heritage”, including proverbs (34). She calls for promoting the knowledge of proverbs and intangible heritage, including making proverb collections widely available. These are goals I heartily support for *all* language communities, in the Caribbean and around the world.

Bogle begins by discussing Caribbean history. To answer the question of what is included under the label “Caribbean”, the answer may differ in French and English contexts. Following that, there is a brief discussion of Caribbean languages, a complex blend of European, African, and indigenous vocabulary and grammar. This is useful for readers who are familiar with proverbs but are not familiar with the origin and interrelatedness of creole languages in the Caribbean. It is important to realize that

a creole language is not merely a bad form of a European language. For example, Haitian Creole is a full and legitimate language in its own right, not merely a bad form of proper French. She also introduces readers briefly to the complexity of spelling systems for these creole languages: words derived from English and French are often not spelled according to standard English and French spelling. The spellings also differ from place to place, e.g., the spelling rules for English-derived Creole speech in Belize and Jamaica differ.

Following this is an introduction to proverb study. This is useful for readers who are not familiar with the study of proverbs but are familiar with the language situation in the Caribbean. She briefly discusses the ongoing struggle by proverb scholars to craft a universal definition of a “proverb”, but wisely sidesteps the problem, concluding, “proverbs make us human” (15). In the Caribbean context, she documents that proverbs are used in popular music, editorial cartoons, speeches, conversations, etc. As found in other parts of the world, proverbs are often artistically formed with such features as rhyme, alliteration, parallelism, etc.

The core of the book is her collection of proverbs. Each entry includes a number of elements, as seen in this example from p. 47:

37. EC Cockroach na gat right in fowl house (Jamaica)

[kək.ɹʊətʃ nə ɡat ɹaɪt ɪn fəʊl ɔʊs]

38. FC Ravet pa janm gen rezon douvan poul. (Haiti)

[ʁav pɑv ʒɔŋ ɡɛ rezɔŋ dɔvɑŋ pɔl]

SE A cockroach is never right in front of a fowl.

M Whenever there are disagreements between two parties,
Justice will always be on the side of the stronger one of them.

Abbreviations: EC is English-lexified Creole, FC is French-lexified Creole, SE is Standard English translation, M is meaning of the proverb. The lines enclosed in square brackets are transcribed in the International Phonetic Alphabet. This line is specific only to the individual language that is cited. It is not directly applicable for comparing the same proverb in other languages.

For almost every proverb, Bogle has listed a source location, such as Jamaica (for 74 proverbs) and Haiti (for 29), as seen in the sample entry for 37 & 38. Most entries list only one source

for the English-related form and one for the French-related form, so readers are unable to know in how many Caribbean locations the proverb is found. This is in contrast to the findings and format of Campbell (1975) and Allsopp (2004) as explained below.

The title suggests that the book will discuss Caribbean proverbs that can be traced to African proverbs. However, the book makes no systematic attempt to identify Caribbean proverbs with matching proverbs from Africa and European. She states, “There is empirical data to support the claim that some Caribbean Creole proverbs are borrowings, either from Africa or Europe” (22). To support this, Bogle cites as evidence a Caribbean proverb that matches African proverbs (22). It is about not insulting an alligator until you have crossed the river. She reports it in Jamaica, Belize, and Guyana and notes that Allsopp (2004) had reported it in Ashanti. I have also found documentation for it in Trinidad (Hearn 1885:27), plus Chewa of Zambia (van Kessel 2015:196), Builsa of Ghana Moon 2009:141), and Fulfulde of a broad band of Africa (Baldi 2015:367).

Bogle also acknowledges the European origin of some proverbs. She presents as evidence the French proverb *Là où la chère est attachée il faut qu'elle broute* (“Where the goat is tied, there it must feed”). She traces this to a 1666 French play by Molière. But the proverb is presently found across Africa, including Ya(w)o of Malawi, Mozambique and Tanzania (Dicks 2006:88) and Xitsonga of South Africa and Zimbabwe (Xitsonga Idioms & Proverbs). None of the places just mentioned were French colonies. Did the French borrow the proverb from Africans elsewhere or did Africans borrow it from the French? This is the sort of example that makes the study of Caribbean and African proverbs fascinating.

The main contribution of this small book is that it highlights the similarities of proverbs across the Caribbean, including both English- and French-influenced areas, similarities that include proverbs, but are deeper and wider than merely proverbs.

I always rejoice when a book has a useful index, so I am very pleased that this book has two of them. The first index lists names (e.g. scholars, musicians, leaders, organizations) and topics (“trade”, “creolization”, “proverbiality”). The second index

lists keywords from proverbs, such as “knife”, “cockroach”, “yam”. These make the book even more useful.

The book includes a list of References for the introductory chapter and gives short lists of References for various islands plus one for the Caribbean region.

