Where Asian Indian folklore meets Arawak and Kalinago folklore, Aural-Oral ‘Sound’ Symmetry and Asymmetry can make you jump!

M.C.L. Provost

In Xaymaka (Jamaica), in the Antilles of Middle America where I was born, my Granddad, my mother’s father, taught me that we are Arawak Indian (a.k.a Taino) while my Grandpére, my father’s father, taught me that we are Asian Indian. But what does a little child do when Asian Indian and American Indian languages and cultures collide and the stories we hear from our grandparents do not fit?

We are talking across the gaps of language here, as you will see, and this is a disorienting experience in all its meanings, no pun intended. John T. Platts’ Urdu, Classical Hindi and English Dictionary (1884), T. Schultz Arruwakki Worterbuch (1803), the Arawak-English Dictionary of J.P. Bennett (1984; 1994), and Velázquez’ Spanish and English Dictionary (2003).

A Glimpse into History

An entire confusion of Indian and American Indian mythologies, legends and folklores began when the languages and cultures of these two Peoples collided. And here is how that came to be. The Italian admiral Cristóforo Colón had sailed west from Spain, in search of a shorter route by sea, to reach the Indian sub-continent. This was supposed to replace the overland trade routes taken by merchants like Marco Polo and his uncles. At First Contact (1492), when Colón landed in the Antilles of Middle America, he sincerely believed he had accomplished this mission and took with him some “Indian” people as proof. All the same, he was mistaken. Nonetheless, the missionaries and other writers began interpreting the Native American languages and customs based on the false assumption that they had indeed reached unexplored coasts of India and that everything they knew about the Middle East and the Far East applied to these lands which were new to them. The Autochthonous Peoples of the Americas have been mistakenly defined as “Indio”, “Indien” and “Indian” since that time. And to this day, Native
Americans defend their (our) right to call themselves (ourselves) Indians. But how could such a mistake have occurred?

That was only the beginning of the errors. About a hundred years later, in 1593, Francisco de Balboa and his men returned from northern South America to the Spanish Court and reported that they had seen a “tyger” (Morgan) which they knew from the accounts of it in India, China and Africa that they had read. The American Indian “tyger” (tiger) was actually a jaguar or arwa in the Arawak language but, to this day, the jaguar is still sometimes called a “tiger” (Bennett, 1984) in Arawak folklore. These are only two of the many errors that occur where Asian Indian and Native American “Indian” legacies of ourselves collide. Arawaks of the Antilles, for example, are falsely said to be extinct.

**False Cognates? Or False Friends?**

The confusion of Asian Indians with American “Indios” in the European accounts is a case of incorrect geography and mistaken identity, some might even say identity theft. In live as it is lived, no one uses the fancy terms of the philosophy of language, or of language teachers. The problem, which is an error of perception, is called a false cognate. In French, the term is a more picturesque: faux amis (false friends). It is a phenomenon we all know from humour and comedy called a pun, or punning. It includes word-pairs that occur in words and images, for example, “sun” with ☼ and “son” with ☺ (homonyms) and like ☼ with ☺ and “sum” with “+” (Provost, 2002). Whether we are Asian Indian, or American “Indian”, our Indigenous thinking patterns of human double-mindedness, and human duality, is always in search of ‘pattern-matches’ or ‘pair-mates’. This is why homophones and homonyms – for example, “hear”, “here”, “hair”, “hare”, or “ere”, “ear”, “heir”, “air” are always troublesome for everyone but especially for second-language learners – so that the same words have different meanings and the same meanings are conveyed by different words (Provost writing in Antone, 2003).

The symmetry and asymmetry of word-sounds creates a kind of word-magic in myths, legends and follores; and this makes it possible to “suspend belief and disbelief”. This makes anything possible. A character in a story can be or become anything or anyone that is similar or different where this Aural-Oral and Visual symmetry and asymmetry occur. It is human instinct to look and listen for people who are “like me” or “like us”, who are supposedly safe as friends. Imagine the possibilities in India, where there are over 3000 languages (Mishra, 2010, personal communication), and in the Arawak tribal families of Middle America – which were originally over 300 distinct language families, with regional variations.

