

B' Rabby as a True-True Bahamian

Rabbyism as Bahamian Ethos and Worldview in the Bahamas' folk tradition and the works of Strachan and Ginton- Meicholas *

Virgil Henry Storr

Don C. Lavoie Research Fellow

Program in Philosophy, Politics and Economics

Department of Economics

George Mason University

Fairfax, Virginia

email: vstorr@gmu.edu

web: <http://www.ihika.org/>

Abstract

Dundes (1971) and others have argued that folklore, which includes myths, legends, storytelling, songs and images, is a source of both folk ideas, "basic premises" that are "the building blocks of worldview," and folk values, the "normative postulates" that inform our moral judgments. Although *talking ol' story* is a dying tradition in the Bahamas, the once popular tales may nevertheless be a valuable source of insight into Bahamian belief systems and cultural practices. Similarly, B' Rabby the trickster, the dominant character in Bahamian folk narratives, might still have a great deal to teach us about Bahamian models of and for the world. Especially, since contemporary authors continue to give voice to many of the folk ideas and values that are so clearly evident in the B' Boukee and B' Rabby tales. It is my contention that Bahamian orature, as well as, novelists like Ian Strachan and satirists like Patricia Ginton-Meicholas represent the Bahamas as a nation peopled with B' Boukee and B' Rabby figures and depict Bahamian society as one dominated by Rabbyism, an ethos and worldview which celebrates cunning over hard work but views greed as an unpardonable vice.

Keywords: Bahamian culture, Bahamian folklore, B' Boukee and B' Rabby, Ian Strachan, Patricia Ginton-Meicholas

* This paper was published in the *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, 6 (1), 2009. *True-true* is a popular phrase in Bahamian dialect that means real or authentic. The standard disclaimer applies.

Introduction

Almost everyone who has visited the Bahamas will tell you the same thing about my people; Bahamians are very friendly, open and honest, always smiling and eager to please. Indeed, all of the travel guides depict Bahamians, to one degree or another, as being “amongst the most beautiful people of earth.” In the *Pelican Guide to the Bahamas* (2000, 42), for instance, we are described as a “generally gregarious, inquisitive and delightfully friendly people.” Similarly, *Bahamas for Dummies* (2001, 337) calls Bahamians “some of the most personable people around,” adding the caveat, “as long as visitors treat them with respect.” Even the *Lonely Planet* (1998, 57-58) whose accounts and advice are typically the most nuanced of the popular guides, suggests that in the urban centers “you’ll meet dozens of genuinely charming people with a friendliness that never pales” for every “wisecracking tough [that you meet] wanting to separate you from your money.” It also describes Bahamians who live on the family islands as “unspoiled by city life” and “friendliness personified, displaying a gentle wisdom and ever-present caring for other people.” From the guides you get a clear sense that if the Bahamas is paradise – and each guide offers reason after reason why the typical visitor might honestly believe that this nation of islands is at least a close approximation of Eden – then Bahamians, it seems, are precisely the sort of people that you’d expect to find there; gregarious, personable, genuinely charming, friendliness personified.¹

The Bahamas, however, is not quite paradise and there are some untoward, if often below the surface, aspects of Bahamian culture (barely hinted at in the travel guides).² For instance, we are a little bit too willing to ignore rules that don’t quite suit us. Think of our blatant disregard of copyright law. Pirated copies of recently released DVD’s and CD’s are often easier to find in local stores than legitimate, factory-packaged releases. Think of our sometimes relaxed attitudes to our

¹ As Strachan (2002, 1) remarked, “This brochure discourse offers an interesting version of ‘paradise’ to the eyes and pocketbook of the visitor: captivating aerial shots of rocks; the deep blue-green waters teeming with colorful fish that flourish among astounding coral reefs; a white woman, alone, inviting, walking on a white sandy beach without footprints; lush green landscapes; and smiling black ‘natives’ chopping open coconuts, ready to serve, ready to please, gesturing with their hands for the viewer to come and join in the fun.”

² This paradise that we have constructed, advertised and distributed to the world, as Strachan (2002, 1) suggests, “has as much authenticity for indigenous residents as would a stage prop or movie.” And, our smiles (like our countrymen) though often sincere are sometimes disingenuous.

marriage vows. Serial adultery, which is euphemistically called sweethearting, is something of a national pastime. What's worse, we're a little bit too accepting of corruption. In the 1980's, for instance, our political leaders were accused of all sorts of corruption, from accepting kickbacks to facilitating the trade of illicit drugs, yet the government of the day was not called to account nor did they face any real penalty at the polls; the Pindling administration was re-elected twice during that era by overwhelming margins. The gregarious, genuinely charming, caring Bahamians have an alter-ego. Our cultural system is far more complex than the brochure discourse about our nation of islands suggests.

Geertz (1973) has explained that a cultural system has both a particular ethos and a definite world view. As he describes, "a people's ethos is the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood; it is the underlying attitude toward themselves and their world that life reflects. Their world view is their picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society. It contains their most comprehensive ideas of order" (ibid., 127). According to Geertz, there is a definite, symbiotic relationship between the values that a people hold, their morality, their notion of how people should behave and their beliefs about how the world really works. The ethos is "intellectually reasonable" to the extent that it represents "a way of life implied by the actual state of affairs which the world view describes" (ibid.). Likewise, the worldview is only "emotionally acceptable" to the degree to which its "image" of the "actual state of affairs" represents "an authentic expression" of the "way of life" required by a people's ethos.

Religion, Geertz (ibid.) explained, is one arena where this play of ethos and world view occurs; "religious belief and ritual confront and mutually confirm one another ... [the] demonstration of a meaningful relation between the values a people holds and the general order of existence within which it finds itself is an essential element in all religions." As a cultural system, it acts as both a model for operating in the world (i.e. it is normative for our acting in the world) and a model of how the world actually works (i.e. it aids our positive analysis of happenings in the world). Undoubtedly, a people's folklore is another arena where ethos and worldview confront and mutually confirm one another.

Speaking of the Jataka story-telling tradition amongst the Laotians of eastern Thailand, Wongthet (1989, 24) explains that “understanding of the Jakata story-telling activity will help us understand the world-view, personality and cultural values of Laotians.” Ogunleye (1997) has made a similar point about the importance of folklore in African communities and in the Diaspora. As he (*ibid.*, 436) contends,

Folklore represents a line to a vast, interconnected network of meanings, values, and cognitions. Folklore contains seeds of wisdom, problem solving, and prophecy through tales of rebellion, triumph, reasoning, moralizing, and satire. All that African American people value, including the agony enslaved and freed Africans were forced to endure, as well as strategies they used to resist servitude and flee their captors, is discernable in this folk literature. African American folklore is also an historical thread that ties the cultural heritage of Africans in the diaspora and those living on the continent of Africa.

Folklore, which includes myths, legends, storytelling, songs and images, is a source of both folk ideas, “basic premises” that are “the building blocks of worldview,” and folk values, the “normative postulates” that inform our moral judgments (Dundes 1971).