The book is published by Peter Lang, a publisher known and respected for its books on proverb studies in the International Folkloristics series, of which this is volume 14. This volume is part of a new publishing pathway, “Peter Lang Prompt”, which is intended to publish books more quickly while still holding to “the high standard of scholarly publishing”. This pathway handles projects which are “outside the traditional length of the standard book,” which describes this 100-page book. The quality of the printing & binding, the editing of the text for grammar & cohesion, and all matters of layout are all up to Peter Lang’s usual standards.

Theophine Campbell. *African and Afro-American Proverb Parallels*. University of California: MA thesis, 1975, 92 p.

This second part of this review article is a description of the contribution to Caribbean proverbs studies by Theophine Maria Campbell. She wrote her MA thesis at the University of California in Berkeley in 1975, titled *African and Afro-American Proverb Parallels*. Sadly, the only way to study Campbell’s work was to read it at Berkeley; the university library would not share it via interlibrary loan. According to Google Scholar, this overlooked thesis has only been cited twice, once by the folklore and proverb scholar Alan Dundes, her thesis supervisor. He quoted some of her examples and gave her credit for her broad comparison of African and Caribbean proverbs (1976). The other citation of her work is by J. O. Ojoade (1987:229), noting that Campbell had identified 36 proverbs in the Caribbean that matched proverbs from Africa. It is sad that other scholars have not been able to benefit from Campbell’s findings. With the help of my wife Carole, who handles interlibrary loans at Dallas International University, I was able to pay the University of California to scan the thesis.¹ The scanned copy allowed me to search the text for specific words, an added value.

¹ I hope that the library at the University of California at Berkeley will now be willing to send this digital copy out to those who request it.

Campbell wrote at a time when Richard Dorson's work (1964, 1967) was being debated. Dorson had raised major doubts as to how much African oral folklore had survived in America, e.g., "African slaves in the United States learned tales from their white masters and mistresses" (1964:231). In contrast, Campbell's Appendix A presents a number of African proverbs that have survived in the USA and in the Caribbean (72 ff). Her work lists a number of proverbs documented in both the Caribbean and the southeastern part of the USA, both areas where African slaves and many of their descendants have lived.

The following is one of Campbell's examples (1975:73). The proverb is documented from the Caribbean, Africa, and the USA.

7. When breeze no blow yon no see fowl back (Jamaica, Cu 579)

It's when the wind is blowing that folks can see the skin of a fowl (Trinidad & Louisiana, H 80)

When the wind is blowing we see the skin of the fowl (Haiti, Bl 19)

Fine feathers are lifted when the wind blows (USA, Br 406)

A single gust of wind suffices to expose the anus of a hen (Ruanda, Ch 578)

In a second appendix, Campbell listed proverbs that were found in both the United States and the Caribbean. In her third appendix, Campbell listed proverbs that are found in both French and English-influenced parts of the Caribbean (85 ff).

Discussion of individual proverbs found in additional places

I present here some proverbs that I have discovered in more places than those mentioned by Bogle, Campbell, or Allsopp.

As an example of how some proverbs are very widespread in the Caribbean and in Africa, I choose one Bogle documented in St. Kitts and Martinique (56): "The baby hog said to its mother: 'Mummy, why is your mouth so long?', the mother says to the pig 'My child, you're growing'." Campbell (76) also found this proverb documented in Jamaica, Surinam, St. Croix, St. Lucia, Dominica, Antigua, Haiti. Additionally, I have found this in collections from Guyana, Montserrat, and Belize. This proverb is then found in 12 separate places in the Caribbean, in both English-based and French-based creoles. Campbell identified the

proverb in Africa, from Ashanti, a language from Ghana. I have identified it in four more African languages, from Ga of Ghana (Burton 1865, 143), Sierra Leone Creole English (Lewis-Coker 2018, 205), Yoruba of Nigeria (p.c. David Oluseyi Ige 2019), and Ibibio of Nigeria (Udosen, Ekah, Offong 2017, 72). Such examples show the richness and complexity of comparing Caribbean proverbs with African proverbs.

One of the proverbs that Campbell and/or Allsopp identified as having corresponding proverbs in Africa is about a person or animal swallowing something too big for their anus, e.g. “The cow must know what his anus is like before he swallows the oil palm seed.” Bogle cites this with two Caribbean languages (46). Allsopp cites additional matches from the Caribbean and African (2004:68). To these I can add Trinidad (Hearn 1885:34).

All of these proverbs are about an animal thinking about its anus while swallowing something unusually large. This proverb is very widely spread across Africa, from the west in Balant of Senegal (Mansaly 2018:28), across to the east in Tigrinya of Eritrea (Täklä, Wäldä-Maryam, & Gäbrä-Sällasse 1985:34), down south to Tswana in Botswana (Gadilatolwe 2006:6), and up to the Gulf of Guinea to Bura of Nigeria (Bwala 2016:32).

This proverb is not found only in Africa and the Caribbean. It is also documented in Pashto of Afghanistan and Pakistan: “Before you swallowed the bone, why didn’t you measure your anus?” (Bartlotti and Khattak 2006:31). This proverb’s history is old, very old. In ancient Sumerian of Mesopotamia, there was a very similar proverb about an animal thinking about his anus as he swallowed a large object, “The dog gnawing on a bone says to his anus, ‘This is going to hurt you!’” (The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature, Proverbs: collection 5, Segment D, 5.84 87-89). Paremiology leads us not only across large distances but also back into history.

