


Word from the Motherland: Rap, the Dozens, and African Griots

by Khephra Burns

“Brofners!” my wife hollered. Neither of us could believe what we were seeing—Arsenio Hall and rapper Will Smith, the Fresh Prince, playing the “dozens,” dissing each other’s mama on late night television. It was a first. It



was funny. And, thankfully, as the dozens go, it was G rated.

Playing the dozens is part of a long tradition of verbal shootouts, rap acrobatics, loud lying, and a lot of poetic license word-slinging brothers and sharp-tongued sisters have taken with the language. Be we preachers, players, or just plain folks, our ability to wield words with wit and rhythm has given us power when there was little within our grasp. We are a race of rappers from way back.

In the 1950s, when the brothers on my block were rhythmically slapping their chests and thighs, “doin’ that crazy hand jive,” it seemed as novel to us then as rap must have seemed to kids in the South Bronx a generation later. Come to find out, we were “rapping” in the 1850s—trading tall tales, handing out verbal abuse in rhymes, and providing our own rhythmic, chest-whacking, thigh-slapping accompaniment. Back then it was called “pattin’ juba.” Juba faded, only to resurface like a race memory a hundred years later. In the meantime the tradition of rhyming and trading insults evolved into “signifying,” the “dozens,” and epic tales called “toasts.” At least one well-known rhyme from the folklore, the Signifying Monkey, has its roots in West African animal tales.

**Signifyin’ monkey told the lion one day,
“There’s a bad motherfucker comin’ down your way.
He talked about your family and I’m sorry to say,
But he talked about your mama in a hell of a way.
Talked about your sister and your grandma, too,
And he didn’t show too much respect for you. . . .”**

The lion goes off in search of the elephant whom the monkey says has been doing all this bad talking, and the elephant hands the lion a royal ass whipping. To make matters worse, it turns out the elephant wasn’t even studyin’ the lion.

Signifying is not widely condoned among right-thinking folks. In order to avoid charges of signifying and stirring up shit, folks carrying tales (gossiping, that is) will often swear, “If I’m lyin’, I’m flyin’.” Still, the tale of the signifying monkey acknowledges that the word is mightier than tooth and claw, and that those with little power can use language to manipulate and overcome the powerful.

Most toasts celebrated mythical badmen like Stagolee and tricksters like Shine. Stagolee (aka Stackalee, Stacker Lee, etc.) was the baddest

of the badmen—badder than Shaft, badder than Trouble Man, badder than anything L.L. Cool J could imagine. In some toasts he shoots Billy Lions, another badman, for cheating him at cards or dice. In others he shoots Billy just to prove which of them is the baddest. And in others still, he “perforates” the bartender and assorted others with “six .44 rockets” (bullets in typically phallic toast hyperbole) for daring to challenge him, verbally or otherwise. He breaks the white man’s rules in grand style and flaunts power at the point of a gun for real-life black men who have no power. Stack’s don’t-give-a-damn attitude is summed up in the lines

**I’m Stackalee
Mean as can be.
Trouble I crave.
Born in a open grave
When the earth quaked.
Suckled by a black snake
On poison and hoecake.
Got no compassion,
Ain’t got no fears.
The moans of widows and orphans
Is music to my ears.
I got a tombstone disposition
And a graveyard mind.
I’m a bad muthafucka
‘Cause I don’t mind dyin’.***

[Some of the impact of such toasts may be lost today when life too often and too tragically imitates art in our communities.] Today, L.L. Cool J raps, “I explode / And my nine [millimeter handgun] is easy to load. . . .” (from “Mama Said Knock You Out”), but the vicarious experience of power through the toast or boast seems increasingly to be an insufficient fix for the pain of powerlessness. Especially when nine-year-olds can put their hands on a real nine-millimeter. In an article from the *Journal of American Folklore*, “Circus and Street: Psychological Aspects of the Black Toast,” Bruce Jackson makes the case simply and succinctly that Stagolee’s “style is not viable, for the population in the land of irrational badmen is constantly decreasing, and that is, in any society, intolerable.”