Although *talking ol' story* is something of a dying tradition in the Bahamas, the once popular tales are still a valuable source of insight into Bahamian identity and culture. The Bahamian storytelling tradition was a rich one, replete with colorful tales of gaulins and serpents and devils, often punctuated by proverbs and songs and told with the aid of “mimicry, onomatopoeia and gestures” (Glinton 1993, 13). The storyteller in Bahamian orature, however, was not just an entertainer. He was also “the news-bringer and historian of the clan, prescriber and disseminator of his people’s culture, upholder of their religious practices and their moral values” (Turner 1988, viii).

B’ Rabby (the trickster) is the dominant character in Bahamian folk narratives (Glinton 1993, Turner 1988). I, for instance, can vividly remember sitting with my cousins at my grandmother’s feet, enthralled for hours as she told us tale after tale of B’ Rabby getting the best of his friend and foil B’ Boukee. Brought over from the continent by enslaved Africans, B’ Rabby and B’ Boukee “are primarily a part of this country’s African heritage” (*ibid.*, 12). B’ Rabby, called Brer Rabbit in Black American communities (where he also thrived), is a “cunning” and “tricky” figure who “is the archetypal hero-trickster character” (Kulii and Kulii 2001, 46). Appearing as “Leuk, the hare and Bouki, the hyena in stories of the Wolof people of West Africa,” links can also be drawn

between B' Rabby and B' Boukee and the Antillean tales of Compere Lapi or Ti Malice and Bouki (ibid.). There is also a strong affinity between B' Rabby (or Brer Rabbit) and the "two major tricksters of Africa (Anansi or Anancy the Ashanti spider, and Ijapa, the Yoruba turtle)" (Kulii and Kulii 2001, 46). Like Anancy (which is the dominant trickster character amongst the Ashanti in Ghana as well as in the Caribbean), whether B' Rabby is pitted against the likes of Brer Bear, Brer Wolf or Sly Brer Fox (in Black American narratives) or the powerful B' Lion and B' Whale or the dimwitted B' Boukee (his favorite adversaries in Bahamian orature), he "tries to nullify the plans of his [sometimes] stronger archenemies by using his superior intelligence and his quick thinking" (Kulii and Kulii 2001, 46). B' Rabby usually gets the better of his rivals; his smarts are his chief asset and his major advantage.

B' Rabby, however, is more than just the cunning protagonist taking advantage of B' Boukee in one tale after the other. He is also, I contend, a figure that we meet again and again in our history books, our folk songs, our poems, our novels and our plays. The pirates, smugglers and bootleggers of yesteryear, today's successful businessmen and political leaders, in short, the characters from our past and present who we admire and celebrate all seem to have something in common with the mythical creature. Similarly, contemporary novelists like Ian Strachan and satirists like Patricia Glington-Meicholas represent the Bahamas as a nation peopled with B' Boukee and B' Rabby figures and depict Bahamian society as one dominated by what I call Rabbyism. It is my intention to undertake a careful read of Strachan's *God's Angry Babies* (1997) and Glington-Meicholas' *The 99cent Breakfast* (1998) in an effort to demonstrate just what I mean by that charge. Before doing that, however, it makes sense to explore the folk values and ideas that come out of the Bahamas' folk tradition.

Folk Ideas and Folk Values in B' Rabby Tales³

What can B' Rabby teach us about the Bahamian ethos and worldview? What folk ideas and folk values emerge from the popular B' Boukee and B' Rabby tales? Why do we admire B' Rabby and laugh at B' Boukee? What does our hero teach us about us? Again, B' Rabby's chief asset is his cunning. We respect him because, using only his wits and his wiles, he is able to sidestep every

³ This section borrows heavily from Storr (2004a).

roadblock, overcome every obstacle, escape every trap, win every bet and battle and attain any and everything that he needs or wants.

Consider, for instance, the tale of *The Cane Field* (Hurston 1930), also called the *False Message: Take My Place* (Finlay 1925). Another version of the tale appears as *Getting the Other Fellow to Take Your Place* (Cleare 1917).⁴ There was once a man who owned a large sugar cane field. Everyday the “sweat-talking” B’ Rabby would go to that field and say to the owner’s daughter, “I and your dardy just done talk. He say tie me in the best cane field he has” (Finlay 1925, 19). Everyday the daughter would oblige and would return in the afternoons to let a stuffed B’ Rabby go free. It went on this way for a few weeks; Rabby arriving early in the morning with a request from the little girl’s father and Rabby leaving in the afternoon satiated. It would have gone on this way forever it seems if the little girl hadn’t grown jealous of Rabby and finally asked her father about his strange requests. “Father, how you can send Rabbit every day to the cane fields for me to tie him the very best field and you would not give me none?” (ibid.). The plantation owner, angered by Rabby’s deception, hatches a trap. If B’ Rabby comes again, he tells the little girl, “See that you tie him good and don’t loose him. Come home and let me know” (ibid.).

Sure enough, B’ Rabby returned the next day using the same con that had worked so well for him in the past. This time, however, the girl tied him tighter than usual and, instead of releasing him in the afternoon, she went to get her father. When they returned they put Rabby in a large boiler pot and went to fetch some hot water. Rabby was in trouble. Just as they were walking away, however, B’ Boukee comes up the Rabby. “What are you doing there?” he asks. Rabby’s lie is ingenious. Playing on Boukee’s dim wittedness and his greed, he says, “Oh, Ber, dem people gone hum to cook some for me and I ... wait on dem. Oh [B’ Boukee], we nor bin treat yer good the other day you come. Wait until dem people come with my food and yer could take ‘em all.” Boukee, anticipating the feast that he had just been promised, agreed at once. He sets Rabby free and climbs in to wait for his meal. When the farmer and his daughter returned, instead of bringing a feast, they showered the anxious Boukee with a vat of scalding water.

⁴ The account presented here is a composite of both Hurston and Finlay’s recordings. Though both are quite similar, Finlay’s has an ending much more in keeping with the kinds of B’ Boukee and B’ Rabby stories that are so popular in the Bahamas. Hurston’s ends his tale, if you will, before the action begins.

The B' Rabby in this tale is the classic trickster-hero figure. He is an excellent liar, using his "quick tongue" to both get what he wants and to get himself out of trouble. He convinces the farmer's daughter that she should let him eat the best cane in the field and, after he's caught, he convinces his friend B' Boukee to take his place in the trap. Cunning, as this story clearly demonstrates, is thus an important part of a person's arsenal; it is both an offensive and defensive weapon.

This theme of cunning being an admirable quality reoccurs in *B' Rabby Makes B' Boukee his Cart Horse* (Burrows 1990). Burrow's begins his account by reminding us that "Whereas B' Rabby is the trickster. B' Boukee is the foolish one, greedy, always getting himself into trouble. And, B' Rabby, he never pass up an opportunity to get at B' Boukee." In this story, B' Boukee and B' Rabby are living together like brothers. Somehow B' Boukee found himself a girlfriend who he'd visit every day and brag about every night. Eventually, B' Rabby overcome with jealousy decides to fix his friend. One day when B' Boukee was off somewhere fishing, B' Rabby goes to B' Boukee's girlfriend and convinces her that her beau B' Boukee was not boyfriend material. "B' Boukee," Rabby tells her, "ain' no man. I bet he ain' tell you that he's my father's cart horse and I does ride him everyday."