Bogle, Campbell, and Allsopp documented many proverbs that are found in both the Caribbean and in Africa. Here I present additional interesting proverbs that are found in both the Caribbean and Africa.

The basic form of the first proverb is “If you play with a puppy, he will lick your mouth.” Campbell documented it in two Caribbean islands, plus two places in the southeast USA (81),

where it was documented among African Americans. Allsopp added five more locations in the Caribbean (2004:168,169). Neither noted any link to Africa for this proverb. But I have discovered a similar proverb in the Ga language of Ghana, “When you play with a dog it will lick your mouth” (When you play with a dog it licks your mouth – Shatta Wale tells Okraku Mantey (ghanaweb.com)). I do not think anyone will be surprised that another Caribbean proverb has a link to Africa. Further research will undoubtedly find more Caribbean proverbs with African links.

However, this proverb is interesting because the same proverb is found not only in the Caribbean and in Africa, it is also found in Southeast Asia. In Burmese, it is “Fondle a dog and it will lick your face.” (Min and Thida 2020:1325). Just across the border, in the adjacent section of India, in Manipuri it is “If you show much affection for a pup he will lick the tip of your tongue.” (Shakespeare 1911:473). I am puzzled by this similar proverb being found in places that are so far apart. Mieder has presented evidence for a single proverb being independently created in two different European languages (2017). Is similar polygenesis the explanation here? Or, did a British colonial official learn it in a British colony in Africa, then get transferred to Southeast Asia where he introduced it to the local community? Similarly, the proverb about insulting an alligator or crocodile, mentioned above as being documented widely in the Caribbean and in Africa, is very similar to a proverb in Malaysia, “Do not use bad language on a river or the crocodile will grow fierce” (Winstedt 1950:21). Paremiology is always full of surprises.

Another proverb for which Bogle, Campbell, and Allsopp did not discover an African link is, “When cow tail cut off God-a-mighty brush fly” (Campbell 1985). It is found in Kuteb, Igbo, Yoruba, all of Nigeria (Warner-Lewis 2018:329).

I have discovered three additional Caribbean proverbs that have links to Africa. All three of these are wellerism proverbs, containing a quotation and an identified speaker. The Caribbean forms have preserved not only the meaning and general form of a proverb, but they have also preserved the structure of a wellerism proverb. Proverbs with one quotation are called “wellerism proverbs” and those with two quotations are called “dialogue

proverbs". Both are common in Africa (Unseth et al 2017:13,14; Unseth 2020).

The first of these wellerism proverbs is documented from Jamaica, "Snake says if it does not hold up its head, a woman will use it to tie wood." (Watson 1991:102). This matches an Igbo proverb from Nigeria, "If the snake fails to bite, the women will use it in tying firewood" (Onwuchekwa 2012:219).

The second example of a Caribbean wellerism proverb with an African match is spoken by an animal that has been killed. In Martinique, it is "The snake says he doesn't hate the person who kills him, but the one who calls out, 'Look at the snake!'" (Hearn 1885: 33). In the African examples, the specific animals mentioned vary.

Kipsigis (Kenya): "Antelope that was shot, said it did not blame the hunter but the one who roused it." (Soi 2014:64

Ibibio (Nigeria): "The rat says, it is not the person who kills him that annoys him as the one who says, 'See it going!'" (Iwokedok 2014:193).

The third example of a proverb containing a quotation is about moving quickly. From Sranan Tongo of Guyana, there is a wellerism proverb with one quotation: "The chameleon says, 'Haste, haste is good, but caution, caution is good, too.'" (Herskovits & Herskovits 1936:467). From Ghana, there are two matches. The Chumburung example is a wellerism proverb very close to the form of the Sranan Tongo proverb, with a chameleon speaking. The Ewe example is in the form of a dialogue proverb, the second speaker being a chameleon like the other two examples, but the first speaker is a "hare":

Chumburung: "Chameleon says, 'Quickly quickly is good and slowly slowly is good.'" (Hansford 2003: 79)

Ewe: "The hare says, 'Walking slowly leads to death.' The chameleon says, 'Walking quickly leads to death'" (Knappert 1989, 94).

Conclusion

Bogle's book is a welcome addition to the study of proverbs shared across the Caribbean. She has highlighted the sharing of proverbs between French-derived creole languages and En-

glish-derived creole languages. Bogle's book should be consulted by those studying proverbs in the Caribbean region. Her book would be even more useful if she had listed all of the places where each is found, along with specific citations. Campbell's long-neglected thesis deserves to be read and acknowledged as a pioneering work. Her work, like Allsopp's better-known book, will be consulted by and be useful to those who study not only Caribbean proverbs but also their African links. Allsopp's book is more complete than either of them. However, each of these three works has some contribution missing from the other two and prover scholars studying the Caribbean area will want to study all three.

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