**Family Folklore: Three Indians & The Disconnect**

Every family has its own ‘folklore’ or ‘mythology’ and the family folklores of Asian Indians and Native American Indians have something in common. In both instances, our folklores have been interrupted and disrupted by the Colonial Social Experiment by Spanish, French, Portuguese, Netherlands and British then-Empires. After Balboa gave his report about the “tiger,” another 250 or so years later, in May of 1845, the first recorded group of Asian Indian migrants – Natives of the Indian sub-continent - landed in Xaymaka (Jamaica). Most were sent by agents of the British Empire to be indentured labourers and to supplement the economy via sugarcane harvesting with that ‘opportunity’
to pay their debts. Some also became shopkeepers, accountants, and teachers. Rampol Ton-Singh, great-grandfather, was one of them. At the age of twenty-one, great-grandfather had travelled by ship, departing India from the port of Calcutta. We children were told that our Asian Indian ancestors were Sikh and had been musicians at court, but if so, why would he have left home for a strange land? And so we were orphaned from our Asian Indian roots and were born as non-resident Indians.

**Asian Indian Roots**

Rampol married Ada Jacobs and eventually became Roman Catholic. His daughter, Gladys Ton-Singh, was my grandmother, my father’s mother. Great-grandmother died when my father was about 3 years old and her family demanded back her dowry when my Grandfather was to remarry. This widened the gap.

Louise Stewart-Prevost was another Indian in my family tree (see photo). It is said her parents were on their way from India to Jamaica, and died on shipboard before arriving. Louise was adopted by a Captain Stewart and his wife. But Louise’s husband Jacques Christophe Prevost was supposed to have come to Jamaica from Haiti about the time of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), coming originally from France via Quebec. The dates do not match and, in Haiti, Dessalines had put to death as many Blancs (Europeans) as his armies could find. Louise would have had to be at least 16 when they married. David Clifford, one of Jacques Christophe and Louise’s seven children, was my grandfather, my father’s father.

Is it possible that Louise’s mother was Asian Indian and left her village in India already pregnant and an outcast, but died in childbirth? But, again, how to prove that? Even DNA studies presently do not go into such fine details and I could find no record of any Asian Indian women coming to Jamaica in or before 1791-1804. . . . It is also possible that Louise’s mother may have been an American “Indian” who gave her baby to Captain Stewart (probably the father) to be raised by himself and his wife. All the same, our family remains convinced that Louise was Indian from India.

**Arawak Indian Roots**
On my mother’s side, Maria, my Arawak-Spanish great-great-grandmother (my mother is one generation, younger than my father), married Xhiang, a Native of China who was also an indentured labourer later turned shopkeeper. Her daughter Rosalinda was my grandfather Herbert Hugg’s mother and he taught me that we are Arawak and “Indio” (a.k.a. “Taino”).

Our Indian and “Indio” children’s folktales were made up of lots of fragments. Though we were Catholic, Papa taught me to love Hindu, Muslim and Sikh literatures, poetry and music and none of the language. But he did know one folk song which seemed to originate in Jamaica and may even have Chinese influence: “Me a coolie ‘pon me piazza wid mi rampa pon mi shouldah” which we sang with glee and a certain pride, even though it was about lowly roots. He did not know any Hindu, Urdu or Arabic words or if he did, he never mentioned them. Meanwhile, my mother’s father taught me Arawak stories, some of the language, and a children’s song in Arawak mixed with English: “Terachi, terachi, baby can do a terachi” (with finger-plays about the movements of the stars and family relationships).