That evening when B' Boukee went to visit his girlfriend he found her cold and distant. "What's wrong?" he asked her. She was coy at first but eventually told him Rabby's fantastical tale. "He tell me say you is his father's cart house and he does ride you everyday." Boukee, of course, denied it vehemently and promised to bring Rabby back with him right away to clear up the matter. When B' Boukee reached his house, however, he found Rabby moaning and wailing in bed. An upset and unsympathetic B' Boukee grilled B' Rabby, "Why you tell my girlfriend that I is your cart horse and you does does ride me every day?" Rabby denied telling Boukee's girlfriend anything but told B' Boukee that although he would like to help that he was too sick to move. "B' Rabby you gern move," B' Boukee exclaimed, "if I gatta carry you."

So, B' Rabby climbed onto B' Boukee's back. After only a few steps, B' Rabby started to complain that he was "bouncing up and down" too much and that he needed something to sit on. By this time, Boukee was more than anxious to have Rabby explain things to his girlfriend, so he was willing to agree to just about anything. He put a saddle on his back and let Rabby mount him.

After a few more steps Rabby started to complain again, "B' Boukee I sitting fine but my legs swinging too much." He convinced B' Boukee to get stirrups. B' Rabby went on like this until B' Boukee had agreed to put on the full gear of a cart horse: saddle, stirrups and reigns. B' Rabby had also dressed himself in full riding gear, complete with whip and spurs. When they approached B' Boukee's girlfriends house, B' Rabby, instead of getting off as he promised, jammed his spurred heels into B' Boukee's side and began whipping B' Boukee repeatedly with the whip. A surprised B' Boukee galloped all the way to his girlfriend's front door. "Ain' I tell you that B' Boukee is my father's cart horse," B' Rabby exclaimed and with that he jumped off B' Boukee, tied him to the gate and bound up the stairs to the porch.

The almost universal refrain "fool me once shame on you, fool me twice shame on me" has been rewritten in Bahamian lore; in the Bahamas getting tricked whether it is the first or the fifteenth time is always entirely your fault. Similarly, B' Boukee is not a figure to be pitied he is a figure to be scorned; "B' Boukee is the foolish one, greedy, always getting himself into trouble. And, B' Rabby, he never pass up an opportunity to get at B' Boukee." We see this again in the tale of *The Master Trickster*, an adaptation of a Haitian tale retold by Patricia Ginton in *An Evening in Guanima* (1993). The story begins in the home of B' Boukee. B' Boukee is in the kitchen with his son Lazy Borin cleaning a fish that they had stolen from an unattended fishing boat anchored at the harbor. When his scaling knife breaks, he sends his son Lazy Borin (who we learn is a "chip off the old block") to B' Rabby to borrow another knife. As Ginton (1993, 125) informs, "Boukee's motto was 'why buy when yuh could borrow [borrow].'" After some expected protest (after all he is named Lazy), Lazy Borin reluctantly sets out on his assignment. Rather than heading straight to B' Rabby's, however, B' Boukee's son (who is "stupid, greedy and full of low cunning"), stretches "the five minute walk into a thirty-minute adventure" (Ginton 1993, 125). En route, "he stole two peach mangoes, pulled the tail of a stray goat, [and] deprived a butterfly of its wings and a lizard of its tail" (ibid.).

As he approaches Rabby's house, however, he smells the crabs B' Rabby is boiling for dinner and so quickens his steps; anxious to get there while there was still food to be had. When he arrived, however, "he discovered [to his dismay] that the choice dish was not yet ready for eating." B' Rabby, in fact, had only just begun. This presented a major problem for Borin, "how does he prolong his stay at B' Rabby's and delay his return home with the utensil he had come to

borrow?" Rather than accept defeat, however, Borin contrives a way to trick B' Rabby into letting him stay for dinner. Although not deceived by Borin's ruse ("Rabby was after all a master trickster, while Borin was yet a babe in the trade"), B' Rabby generously shares his dinner with the boy (who he loved like a nephew). But, B' Rabby warned him not to tell his father. B' Rabby had no intention, he told Borin, of feeding the two of them that evening. Of course, Borin disregarded B' Rabby's warnings and soon after he left, Borin was back at B' Rabby's house with his father B' Boukee, asking to share in the meal. Rabby consented but decided to teach them a lesson.

The next day Borin appeared at B' Rabby's door, after a similar adventure to the one he had on the day before, and asked to borrow some fire; the hearth at his father's house had gone out. While "Uncle Rab" was chastising Borin and his father for asking to borrow so often, Borin, as might be expected, snuck over to the half-opened pot on the stove and saw that Rabby was preparing boiled eggs. "Now boiled eggs to Borin and Boukee," as Ginton (*ibid.*, 130) asserts, "were like green leaves to caterpillars. However many they ate, it never seemed enough." Borin immediately began thinking of a way to share in Rabby's meal. He decided that burning a hole through his bag of marbles with the slow burning stick that he had come to borrow would be the most effective method. Borin timed it so that he was picking up the last marble at the same time that B' Rabby finished peeling the last egg. "Rabby smiled at the boys antics," Ginton (*ibid.*) reports, "and gave him four of the eggs without being asked." After dinner, Borin rushed home and told his father, who rushed over to B' Rabby's house as soon as he heard the news. Rabby "placed a plateful of eggs in front of Boukee," almost as soon as he arrived. Boukee gulped down the eggs and pressed Rabby to tell him where he had gotten "all dese aig" (all these eggs) from. "In answer," Ginton (*ibid.*, 133) tells us, "Rabby smiled and promised to take Boukee to a farm where he could get more eggs than he could ever eat." The trap had been prepared. They agreed to meet at dawn the next morning.

Setting out very early the next day, Rabby took Boukee and Borin to the farm, as promised, and showed them "the way into a barn where eggs were piled high in a heap of straw. Boukee went mad at the site of this treasure" (*ibid.*). Rabby then outlined their plan of attack. While Borin and Boukee gathered the eggs, Rabby suggested, he alone would go through the door that led into the next room and gather what he could there. Of course, the dim-witted Boukee, always vulnerable

to reverse psychology, objected. He and Borin pushed past Rabby and burst through the door. Rabby's trap had sprung and so he ran away satisfied, imagining Boukee and Borin's fate. The barn door led to the farmer's bedroom and Boukee and Borin were duly punished for breaking and entering.

These narratives clearly suggest that the world is full of people who will try to take advantage of you. Boukee and his son Borin, for instance, "tricked and cheated friend and foe alike" (ibid., 125). In such a world, a world where even your friends cannot be trusted, cunning is an important defense. Rabby was able to recognize Borin's antics for what they were; he was not taken in by him. And, when pushed, he used his superior cunning to set a trap for Boukee and Borin; their pathetic effort to trick Rabby out of a few free meals is met with a sharp reprisal. Stated another way, the folk idea that the world is full of tricksters is confronted and complemented by the folk value that we should engage in trickery since we live in this sort of world. Not surprisingly then, "low cunning" or an inability to be cunning is frequently mocked in these narratives. Recall that Ginton (ibid, 125) described Boukee and Borin as "stupid, greedy and full of low cunning." Being full of low cunning appears last on the list of character flaws and for Bahamians it is the most damning. Remember, also, that being a "babe to the trade" of trickery was ultimately the cause of Borin's demise.

