

# PLEA FOR NEGRO FOLK LORE

## We Must Imitate the Example of Other People's and

Preserve from the Rust of Oblivion the Traditions, Habits and Sayings of our Forefathers.

The American Negroes are rising so rapidly from the condition of ignorance and poverty in which slavery left them, to a position among the cultivated and civilized people of the earth, that the time seems not far distant when they shall have cast off their past entirely, and stand, an anomaly among civilized races, as a people having no distinct traditions, beliefs or ideas from which a history of their growth may be traced. If, within the next few years, care is not taken to collect and preserve all traditions and customs peculiar to the Negroes, there will be little to reward the search of the future historian who would trace their history from the African continent through the years of slavery to the position which they will hold a few generations hence. Even now the children are growing up with little knowledge of what their ancestors have thought, or felt, or suffered. The common school system with its teachings is eradicating the old and planting the seeds of the new, and the transition period is likely to be a short one. The old people, however, still have their thoughts on the past, and believe and think and do much as they have for generations. From them and from the younger ones whose thoughts have been moulded by them in regions where the school is, as yet, imperfectly established, much may be gathered that will, when put together and printed, be of great value as material for history and ethnology.

But, if this material is to be obtained, it must be gathered soon and by many intelligent observers stationed in different places. It must be done by observers who enter into the homes and lives of the more ignorant colored people and who see in their beliefs and customs no occasion for scorn, or contempt, or laughter, but only the showing forth of the first child-like, but still reasoning philosophy of a race reaching after some interpretation of its surroundings and its antecedents. To such observers, every custom, belief, or superstition, foolish and empty to others, will be of value and will be worth careful preservation. The work cannot be done by white people, much as many of them would enjoy the opportunity of doing it, but must be done by the intelligent and educated colored people who are at work all through the South among the more ignorant of their own race, teaching, preaching, practicing medicine, carrying on business of any kind that brings them into close contact with the simple, old-time ways of their own people. We want to get all such persons interested in this work, and to get them to note down their observations along certain lines and send them into the editor of the Southern Workman. We hope sooner or later to join all such contributors together into a Folk-Lore Society and to make our work of value to the whole world, but our beginning will be in a corner of the Southern Workman and we have liberty to establish there a department of Folk-Lore Ethnology.

Notes and observations on any or all of the following subjects will be welcomed:

1. Folk-tales. The animal tales about Brer. Fox and Brer. Rabbit and the others have been well told by many white writers as taken down from the lips of Negroes. Some of them have been already traced back to Africa, many are found existing, with slight variations, among Negroes and Indians of South as well as North America. These, with other stories relating to deluges, the colors of different races and natural phenomena of various kinds, form an important body of Negro mythology. Any additions to these already written out and printed, or variations on those already obtained would be of great value.

2. Customs, especially in connection with birth, marriage and death, that are different from those of the whites. Old customs cling longest about such occasions. The old nurse, who first takes the little baby in her arms, has great store of old-fashioned learning about what to do and what not to do, to start the child auspiciously upon the voyage of life. The bride receives many warnings and injunctions upon passing through the gates of matrimony, and the customs that follow death and burial tend to change but little from age to age. What was once regarded as an honor to the dead, or a propitiation of his spirit, must not be neglected, lest the dead seem dishonored, or the spirit—about which we know so little after all—wander forlorn and lonely, or work us ill because we failed to do some little thing that was needful for its rest. And so the old ways linger on about those events of our lives, and through them we may trace back the thoughts and beliefs of our ancestors for generations.

3. Traditions of ancestry in Africa, or of transportation to America. Rev. Dr. Crummell, in his eulogy of

Henry Highland Garnett, says of that great man: "He was born in slavery. His father before him was born in the same condition. His grandfather, however, was born a free man in Africa. He was a Mandingo chieftain and warrior, and, having been taken prisoner in a tribal fight, was sold to slave traders, and then brought as a slave to America." If this tradition was preserved for three generations, may there not be others that have been handed from father to son, or from mother to daughter through longer descents? The slavery system as it existed in the United States tended to obscure pedigrees and blot them out entirely by its brutal breaking up of all family ties, but even if only here and there such traditions are still found, they are worth preserving as tending to throw light upon the derivation of the American Negroes.

4. African words surviving in speech or song. Here and there some African word has crept into common use, as goober for peanut, which is manifestly the same as n'gooba, the universal African designation for the same article of food. Are there not other words less common which are African? Do not children sing songs, or count out in their games with words which we may have taken for nonsense, but which really form links in the chain that connects the American with the African Negro? Do not the old people when they tell stories use expressions sometimes that are not English, and that you have passed over as nonsense? Are there songs sung by the fireside, at the camp meeting, or at work, or play, that contain words, apparently nonsensical, that make a refrain or chorus? If there are, note them down, spelling them so as to give as nearly their exact sound as possible and send them in with a note of how they are used.