*From the author’s play, *Stackalee*

Unlike the badman, who cannot use words to cope with conflict—for whom, in fact, the words are typically unavailable—those who toasted them, and the rappers like L.L. Cool J who assume the badman persona, employ words as the weapon of choice. Likewise, tricksters, like Shine, use wit and cunning, guile and banter, to attain their goals, which are generally to get sex and to outsmart the white man. In the toast “*Titanic*” Shine outthinks the white folks, swims the ocean, outswims sharks, and (untypically) even resists the temptations of the flesh in order to save his ass when the great *Titanic* hits an iceberg and sinks.

**All the old folks say
The fourth of May was a hell of a day.
I was in a little seaport town
And the great *Titanic* was goin’ down.
Now the sergeant and the captain was havin’ some
words
When all of sudden they hit that iceberg.
Up come Shine from down below,
Sayin’ “Captain, Captain, you don’t know,
We got nine feet of water over the boiler room floor.”
The captain said, “Go on back and start stackin’
stacks,
We got nine pumps to keep that water back. . . .”**

Shine tells him:

**“This ship may be big and this ship may be fine,
But where this ship is takin’ you,
It ain’t gonna take Shine.”
Now a thousand millionaires was lookin’ at him
When he jumped in the ocean and started to swim.
A rich man’s daughter came up on deck
With her drawers around her knees and her skirt around
her neck.
Shine shook as he stopped to look. . . .
She said, “Shine, oh, Shine, save me, please,
And I’ll give you everything your eyes may see.”
He said, “Lady, your pussy looks good, it’s true,
But there’s some girls on land got pussy too.”**

Up come a shark from the bottom of the sea,
 Said, "Look what the Lord done sent to me."
 But Shine wasn't jokin', he was double strokin',
 And after ol' shark seen that Shine had him beat,
 He said, "Swim on, motherfucker, 'cause I don't like black
 meat."
 About four-thirty when the *Titanic* was sinkin',
 Shine had swimm'd clear to Los Angeles and was in a bar
 drinkin'.

Toasting Shine and Stagolee was one means by which black men identified with power. And toasting with style and clever rhymes gave one status and power among one's peers.

Like much of today's rap many of these toasts were shamefully misogynistic. Some even celebrated pimps, though not so much for their alleged sexual superiority as for their verbal prowess. On some level those who toasted knew—as do the pimps, politicians, and Madison Avenue advertising firms—that with the right words you can control the minds of others. *The Mack*, the title of the 1970s blaxploitation flick, was a synonym for *pimp*. "To mack" meant to seduce a woman with talk, as did *rap* before it finally came to signify rhyming in rhythm. (An interesting aside: The links between the sexual urge, the art of seduction, and the development of language go way back. It's no accident that the words *language*, *lingual* [tongue], and *lingam* [phallus] all have the same root. The word *language* can thus be read as a one-word poem; buried deep beneath its layers of centuries of civilizing usage is the powerful image of the tongue in the ear when *tongue* equals penis, *ear* connotes vagina, and words are the seeds that inseminate the mind.)

Quiet as it's kept, sisters have played the game too. And no amount of male muscle can ever hope to match the power that resides in a woman's mouth. Case in point: A brother stopped dead in his tracks. He'd been spotted by a group of women coming out of the men's room with his fly open. After zipping up he made the mistake of approaching one of them and asking, "Hey, baby, did you see my big brown Cadillac ready to roll into action just for you?" "No," she said, "but I saw a little gray Volkswagen with two flat tires."

Linguists say black folks place much more emphasis on effective talking than whites do. With us it's always been "not what you say, but how you say it" that has made the difference between seriously rapping and

just flapping your gums. In the 1930s and '40s, before it came to signify someone who is trifling, "jive" was the black progenitor of American slang. And it was often rhymed. A "zoot suit with a reet pleat and a drape shape with a stuffed cuff" was a seriously hip fashion statement. While the vocabulary of the hip is constantly changing, and rap is the primary conduit of new slang today, the impetus for improvising with words originated with jazz improvisers in the thirties and forties. Over time many black slang terms have seeped into the mainstream culture and have helped to keep American English interesting and fresh. And some form of rapping, toasting, and verbal dueling can be found wherever we are.