While "cunning" is consistently celebrated in these stories, greed is as consistently condemned. It is how the thief gets himself into trouble. We saw this clearly in Ginton's adaptation of *The Master Trickster*. Ginton (ibid., 128), for example, disparagingly called Boukee, "Bouki-of-the-Bottomless-Belly" who "ate what he was given and asked for more." And, it is Boukee and Borin's greed that stung B' Rabbi's sensibilities in *The Master Trickster*. Similarly, it is Rabby's greed, his returning to the cane field one day too many, that angers the girl and that makes him vulnerable to the farmer's trap. Moreover, Rabby takes advantage of Boukee's greed in order to get out of the boiler pot.

This folk value of cunning as a virtue and greed as a vice is also clearly evident in Ginton's (1993) adaptation of *The Sperrit House*. Ginton begins her treatment by comparing the two friends. Rabby we learn, for instance, "was so sharp, he could teach a wasp a better way to sting. He could smell the [odors] from a pot and tell whether the cook had added goat peppers or bird

peppers. Being a thief, Boukee's friend could look at a field of ripened corn and estimate to the last grain how much he could steal without getting caught" (Glinton 19993, 59). Rabby was truly a figure to admire. Boukee, however, "was different. On a good day, one and one could be three or four or, on a bad day as many as sixteen" (ibid., 60). And, while Rabby was able to *control his passions* and was as *brave as a lion*, Boukee was both greedy and a coward. Turner captured the consequences of these differences quite succinctly in *The House in the Sky* (1988), her adaptation of the same tale. "Brer Booky," she tells us, "could hardly find food for his family. On the other hand Brer Rabby's household looked plump and prosperous" (Turner 1988, 52). In spite of these differences, they were still friends, "united in their love of food and the desire to do as little as possible to get it" (Glinton 1993, 60).

One day, Rabby mentions to Boukee that he knows a good place where they could find food and so the two set out on their quest the very next day at the crack of dawn. When they reached the appropriate spot, a clearing in the middle of the forest, Rabby told his friend, who by now was quite confused, what was going on. Apparently, a couple of days before Rabby had been in this same clearing when he heard someone singing a song and then saw a *sperrit (spirit) house* descend from the heavens to the ground. Rabby of course (not one to miss an opportunity) had committed the song the *sperrit* sang to memory and so was able to sing it again on the day when he came with Boukee to search for easy plunder. As he sang it, the house came down as expected and the pair went inside. The door closed behind them and the house returned to the heavens. A mouth watering *sperrit feast* was prepared and laid out on the dining room table; "juicy sides of beef, legs of mutton and huge hams, all roasted and ready to eat" (Glinton ibid., 64). Boukee, Glinton (ibid.) tells us, "ran here and there . . . grabbing handfuls of this, a bowlful of that, trying manfully to stuff a quart of food at a time into a mouth, which was made to hold no more than a half pint." Rabby, on the other hand, "found an empty sack and carefully packed it with small portions of all the things he liked. He was neat about it, cutting and sampling in such a clever way that nobody but another Rabby could tell that the dish had been disturbed." When he was finished packing his sac, B' Rabby grabbed it up, sang the appropriate words (to bring the house out of the heavens) and left. Boukee, however, unable to tear himself away from this windfall, did not follow. Instead, he ate and danced to the point of exhaustion, collapsed, rolled under the bed and fell asleep.

When dusk came, the *sperrits* came home and realizing that someone had broken into their home began searching for the intruder. When they found Boukee under the “baby *sperrits*” bed, “the papa *sperrit* grabbed his kukumakai [magic] stick and poked at Boukee under the bed. Still drowsy, Boukee stumbled out to be greeted by a rain of blows” (Glinton 1993, 67). Though Boukee pleaded for his life, “the *sperrit* paid no heed to Boukee’s pleas. He might have been beating him still, if the *sperrit* child had not taken pity on Boukee and sung the house down” (ibid.). Boukee escaped out of the house into the night.

The B’ Rabby that appears in *The Cane Field*, *The Master Trickster*, *B’Rabby makes B’Boukee his Cart Horse* and *The Sperrit House*, indeed the B’ Rabby of *How Brer Rabby Tricked Brer Lion*, *Starvation*, *B’Rabby*, *B’Whale* and *B’Elephant* and the countless other B’ Rabby narratives (and versions of familiar B’ Rabby narratives) that float around the Bahamas, is a figure who, while rejecting greediness, nonetheless believes that he is entitled to whatever he can steal (and get away with), that it is alright to have a casual relationship with the truth and that cunning is a necessary tool for survival.

It is perhaps not surprising that B’ Rabby was a popular figure in the Bahamas during slavery and colonization. As McFarlane (1998, 112) says of Anancy (B’ Rabby’s Jamaican cousin),

Anancy’s ability to survive seemingly insurmountable odds, to outwit and confound the allegedly clever, and to disorient the strong and influential wins this unscrupulous creature much admiration. This West African folktale of the crafty spider has functioned as a pedagogical tool for teaching children survival skills. In spite of the fact that “it” is a confidence man, Anancy offers hope and relief to a disempowered population; persons who feel powerless can at least fantasize about using their weakness as a strength, albeit surreptitiously.

Similarly, B’ Rabby tales spoke to the predicament that black Bahamians found themselves in prior to emancipation, prior to majority rule, prior to independence. Slavery and colonization were damnable institutions. However peculiar the Bahamian variants, blacks in the Bahamas were horribly oppressed before 1967 when the majority black Progressive Liberal Party was elected to power. Prior to 1967, then, B’ Rabby, who bested much stronger foes, was a source of inspiration and hope to the disenfranchised Bahamian black population. Like B’ Rabby, they did not have many resources at their disposal. And, like B’ Rabby, they could use cunning, and trickery and lies when necessary, to resist, temper and escape their oppression. Like B’ Rabby,

they could outwit and outmaneuver, albeit surreptitiously, the mighty B' Whale or the machinations of the colonial state. It makes sense that B' Rabby was a figure that many Bahamian blacks embraced and sought to emulate.