5. Ceremonies and superstitions. Under this head may be included, all beliefs in regard to the influence of the moon or other heavenly bodies; superstitions in regard to animals of various kinds and their powers for good or evil, as well as all ideas about the medical or magical properties of different plants or stones. Here also may be noted all that can be learned about beliefs in ghosts, witches, hags, and how to overcome supernatural influences. How to cork up a hag in a bottle so that she cannot disturb your slumbers, how to keep her at work all night threading the meshes of a sifter hung up in the doorway and so escape her influence, how to detect or avoid conjuring, or magic in any form, how to escape the bad luck that must come if you turn back to get something you have forgotten, or if a crow flies over the house, or if your eye twitches, or if any of the thousand and one things occur which, in the minds of the ignorant and superstitious, will bring bad luck if the right thing is not done at once to avert the evil influence.

6. Proverbs and sayings. From the time of King Solomon until now there have always been embodied in proverbs many bits of sound wisdom that show the philosophy of the common people. The form that the proverbs and sayings take depend largely upon the habits and modes of thought of the people who make them. Thus a collection of the proverbs of any people shows their race characteristics and the circumstances of life which surround them. Joel Chandler Harris in his "Uncle Remus's Songs and Sayings" has given a series of Plantation Proverbs that shows the quaint humor, the real philosophy and the homely surroundings of the plantation Negroes. A few specimens from his list may call attention to what we mean: "Better do gravy dan' no grease 'tall," "Tattlin' 'oman can't make do bread rise," "Mighty po bee dat don't make mo' honey dan be want," "Rooster make mo' racket dan de hin wa't iay de alg." In Mr. Harris' book the Georgia Negro dialect is carefully preserved, but that is not necessary for our work, through adding to its value where it can be done well.

7. Songs, words or music or both. The Hampton School has been at some pains to note down and preserve many of the "spirituals" which are probably the best expression so far attained of the religious and musical feeling of the race, but there are innumerable songs of other kinds which have never been taken down here. One of the earliest methods of recording and preserving historical or other knowledge is through the medium of rhythmic and musical utterance. The Iliad of Homer, the great historical poems of the Hebrew poets, the Norse sagas, the Scotch, English and Spanish ballads, were but the histories of the various races moulded into forms in which they could be sung and remembered by the people. In the absence of written records or of a general knowledge of the art of reading, songs are the ordinary vehicle of popular knowledge. A few years ago, I was listening to the singing of some of our night students. The song was new to me, and at first seemed to consist mainly of dates, but I found as it went along and interpreted itself, that it was a long and fully detailed account of the Charleston earthquake, in which the events of

successive days were enumerated, the year being repeated with great fervency again and again in the chorus. Are there not other songs of a similar character that take up older events? Are there not old war songs that would be of permanent value? Are there not songs that take up the condition and events of slavery from other than the religious side? Are there any songs that go back to Africa, or the conditions of life there? What are your people singing about—for they are always singing—at their work or their play, by the fireside or in social gatherings? Find out and write it down, for there must be much of their real life and thought in these as yet uncollected and unwritten songs.

There are many other lines along which observation would be of value for the purpose of gaining a thorough knowledge of the condition—past and present, of the American Negro. Are there any survivors of the later importations from Africa, or are there any Negroes who can say to-day, "My father or my mother was a native African?" If there are, talk with them, learn of them all they can tell you and note it down. Are there any families of Negroes, apparently of pure blood, characterized by straight or nearly straight hair? If there are, do they account for it in any way? What proportion of the colored people in the district where you live are of mixed blood. Give the number of pure and mixed blood. What proportion having white blood have kept any traditions of their white and Negro ancestry so that they know the exact proportion of white to Negro blood? How many have traditions of Indian ancestry? Reports on all these subjects would be in the line of our work.

And now, having shown as fully as is possible within the limits here set down, what it is that the Hampton School desires to do through its graduates and all other intelligent Negroes who are interested in the history and origin of their own race, we would say in closing, that we should be glad to enter into correspondence with any persons who wish to help in this work, and to receive contributions from all who have made or who can make observations along the proposed lines of investigation. Correspondence with prominent men of both races, leads us to believe that we have the possibility ahead of us of valuable scientific study, that in this age when it is hard to open up a new line of research, or add anything to the knowledge of men and manners and beliefs that the world already possesses, we, if we labor earnestly and patiently, may contribute much that shall be of real and permanent value in spreading among men the understanding of their fellowmen as well as in furnishing material for the future historian of the American Negro. Is not this worth doing?

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