My parents, were born in 1930 and 1916 and my father is terminally ill. After writing I had news that John Peter Bennett, who was born in 1914 and whose wife Auntie Clara passed on nearly two years ago, is also on his return journey to the Ancestors. I am writing this to honour them and their children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren – though my family are in Xaymaka and theirs is in Guyana (Kayenne), our families are made up of intermarriages between American Indians with Asian Indians and other newcomer peoples in Middle America. This is also for Washinabana’s parents who have already crossed over to the Ancestors, and the grandparents of Arakabesa and Amahura also. Though they did not go to university, they worked hard and impressed on us-all the importance of knowledge-keeping, faith-keeping, teaching and learning to get back some of the knowledge that has been lost, and to teach it to our future generations..

**How the stories collided**

According to Louise Bennett, when all the cultures that came to Jamaica “buck up” (collided) with each other, “de riddim sweet” (the rhythm is sweet). The languages that the European then-Empires used for writing and religious education were Spanish, French, Portuguese, Dutch and English, as well as German and Italian. When the Arawak stories collided with the ideas of these foreign peoples in the course of education, the stories became fragmented and violent. As the European writers did not have the Arawak context, the stories were incomplete – most of what survives is bits of knowledge about different characters that do not have any ‘family’ or context of happy stories they fit into.
Spirit & Spiritedness in Vaca/Bhaka/Baka/Baku/Opiel/Rolling Calf

Not all examples of similar-sounding word-pairs from Asian Indian and Arawak Indian languages can be fit into each culture. For example, a famous Jamaican folk character is the “Rolling Calf”, though cattle are not native to the Americas but were introduced by the Europeans. There is even a saying about someone “born back-a cow” which in Jamaican language means someone who has no upbringing and is uncultured. In Spanish, as many Arawak People still use English and Spanish, the cow is vaca, pronounced “baka”, and is not sacred. So then, to be born “back-a cow” (in a field behind a cow) in English, would also mean “cow cow” and being less than human. In Arawak language, Washina recognized a similar-sounding word to the Asian Indian aditi in adiki, which means to be wrapped or swaddled (like a baby) (Schultz, 1803, transl. F. Soural, 2008). This seems to have no similar meaning to the Asian Indian word bhaka meaning “speech”.

However, let’s look more closely. In the Antilles, cattle (vaca/baca/baka/bhaka/cow) somehow became associated with Opielguabiran, who is described as Arawak peoples’ three-legged “dog-god” of the dead. Joseph Amahura Riverwind (2011, personal communication) retells a story from his father, about his grandfather often picking up a calf and raising it over his head and saying, “Opiel cria” apparently meaning “strong-spirited” or “strong as an ox”. But literally, the offspring of Opiel, or of the Ancestors. The spirits of the Ancestors in Arawak language are also called Opiah, which is related with hutia and hupia, a small animal that once was part of Arawak people’s diet. It is difficult to trace the Arawak stories as they were recorded by the 5 then-Empires in their 5 and sometimes German and Italian as well. The European writers’ false assumptions about reaching India clearly did not help.

The result is much more than a simple word-pair of two words from different languages – there are over 5 word-pairs, and closer to 10, here. It is also reasonable to conclude that there was some confusion over traditions brought by Africans long before the Indians who came as indentured workers, as some people in both groups could spoke and write Arabic. The Rolling Calf has only three legs. My mother said Rolling Calf was once tied-up and chained, but being so strong, the calf escaped – it is not clear whether the Rolling Calf has 3 legs or four – but I heard that in escaping he lost a leg. And so he runs around at night, never making any sound but rattling his chain as he runs. The calf is thought of as “he” even though ‘vaca/baka’ is feminine. In his anger, Rolling Calf will charge at any one he may meet, to do them harm. And this seems to be related to the idea of being angry after being captured and chained as in slavery, and of not having a voice – which then coincides with bhaka (speech) in the Asian Indian languages. So then, while there may not be any direct etymological derivation, we do see a derivation of similarity in these word-pairs, via folkloricized themes such as nourishment:mother, anger:loss of voice, and spirit/spiritedness:Ancestors.