These narratives, thus, teach us quite a bit about the values celebrated by Bahamians and about Bahamian attitudes and beliefs. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the same communities that applaud B' Rabby because he is a master trickster, would fail to have any moral qualms about erecting fake lighthouses and the like. Indeed, for a time, *wrecking*, which involved luring unsuspecting ships to their ruin on the coral reefs that surround the Bahama Islands and "salvaging" their cargo, was the dominant "industry" in the Bahamas. That Bahamians seem to have had a strange attraction to piracy and similar industries throughout our history is also understandable given the attitudes toward cunning and corruption that are so much a part of the nation's folk tradition. As I have argued elsewhere, piracy exists as a model and metaphor for business dealings in the Bahamas (Storr 2004a). It, similarly, makes sense that government corruption would be a major problem in a country whose folklore celebrates getting more than a full days pay for less than a full days work. In 1990 the Bahamas was listed as one of the six most corrupt countries in the world by the *International Credit Risk Guide* (Easterly 2001, 245) and reports of corruption (even at the Cabinet level) were quite common during the 25 years that Sir Lynden Oscar Pindling was Prime Minister of the Bahamas.⁵

It is quite clear, then, that B' Rabby is more than just a character who figures prominently in Bahamian orature. In fact, it may be possible to think of Rabby as an archetypal Bahamian figure. Some contemporary Bahamian novelists and satirists have done just that. Strachan's *God's Angry Babies* (1997), for instance, is littered with individuals that resemble our master trickster; 'something for nothing,' 'all for me baby,' 'what you see is not what you get' and 'do unto others before they do unto you' are watchwords for many of Strachan's characters. Similarly, the Bahamas that Glinton-Meicholas describes in her satire *The 99cent Breakfast* (1998) is unmistakably dominated by Rabbyism. According to Glinton-Meicholas (1998), the Bahamian people, who she

⁵ In fact, a Bahamian Commission of Inquiry set up in 1986 to look at government involvement in the drug trade discovered that the then Prime Minister, Sir Lynden Oscar Pindling, was spending more than five times his income every year (*Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, Nassau, Bahamas, 1984).

alternately chides and celebrates, “live in an egocentric universe” (ibid., 5), “practise religion with joyous abandon so long as it does not compromise their opportunities for sinning” (ibid., 7) and flee from hard work “as if it were a grim reaper come to harvest their greatest pleasure – paid indolence” (ibid., 110).

Strachan *Talkin’ Ole Story*

Strachan’s *God’s Angry Babies* (1997) is a bildungsroman that tells the story of Mark “Tree” Bodie, a gifted young writer who is lured into the seedy world of Santa Marian politics. Tree needs a government scholarship in order to complete his studies. In Santa Maria, however, it is not just a matter of his meeting the qualifications. Government scholarships like government appointments and government contracts are chits that Santa Marian politicians hand out to their political supporters. So, Tree, whose mother has been a loyal supporter of the ruling PNF, approaches his parliamentary representative the Minister of Education Thaddeus McKinney for help. Minister McKinney agrees but insists that Tree do him a few favors in return. Much of the narrative catalogues Tree’s internal conflict as he betrays principles that he had thought dear in order to secure his academic future.

Afolabi (2003) has described Strachan’s *God’s Angry Babies* (1997) as “a ‘journey within’ in both a personal and political sense” and has argued that “in following the rites of passage of Tree Bodie [the central character], Strachan provides the reader with the internal struggles, pleasures, and pain of growing up in the Bahamas.” I concur. So much of Strachan’s superb novel transported me back to the nation where I was born, grew up and now visit (too infrequently I must confess) every Christmas and summer. Although Strachan sets his tale in Santa Maria, a fictionalized Caribbean country, it is a place too like the Bahamas to be anywhere else.

The connections between Strachan’s Santa Maria and the actual Bahamas are worth considering. Perhaps the most obvious link is the name. Strachan named his country after the Santa Maria, Christopher Columbus’ flagship that made landfall in San Salvador, Bahamas on October 12, 1492 discovering the so-called New World. Through Strachan’s Santa Maria, we are given an opportunity to rediscover the Bahamas. And, we find it peopled not with Tainos, but with Bahamians struggling with questions of place and identity. It is unclear whether or not this was a

conscious move by Strachan, but his Santa Marians, like the ship they are named after, are constantly engaged in acts of discovery and efforts at deception (discovery's dark twin). Tree, for instance, is learning more about his limits and himself on every page. He begins the tale as a principled figure weary of getting too close to political power and willing to protest against government wrongdoing. He ends the tale with his principles in abeyance having sold his soul for a government scholarship. Similarly, Stooley, Tree's best friend, discovers that he was the type of man who would stand up for what was right in spite of his fears. And, Maureen Bodie, Tree's mother, is continually discovering that she has enormous untapped reserves of strength. She sits her Advanced Level General Certificate of Education examinations in English and History when she was pregnant with Tree and passes them with distinctions. She manages to get accepted to university, to complete her degree and to support and educate her kids with little help from anyone at a time when women were still being treated as second class citizens in Santa Maria. She leaves her neglectful husband, Mercer Stone, after fifteen years and four children.

There are additional links between Strachan's Santa Maria and the Bahamas that should be noted. They have identical geographies. Both are archipelagoes with densely populated capitals surrounded by less densely populated "family islands." Additionally, the nameless streets, the potholes and the potcakes (dogs with mix breeding and without owners who run free on the streets) are as common in the Bahamas as they are in Santa Maria.

Strachan's description of the political landscape in Santa Maria would also be easily recognizable to any student of Bahamian political history. So much of what Strachan says about the ruling People's National Front (PNF) can also be said about the Progressive Liberal Party (PLP), the political party that has been so successful in the Bahamas. In Santa Maria, "the white minority National Democratic Party – or 'The Egyptians' as the people called them – were overthrown by the black ballot, and no blood has been shed" (Strachan 1997, 43). Likewise, a similarly "quiet revolution" led to majority rule in the Bahamas when the black led PLP defeated the white minority United Bahamian Party in 1967 (see Johnson 1972). Also, both the PLP and the PNF managed to stay in power for twenty-five years. The commonalities don't stop there. The allegations of corruption that plagued the PNF in Strachan's novel also followed the PLP during the 1980's. Similarly, the opposition Free Liberal Party of Santa Maria and the Free National Movement of the Bahamas have almost identical histories. Both began as break away parties,

both lost election after election, neither came to power until the early 1990s, both were seen as an answer to the greed that seemed to dominate the parties they competed against.

Additionally, Santa Marians and Bahamians share a common dialect and similar cultural traditions. Words like “tings” (for things), “dat” (for that), “t’iefin’ (for stealing), “chile” (for child) pepper Strachan’s prose. The Bahamian festival Junkanoo, a carnival-like semi-annual celebration unique to the Bahamas, also occurs in Santa Maria. “Christmas,” Strachan writes, meant cow bells, whistles, bicycle horns blown from jubilant lips, goatskin drums invoked with fire, crowds of black faces, bending knees, behinds shaking, costumes bouncing, a crescendo of masks” (Strachan 1997, 74). This was just as true in the Bahamas as it was in Santa Maria.

And, perhaps most importantly for us, many of the B’ Rabby tales that I discussed earlier are also referenced or retold in Strachan’s novel. When Tree is in the six grade, for instance, he acts in the his school’s production of the story of *B’ Nansi and B’ Snake and B’ Rabbit and B’ Donkey and B’ Frog* (ibid., 79). When Small Pint is trying to trick Tree into doing something foolish, Strachan suggests that Small Pint was talking “like B’ Rabby trying to trick B’ Bouki once more for old time’s sake” (ibid., 92). And, at the end of the novel Tree and his brother Firsborn reminisce about how their “Mamma use to talk old story” (ibid., 269). Firsborn then recounts the story “bout how Rabby make B’ Bouki he cart horse” (ibid.). On one level, it was just natural for Strachan to infuse his narrative with references to the Bahamian folk tradition. As he has remarked elsewhere, “If I wished to talk about a Bahamian I would of necessity come to examine aspects of culture which are at the center of our way of life: our language, Junkanoo, etc.” (Afolabi 2003). Rabby, however, provides more than local color or comic relief in Strachan’s tale. Indeed, B’ Rabby operates in Strachan’s Santa Maria as a sort of impartial spectator (in the Smithian sense), giving approbation to certain activities and disapproving others. Santa Marians, thus, celebrate cunning over hard work; accept bribery and political favoritism as simply the way that things are done; and, willingly if not eagerly allow themselves to be co-opted by and to become complicit in the corrupt social order that thrives in their country. Rabbyism is alive and well in Santa Maria.