Among the Rundi of Burundi in east central Africa, everyone plays the game of matching wits through verbal thrusts and parrying. Eloquence is highly prized, and the Rundi place a great emphasis on the ability to use *ubgenge*, which means something like "successful cleverness" in language, and *imfura* or "speaking well." News, gossip, social satire, and whole histories of the Mandinka and Ibo peoples were wrapped up in the epic narratives of savannah griots. Among the Yoruba, the trickster god, Eshu, is also the master of the principles of speech and language. And quarreling Yoruba women sing the dozens at each other in the laundry place, publicly airing each other's "dirty laundry." In the Caribbean, Trinidadians put music to the dozens and invented Calypso. Among the Efik of Nigeria, typical slams include *engwi imiäng urua* ("you fart in the market") and *eyen ntime nsene* ("child of mixed sperm"—in other words, you were conceived by more than one father). The person thus dissed might reply with a snappy comeback that translates as "Your mama."

According to brother Morgan Dalphinis, author of *Caribbean and African Languages*, this is the ultimate pan-African insult. The Hausa say *uwarka* ("your mother"), which is really short for *ka ci uwarka* (unprintable). In the Creole-speaking Caribbean, *manman ou* and *koukoun manman ou* mean roughly the same thing.

"Shameful," some folks say, and shake their heads. "Ign'ant." "And disrespectful." "A confused reaction to matriarchy on the part of adolescent boys searching for masculinity," say the sociologists. But the dozens is a high-stakes game where Mama's honor is worth more than anything, including your own physical safety. Fact is, insulting someone's mother, even in defense of your own, is ordinarily enough to provoke an immediate, highly emotional, and decidedly physical response. In other words, a fight. But resorting to violence is ultimately an admis-

sion that you aren't hard enough to hang. Not ready for the real world. More often than not, tensions are dissipated through words that fly fast and sting but also provoke laughter and inspire admiration for our cleverness and skill in using language creatively. It tests our ability to remain cool under pressure. And verbal dueling provides young brothers and sisters with a training ground for adulthood in a society where fire-power and sheer numbers dictate that we do battle with whites verbally rather than physically. These are war games, with the only weapons we will be permitted in mainstream society.

The dozens is a kids' contest, in the main. Some of the same language strategy used in the dozens can be heard earlier on in the taunts and tricks of small children.

**Red, red, peed in bed,
Wiped it up with jelly-bread.**

**Brown, brown, go to town,
With your britches hanging down.**

African-American adults generally don't play the dozens. When adults "sound" on one another the proverbial response is "I laugh, joke, and smoke, but I don't play." Yet the game is never really forgotten. Clearly, it has served as schooling not only for rappers and others who see themselves as machine-gun poets and wordslingers for hire, but for all who, on whatever level in their daily lives, choose the mode of the trickster over that of the badman.

Ultimately, to update the old aphorism about pens and swords, the book is badder than the bullet. Traditionally, colonialists have relied for the long term not on the bullet but the Bible to control the colonized. Nations insist that their populations speak a single approved language as an expression of loyalty and are suspicious of foreign tongues and even dialects of the official language. The state can neither prohibit nor encourage behavior it cannot name. And there is a deep-seated, perhaps primordial, awe and fear of strange words and words used in strange ways. It is built right into the language, hidden in words like *curse* and *profane*. The word *grammar* itself derives from a very old term for occult learning and the casting of spells. Before inflationary use devalued it, the word *motherfucker* could be wielded with a force and rhythm by black men to put whites at unease. The same word has been used by black women as a term of endearment to their men. *Motherfucker* embodied the universal masculine and feminine princi-