In another example, a similar idea of baka/baku (bacoo), which seems to be an angry spirit, occurs on the mainland in Guyana, and also in Aitiji-Kiskeya. A baka or baku is a small spirit who is said to “pel[t] stones at houses and mov[e] objects within a house. He eats bananas and milk. Sometimes the baka/baku is said to originate in West African languages, meaning ‘little brother’ or 'short man'. There is a connection in Arawak language and culture, this relates to the idea of being Buttubattu – a widower.
or person who is beside himself and almost out of his mind (Schultz, 1803). Such a person may not be able to put his grief into words (speech) and will become “out of heart” (Taylor *) with grief. This relates through sound-symmetry in the name of the Arawak ballgame of Batey or Batei. Washina and I want to suggest this was a way of dealing with any noxious feelings of guilt and ‘debt’ or ill-feeling by playing the game without touching the ball with your hands and sometimes by wearing weights that could be transferred from one person to another. Again, though Batey (in Arawak) and Bhaka (in Indian languages) are not related, the theme of voice and identity are connected.

_Raakas:Raka: Demon? Or Essential Life-Spirit?_

Writing on Asian Indian folklore in Trinidad, St Vincent, Grenada, Martinique, Guyana and Suriname, in his book, _Indian Caribbean Folklore Spirits_, Kumar Mahabir explains that _Raakas_ is said to be a “deformed, demonic newborn child” who torments the mother until it is killed (Mahabir, 2011). This may be the same as, _سکر rakas_ [for _rakkas_ = Prk. □□□□□□□□□□; S. □□□□□□□□□□], which in India, is a “malignant spirit, fiend (=rākshas), while _raka_ is associated with the full moon and with a girl who has just experienced her first menstruation (Platts, 1884).

In Arawak culture, becoming a woman is a wonderful thing because it means blossoming to become marriageable and able to become a potential mother. The idea of becoming a woman as something to be feared was introduced via the duality of good and evil that we brought in by the culture of the then-Empires of Europe where being a woman means being cursed by sin. In the Arawak cosmos, from our research, everything had its place in harmony and balance. So then, _raakas_ – without the European influence in the Asian Indian translation - would not have been a demonic baby in an Arawak Indian view.

In Lokono Arawak, _raka_ is the essential strength or spirit of a living being. _Raka_ is part of the word _Akhorakali_ (Thunder, a Thunder Being, a Thunder Spirit deity). _Raka_ is related also to _rakasha_ (earthquake), and the idea of _rakasa_ (to pull out, as in drawing out or carving a canoe [spirit boat] out of a tree trunk). Meanwhile, from India there is the idea of _سکر rakes_ as “a guard, watchman, protector, one who watches a field when the crop is ripening” but also _سکر rakshas_ “of or belonging to a demon, demoniacal, fiendish, infernal”. Could this reflect the introduction of the same European dualities of good and evil in Indian myth and folklore?

_Saapina: Sabada: Women as Snakes_

In Trinidad, Kumar Mahabir tells of hearing stories of the _saapina_ a “woman who transforms into a snake” and who can be recognized by a snake pattern on her back; this snake-woman is also seen as one who steals men’s spirits. This example of _saapina_, at least connects with the Arawak word _saba_ (beautiful, lovely, pretty) and _sabañ_ (handsomeness) and _sabada_ (to pound crush, mash) for pounding and crushing is part of preparing the bitter cassava (manioc, or yucca, which is an Arawak clan Ancestor) for food by cleansing the bitter or poisonous spirits. Cassava processing is a woman’s technology. The process involves washing and straining the ground cassava meal through a _matapi_ or _cibukan_, which is a long woven sieve of palm leaves, resembling a snake. If we go back to the Arawak
creation stories from Aitij-Kiskeya (Haiti and the Dominican Republic) there we find snakes falling from trees and later becoming women when they are pierced by the woodpecker (Pané, 1498).

Washina and I found some other similar-sounding words between Asian Indian and Arawak mythology: Ahi and Anata both sound like Arawak names of the annatto or biha plant. This is a red plant that is considered an aphrodisiac in Arawak culture, while biha (bixa/bija) can also means "kiss" in related languages, but in India, biha is “a seed” (V. Shiva, personal communication, 2008). In Indian lore, Ahi is a gigantic “dragon or serpent” which can drink “all the water of the earth and that lives in a mountain range that encircles the whole world” (*online). All the same, here again is the snake theme and the theme of seduction or reproduction for “the Ahi is known for stealing women and cows and endangering fertility”.