On T’iefing and Corruption

As in the B’ Rabby tales so popular in the Bahamas and Santa Maria, tales of t’iefing and corruption appear again and again in Strachan’s narrative. Rather than condemning corruption,

however, the people of Santa Maria tend to view it as perfectly acceptable and even understandable.

Consider, for instance, the Santa Marian reaction to the findings of the Commission of Inquiry that was set up to examine corruption and the drug trade that flourished in Santa Maria during the 1980's. Rather than "preserving reputations," according to Strachan (Strachan 1997, 45), "the Commission implicated everyone." Even the Prime Minister, who had established the Commission to quash the rumors and negative press stories about drug connections and bribe taking in his administration, did not escape untarnished. "Although the Commission failed to directly connect the PM to any of the large cast of international outlaws that were discovered to have dealings with the Santa Marian lawyers, elected officials, policemen, and private citizens great and small, it did point out that he had somehow amassed tremendous financial resources and built himself a mansion, which was impossible on his known sources of income" (ibid.).

Despite the disastrous findings, however, neither the PM's reputation nor his political fortunes at the polls suffered when it was revealed that his government was mired in corruption and that his own hands were most likely dirty as well. Santa Marian's "didn't care about corruption. Many might have confessed that the PM and his Ministers were doing nothing that any Santa Marian would not have done if given half a chance at a piece of long-withheld pie" (ibid., 46). Besides, Santa Maria as a whole had benefited by it serving as a major transshipment port for drugs from the Southern Caribbean and South America into the United States. "In the years preceding and shortly following the Commission, things were good for everybody. Drug money had given the society an economic boost that rivaled days of piracy past ... Every plane that flew over the islands in the hours before the dawn was a gift from God. And no one wanted to mess with such a blessing" (ibid., 47). "As long as the wealth was being shared" (which it was) and they were able to "live the high life," Strachan suggests, the people of Santa Maria turned a blind eye to the untoward aspects of the drug trade that they were facilitating.

Santa Marians also seem not to have had any moral qualms about lying, cheating or stealing. For instance, "it was common practice in the summer months for young men in Safe Haven city [the capital of Santa Maria] to take guineps from people's trees, place them in small plastic bags or a crocus sack, and sell them on the street" (ibid., 102). When the police tried to crack down on the

practice, the people of Safe Haven sided with the young thieves over the police. Similarly, the owner of the Low Price food store chain made arson-for-insurance a veritable habit, having had four of his stores gutted by unexplained electrical fires that in each instance “miraculously” left the four walls and roof intact (ibid., 124). These acts were never thoroughly investigated by the police nor did they trouble Santa Marians, who appreciated the improvements that were usually made to the stores after the insurance money was paid and the stores repaired. Additionally, marriage vows in Santa Maria are not anything approaching sacrosanct. Indeed, sweet-hearting (the keeping of mistresses) is an all too common practice in that country (ibid., 49). It’s not that Santa Marians were a lawless people. The people of Santa Maria, simply, had a particular view of “right and wrong,” a distinct way of conceiving of lawlessness. “Lawlessness did not mean the breaking of laws that were inconvenient and counterproductive for poor people to obey in the first place, laws in which they were never invested, that they had been given but had not themselves devised or accepted” (ibid., 251).

Most Santa Marians, it appears, are perfectly willingness to accept that politics and business are both “corrupt games.” They do not seem at all troubled by the sight of politicians and bureaucrats using their offices for personal gain. They are not at all irked that to get anything done, to get a business license, to win a scholarship to college, to get decent job, you have to be politically connected, you have to “know someone.” What they are bothered by, however, is greed.

Against Being Gravalishus⁶

Just as in the B’ Bouki and B’ Rabby narratives, greed in Strachan’s novel is an unpardonable sin.⁷ It is because of their greed that the mighty in *God’s Angry Babies* fall. It is greed, for instance, that prevented the head of the union from “doing the right thing” and lying before the Commission of Inquiry to protect the PNF and its ministers. And, it’s McKinney’s lack of greed (at least when he

⁶ “To be gravalishus is to be greedy, grasping and golddigging” (Glinton 1995, 53).

⁷ We should remember that being greedy (in the B’ Rabby tales and in Strachan’s novel) is more than just wanting a lot or wanting more than your fair share. It is wanting so much that your greed gets you into trouble or offends others; it is wanting too much; it is thinking only of yourself and refusing to think of others; it is constantly taking without any intention of ever sharing your booty or paying/giving anything back.

was a junior officer in the union before he rose to prominence) that enabled him to do his duty. "During the commission," Strachan (*ibid.*, 48) tells us, "the President of the Union was more interested in saving his own behind than protecting the reputations of Government Ministers. He had amassed a small fortune by pocketing Union funds for twenty-five years, so when he testified he was prepared to implicate stray dogs if it meant he was not going to jail. Thaddeus, on the other hand, had never been greedy [and so] he had nothing to lose by testifying." He "stepped onto the witness stand of the Commission of Inquiry ... and lied with a straight face, thereby placing himself on the road to wealth, status, and admiration" (*ibid.*, 48). McKinney, then an uneducated taxi driver, went on to become the President of the Taxicab Union, a Member of Parliament and eventually became the Minister of Education as reward for the loyalty evidenced by these straight-faced lies.

Minister McKinney, not surprisingly, did not stay unconcerned with money and power. He soon became as greedy for power as anyone else. Ultimately, it was his greed that led him to make his worst political calculations and to put himself in danger of being imprisoned. Thaddeus grew fearful that his political opponent would depose him and end the gravy train that flowed from involvement in Santa Marian politics. Rather than relying on buying votes, political victimization and votes from the deceased (as was the common practice), Minister McKinney used the police to "catch" his opponent in a sexual scandal. In this he went too far.

Santa Marians were willing to accept a lot from their politicians but there were limits to what they would accept. Consider Strachan's discussion of why the PNF were roundly defeated at the polls after twenty-five years in power. Santa Marian patience, Strachan (*ibid.*, 256) writes,

... was monumental. But it was not infinite. That neurotic taking-in-a-hurry in which their leaders were engrossed was well noted. ... They may have been obsessed with those trappings of the world ... but they still understood betrayal. They had let these, their leaders, enjoy the stardom that power afforded ... But they had never let their politicians forget who it was that they served. Every Member of Parliament was accountable to the most lowly of any community, could be asked at any moment, in any place, for money, for a job, for compensation for the privilege of having. ... In the people's eyes, the man who took was not necessarily a threat, as long as he did not stop others from taking when their time came. The man who took and took, and not only took but prevented, even hated to see others take, this man had gone to far.