ples, the yin/yang mother/father with a twist that turned the latter into a verb for the eternal whirlwind of creation. Words have power. The Bible says that "In the beginning was the Word," and that God created everything from the word. In fact, the word *god* has its origin in the Indo-European root *gheue*, meaning "to call." A word is nothing more than a sound which is nothing more than a vibration which is nothing more than a rhythm of waves. The rhythm on rhythm, the sound, the magic, and what we do with words—the way we turn "bad" into good—make African-American speech a wild card in the English language. It keeps American English alive and vital, though perhaps at the expense of white culture, by contributing culturally and linguistically to the blackening of the mainstream mode, and ultimately to what Public Enemy termed "Fear of a Black Planet." With that blackening, the language we have adopted and adapted will in the long run become for whites less the instrument of control and, to some, more a curse and instrument of retribution. (*Karma* was a word they should have got hip to in India, but were too busy oppressing the people of color there.) Even when we don't articulate it according to the standard grammar, we can still improvise some potent magic in this language. When Nina Simone shouts, "I put a spell on you," it's already on you.

In *The Healing Drum*, Yaya Diallo, a member of the Bamana tribe in Mali, West Africa, describes a scenario in which two children start to fight. When an elder breaks them up and asks why they are fighting, the first child says, "He insulted me." The elder asks, "Was it a new insult he invented?" "He insulted my mother," the offended boy says. "Oh, that is an old insult," laughs the elder. "It has never killed anyone here. I would have worried if it were a new insult. That one is nothing to worry about. We have tested all the old insults, and they are harmless. Look around you. All of these people you see have been insulted, but they are fine."

When I had similar complaints as a child, my mother used to recite, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." With all due respect to Mama, the wisdom of this proverb seemed dubious to me. But, as words were the only socially acceptable weapons of war, the only thing left to do was build up my own arsenal.

Language is competitive. Even grown-up, everyday language is a game, a contest between speakers. And the limits of our language define the limits of our world. There is no thought that can be thought without it, no concept that can be grasped without the handle that words provide us. There are certainly things we feel profoundly that

cannot be put into words, but there is no other way than with words to construct a thought. Thought is language spoken to oneself.

Beyond racism, Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* illustrates how the inability to communicate verbally leads to frustration, verbal violence, and, ultimately, physical violence. The stuttering Smiley symbolizes this frustration, and it is further illustrated in Radio Raheem's demands that the Korean grocers he patronizes speak English. Ironic, since he doesn't speak English much better than they. When the grocer calls him a motherfucker, Radio Raheem smiles. Now they are beginning to communicate. In the film Radio Raheem dies in a policeman's choke hold, but his fate is sealed earlier when the pizza shop owner smashes his radio/cassette player with a baseball bat. "You killed my radio!" he says, stunned. And with that the shop owner has effectively destroyed Raheem's identity. He is no longer Radio Raheem. Never again will the sounds of Public Enemy's rap "Fight the Power" give voice to his frustration. He is silenced. That frustration, which is to some degree the frustration of all African Americans, can be heard as well in the stylized emphasis that rappers and our young folks in the hip-hop culture place on what linguists call "plosives," consonants that appear to explode upon the eardrums.

Rap, the dozens, signifying, jive talking, and the other uniquely black modes of communication are just that, modes, best employed strategically and not exclusively or in every context we find ourselves in in America. Some of the more conscious rappers have begun to recognize that black people are (at least metaphorically) at war with the dominant culture in America. But it's a guerrilla war in which we all might serve as more effective agents and spies if we were only more fluent in the mainstream language mode. Ignorance of the rules of white folks' language games would mean I wouldn't know when sarcasm is intended or when I've been insulted. But that works both ways. To William F. Buckley, with all his verbose rodomontades and etiolated dialectics, a simple response like "Your mama" would seem to be an incomprehensible non sequitur. Slang, the invention of black jazz musicians in the thirties and forties, was, in fact, consciously employed to separate the hip folk from the squares and even up the score a bit. In Egypt, four hundred prophets are said to have spoken incoherently before the gates of Samaria in 853 B.C. Incoherent to whom? All depends on who's listening. Noamsain?

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The Rap on Hip-hop

by William Safire

"But the Czar Never Knew About Hip-hop" was the headline in a recent *U.S. News & World Report*. The article was about the Siberian Cadets Corps in Novosibirsk, Russia, where students are learning the real history of Russia along with the cultural activities