**Bali – A Deceiver**

Bali in Indian mythology is a “giant monkey described as a hairy man with a long tail who tried to overthrow his brother”. But in Middle America, bali means “to pass” and is a suffix on the names of trees that resemble another tree, to show that it is not what it seems. Could it be possible that –bali became added (borrowed) from an Indian language into the names of these trees to show that any –bali tree is attempting to “pass” as its ‘brother’?

**Brahma, Khali, Yocahu: The Image of the Gods**

In closing, we looked at three word-pairs in Indian and Arawak words, that are probably the most important, from an Arawak perspective: Kali and Khali, Brahma and Baibrama, and Calingi/Kalingoi and Kalinago. These are the names of two deities and an ancient people or clan ancestor. Brahma is the Hindu High Creator God in India. However Pané (1498) in La Relación, tells us of an Arawak cemi (deity or spirit) called Baibrama who is associated with cassava production. No Arawak etymology or derivation has been found for this word. It seems clear that Pané misheard and mistranscribed, as he did not know the Arawak languages and, as the Europeans had been in the Americas only for six years, they still believed they were in the islands off the coast of India. The closest surviving Arawak word I found is barareme, a river tributary, or “sea-arm” (Bennett, 1984) and Washina agrees that this makes sense in Arawak language because salt water is important in cassava or manioc/yuca technology and in that story. There is no connection with Brahma, unless we use the “yu” of yucca/manioc to connect with the name of Yocahu, who is the Spirit of Life of Arawak Peoples, and Brahma and Yocahu do not share sound symmetry.

The case is different with the next two word-pairs. Khali in India is the Hindu Great Mother Goddess. Her role is to “destroy ignorance, maintain world order, and bless and free those who strive for the knowledge of God” (Encyclopedia Mythica, 2011). In the Lokono Arawak language, khali-iwi is “a cassava plant that grows from a seed and not from [the customary] cutting” (Bennett, 1984) and khali-iwi is the clan Ancestor, already mentioned. Khali-iwi brings life and death, and is the main principle and food around which the Arawak cosmos and knowledge are organized, for Arruwakki (Arawak) means meal-eater.
Lastly, *Calingi/Kalingoi*, in *Asian Indian culture*, according to “Pliny the Elder’s Historia Naturalis (77 AD) . . . [quoting] Duris (3rd century BC)” says that these Asian Indian people “lived in India” long ago “and reached the age of maturity at 5 years old”. At that tender age, they were supposed to “give birth” and then to die soon after at about “8 years of age” (Encyclopedia Mythica, 2011). The similar Arawak word is *Kalinago*, the name of one of the Tribal Families and who call themselves *Karina* or *Kalinago* people and who still have recognized territories today in Dominica and St. Lucia.

When I was a child, my father who has Asian Indian roots had told me that the Indian people had come across the ocean to the Antilles by boat from the south, going north. My mother’s father, who carried Arawak Indian roots, told me that the Creator had made Arawaks in the Americas and that some of us Native Americans had travelled from the south into the north, pursuing the Great Spirit. This is far from the Bering Strait theory that was proposed by Thomas Jefferson which Ward Churchill has exposed as false. But, my husband who is also Taino Arawak – we are Peace-Keeping people and language researchers – said to me: “what will happen when our foot prints are found going across to the east?” Of course, this is a radical idea. It is his personal folklore, and not that far from my father’s and the folklore from my mother’s father – you see, even amongst ourselves as modern people we look for similarities. Right now there is no proof or evidence other than our talk on the language.

But when we consider *Kali* – the Indian Mother Goddess – and *Khali-iwi*, the Arawak “Indian” Clan Ancestor, who is to say that centuries from today, it will not be found that Arawaks and Asian Indians from the coast of India were not visiting each other’s lands long before the Europeans?
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