Santa Marians were willing to tolerate corrupt leaders but would not tolerate leaders who took too much, who imagined that they had a right to take as much as they could, who had no sense of when enough was enough, and, worst of all, who prevented others from taking what they could get. “The young, and some of the older generation, now felt that the leaders of the country had gone back in the pot one too many times that the game should end, that the dog should cease to feign on the next pull of his tail” (ibid., 258).

Glinton-Meicholas *Telling Us Bout We Self*

Strachan’s Santa Maria, I have argued, is peopled with B’ Rabby figures. That fictional Bahamas that he constructs is populated with individuals who expect their politicians and businessmen to be corrupt and cunning but who also frown quite heavily on greed and folly. Is Strachan alone amongst contemporary Bahamian writers in presenting our nation of islands as a place dominated by Rabbyism? Is he the only author who has recognized that way too many of us lie and steal and cheat with alacrity? He isn’t. Playwright and poet Michael Pintard certainly sees a Bahamas that resembles the vivid picture painted by Strachan; see especially his *Politricks* (2003). And, Patricia Glinton-Meicholas also sees a Bahamas where B’ Rabby is an archetypal figure.

Glinton-Meicholas’ project is fundamentally an effort to teach us about *we selves*. As she demonstrates, Bahamians are a peculiar bunch. In *How to be a true-true Bahamian* (1994), for instance, she wrote that “To be a Bahamian is to believe that there is no other place on earth quite like The Bahamas – None more beautiful, more peaceful.” In *The 99cent Breakfast* (1998), the volume with which I am chiefly concerned here, she echoes and expands on her earlier view. “The key to the national ethos,” she writes, “is the letter ‘i’ in the word ‘Bahamian’” (Glinton-Meicholas 1998, 5). We Bahamians, according to Glinton-Meicholas, think highly of ourselves and “spend all of our days on earth trying to get others to acknowledge it” (ibid.). “With a world view shaped by island geography,” Glinton-Meicholas continues, “our people live in an egocentric universe. Many of us see the planet Earth as the centre of all creation, The Bahamas as the centre of the Earth, and each Bahamian sees him or herself as the shining light of our country” (ibid.). This sense of specialness informs our attitudes and behavior. Although she does not suggest it explicitly in her piece, B’ Rabby is also quite present in her analysis. The Bahamians that Glinton-Meicholas describes in *The 99cent Breakfast* using her unique and penetrating wit

have more than a little in common with Strachan's Santa Marians (and by implication they are a lot like B' Rabby, our master trickster).

Consider, for instance, her assertion that many Bahamians rely on their connections (rather than their hard work) to get ahead. "The safe path through all the many passages of life," she (*ibid.*, 120) writes, is

to 'know a guy' (or a woman). If you ever voice a difficulty that you seem unable to solve, the average Bahamian will ask with sorrowful but suspicious concern, 'Don't you know somebody?' 'Somebody' is a male or female with the miraculous ability to open doors long shut, to contravene regulations with impunity, re-write laws, including the laws of Physics.

Knowing somebody is how Bahamians get their electricity, water and telephones turned on in a timely fashion when they move into a new house. Knowing somebody is how they get their vehicles inspected and licensed without having to perform the requisite repairs. Knowing somebody is how Bahamian businessmen get their building plans approved and their licenses renewed without having to worry about the relevant regulations. Knowing somebody is how Bahamians avoid standing in line, waiting their turn, following the rules, doing any of the heavy lifting.

Knowing somebody is also how you find a job in the Bahamas. As Glinton-Meicholas (*ibid.*, 112) writes,

In this country, it is not customary to begin the process of finding work by looking in the want ads, for good reason ... When Bahamians of every hue and cry learn of or have the power to make the selection for a job vacancy, they immediately begin to canvas their memories for connections who may be looking for work. As always they begin with the inner core of all that is important – themselves. If it is not a position which could provide promotion for them, they pass news of the opportunity on to their nearest and dearest, and move outward. They will jealousy guard the information, do all they can to win favour for any applications relatives or friends have submitted, until all kith and kin have refused or been refused. Only then will knowledge of the job become public.

Connections are all-important in Glinton-Meicholas' Bahamas. These super beings, who can "open doors long shut," Glinton-Meicholas (*ibid.*, 120) informs, were "born out of two aspects of the Bahamian personality: the desire to always take the path of least resistance, and the belief that rules were written for everyone else but yourself." Recall, that B' Rabby has an almost identical personality. Though he loves food he wants "to do as little as possible to get it ... Fruit still in the

tree was ... safe. Trees were too hard to climb. [But] anything that could be walked up to, put into the mouth, chewed and swallowed immediately, was fair game " (Glinton 1993, 60).

When Glinton-Meicholas describes religion in the Bahamas we again see aspects of the Bahamian psyche that remind us of B' Rabby. According to Glinton-Meicholas (1998), many of our preachers, like B' Rabby, are really confidence men. These religious entrepreneurs (ibid., 19) with their mail-order Bachelor's degrees and doctorates in Divinity (ibid., 18), she suggests, have the best jobs in the Bahamas (ibid., 110). As she (ibid., 110-11) explains,

What could be better? As pastor you will be chief operating officer and treasurer all rolled into one, and your wife, if you have one, will be company secretary. You don't pay your workers and shareholders, but they are obliged by company regulations to pay you a tenth of what they earn elsewhere, and give you additional gifts of money and other valuables. ... Your chief executive officer generally stays out of your way ... It has also been over two thousand years since the CEO promised to come back and no auditors have ever asked any questions. Moreover, the Government keeps its nose well out of church affairs ... No taxation, no regulation, no antitrust laws to hamper your baser instincts. ... If you are as smart as they are, the older pastors advise, you will take what you can get here and now and let tomorrow take care of itself.

In *The 99cent Breakfast*, Glinton-Meicholas portrays pastors as schemers and tricksters and hypocrites. The story that she recounts of the pastor who condoned his parishioner's incestuous relationship is a case in point. She (ibid., 19) writes, for instance, that

Not long ago, a Supreme Court judge openly reprimanded the leader of a do-it-yourself church for attempting to cloak a member of his congregation who was being prosecuted for taking his eleven-year old daughter's bed for purposes other than to sing her lullabies. The defendant complained that the State and nosy neighbours were remiss in interfering with a man who was trying manfully to 'take care of his family'. Apparently, neither the man, nor his wife, nor the preacher saw anything wrong that a child had been born who would have to explain at Show & Tell time in kindergarten why his family practised the economy of making the same man his father and grandfather.

These same pastors will rail against young women who dress provocatively. "It seems that after nailing the Saviour to the cross," Glinton-Meicholas (ibid., 17) states, "the worst evil that mankind has unleashed on the world is a young girl with 'pum-pum' shorts, which reveal the 'rim [of] the hip' to the whole world."

Of course, Glinton-Meicholas concedes, there are Bahamian pastors who are honest and devout. But, if she is to be believed, many of them are simply in the business of enriching themselves instead of serving the faithful. This would be unpardonable if the sheep were any better than their shepherds. But, she argues, many of us are just as hypocritical as our unsavory pastors. As she (*ibid.*, 7) writes,

Other countries have trees to punctuate the landscape, we have churches. There are probably more places of worship per square mile in this country than in any other. But schizophrenia is also essential to the Bahamian soul, so it is not surprising that these islands also have more bars and liquor stores per square mile than elsewhere. As a result, the majority of people who have been drinking in the gospel according to Johnny Walker during the week, are quite likely to be as intoxicated by the spirits from on high in church on Sunday.

Like B' Rabby, many of the churchgoers in Glinton-Meicholas' Bahamas pretend to be something that they are not.

As was true in the B' Rabby tales, cheating is a common theme in Glinton-Meicholas' *The 99cent Breakfast*. Sweethearting, for instance, is described as something of favorite pastime for Bahamians. As Glinton-Meicholas (*ibid.*, 26) explains, "Sweethearting is the non-binding tie that is favoured by members of the middle class and above, who believe in polygamy or polyandry is the only way to true happiness, but somehow can't seem to get multiple, concurrent marriages recognized by the law. So, with a little ingenuity, you live with both." Similarly, that Bahamian businessmen cheat their customers is considered par for the course. "The short route to upward mobility in The Bahamas," Glinton-Meicholas (*ibid.*, 40) asserts, "is to take up an occupation that allows you to overcharge or bilk your clients without the fear of the law [that] common criminals are forced to have." Bahamians in *The 99cent Breakfast* are not just minor cheats, they excel at it. Recall, that B' Rabby, similarly, excelled at being dishonest. "Being a thief," we are taught, "Bouki's friend could look at a field of ripened corn and estimate to the last grain how much he could steal without getting caught" (Glinton 1993, 59).

Glinton-Meicholas' Bahamians are not only cunning but, like B' Rabby, they abhor greed. Greed is a vice that Bahamians will not tolerate. Politicians, for instance, had better remember their supporters. As Glinton-Meicholas (1998, 71) reminds, although they get to enjoy the enormous spoils of elected office in the Bahamas, they had better "spread some of the new-found goodness in the old neighborhood. It will cost practically nothing to throw a party for the children, and to

do some minor repairs and throw some paint on the one room shacks of a few old ladies." The parliamentarian forgets this at his peril.

It is perhaps worthwhile to remind ourselves at this stage that Glinton-Meicholas' *The 99cent Breakfast* is not meant as a balanced study of Bahamian beliefs and practices. Rather, it is a satire meant to chide us and to poke fun at some of the more unbecoming aspects of Bahamian culture. As such, it focuses almost exclusively on our negative characteristics. As Glinton-Meicholas (ibid., 6) offers, "Because it is meant to be satire, it will not emphasize the very real piety, kindness, warmth and integrity demonstrated by many in this country, but the eccentricities, the vanities and the foibles of my people."⁸ The argument presented here, then, is not that B' Rabby is the *true-true* Bahamian but that the Bahamians that Glinton-Meicholas satirizes (and that Strachan criticizes) are B' Rabby figures.

Conclusion

For Rabby, cunning is both an offensive and defensive weapon. Rabby uses his wits and his wiles to escape every trap, to outmaneuver every foe, and to win every bet and battle. Dahl (1988) has argued that it is Rabby's ability to succeed regardless of the odds that explains his overwhelming popularity. Before 1953, Dahl explains, the majority black population in the Bahamas had no vehicle that they could use to consistently oppose the economic, political and social degradation that they faced. As he (ibid., 73) suggests, "B' Rabby stories, symbolizing the triumph of the weak over the strong, the disadvantaged over the advantaged, or the oppressed over the oppressor,

⁸ Rabbyism (if it is alive in the Bahamas) is but a part of the Bahamian character. Glinton-Meicholas (1998, 88), for instance, has argued that the Bahamian psyche is schizophrenic; a "well defined national schizophrenia ... fuels a great many of the contradictions we see in Bahamian life." "Schizophrenia," she (ibid., 7) contends, "is essential to the Bahamian soul." Writing about Bahamian attitudes toward work, she (ibid., 110) states, "Employment is an excellent arena to see yet another aspect of the national schizophrenia at play. There are Bahamians who are capable of extraordinary hard work, and others who flee from it as if it were a grim reaper come to harvest their greatest pleasure – paid indolence." Craton and Saunders (1992, 104), for instance, have also noticed this schizophrenia. "Piracy," they suggest, stands for the opposite pole in the Bahamian lifestyle and character from that implanted by farming, fishing, and other respectable pursuits. But there has rarely been a clearcut or permanent division, even at the individual level within a single lifetime. Rather, there has always been an almost schizophrenic tendency to crossover." In my book on Bahamian economic culture (Storr 2004a), I also point to the schizophrenia that seems to infect Bahamian entrepreneurs.

was a way for [oppressed] Bahamian blacks to avoid being totally demoralized by a white colonial Bahamian regime."

After 1953, Dahl (ibid., 132) argues, the image of the family became central in Bahamian literature. "Even the most casual reading of contemporary Bahamian literature," he argues, "reveals the presence of a recurring image, that of the family." According to Dahl (ibid., 134), "The centrality of the family image is due, we believe, to the fact that the archetype of 'family' has become activated in the contemporary Bahamian unconscious because of its importance to Bahamian cultural praxis at this time in the life of the nation." The family does figure prominently in Strachan's *God's Angry Babies*. Much of his novel describes Maureen Bodie's heroic efforts to educate herself and to raise Tree and his brothers with virtually no help from their neglectful father Mercer Stone. Similarly, Glington-Meicholas highlights the importance of family in her *The 99cent Breakfast*. "Marriage," she writes, "is a national imperative" (Glington-Meicholas 1998, 22).

Although Dahl is quite right that the family is an important theme in contemporary Bahamian literature, he understates the importance that the archetype of the Trickster continues to play. Indeed, the shift in the literature away from the trickster motif toward the archetypal family image was not as stark as Dahl pretends. B' Rabby figures did not leave our literature in 1953. Instead, they continue to occupy the landscape. In Strachan's *God's Angry Babies* and Glington-Meicholas' *The 99cent Breakfast*, we encounter a modern Bahamas populated with B' Boukee and B' Rabby figures and dominated by Rabbyism. Both books speak to the fact that the folk values and ideas that are evident in the Bahamas' folk tradition still resonate. Both books also speak to the difficulties associated with trying to build a nation when so many of our people continue to embrace an ethos and worldview that burgeoned (and served us well to be sure) under drastically different circumstances.

Indeed, before black rule and independence, B' Rabby folk tales performed an important function. Rabby offered hope to a disempowered and disenfranchised people. After majority rule and independence, however, it is unclear if these tales are still beneficial. The Rabby figure who used his wits to outfox his oppressors becomes a shady businessman, a corrupt public official, an oppressor himself when he gains economic and political power. The models of and for the world

that helped us to survive and triumph over slavery and colonialism are rather ill-fitting given our current challenges. Strachan's novel clearly demonstrates this as does Glinton-Meicholas' satire.

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