Trickster Stories and the Human Bond

Human Bonding Article #4

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I'm an anthropologist who works on governance and development problems around the world. Using my experiences I write about how economic processes and human relationships build (or destroy) social systems and the institutions of governance.

Today's Key Message: The spoken word is the most powerful social medium. It is an important tool in creating bonds between people and building community. From folk hero stories like Paul Bunyan, Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, Molly Pitcher, Calamity Jane and Pocahontas we can create community bonds and create a psychological fabric of civic engagement. Every country has its folk heroes, but the folk heroes of some societies have been stolen.

Today's Essay:

It was a warm spring evening as my colleague, a sociologist, and I, an agricultural anthropologist, visited Remèd, a rice farmer near Acul du Nord in Northern Haiti to expand our understanding of local governance relationships. Yves and I were on a mission to evaluate donor-funded "democracy enhancement" programs. We were visiting community-owned infrastructure, assets that brought people together and required joint management. We were looking for signs of civic engagement. We wanted to understand what made the

bonds of civic engagement happen, but also what kept those bonds from happening, because those bonds are at the basis of creating inclusive models of governance.

As Yves interviewed Remèd, I was looking at the way he had organized his field, the position of his house, the species of fruit trees he was growing and the distance between them, and so on. I was also paying attention to the number and relative ages of the pigs in Remèd's yard, which gave me useful hints about his animal husbandry strategy and whether he was raising them for family consumption or for market.

When I noticed the majestic Citadel on the distant mountain behind Remèd's humble thatched roof house I tried to take a photograph that would capture both buildings, but the sun wasn't cooperating. I joined the conversation as I awkwardly positioned and repositioned my camera.

As Remèd squinted toward the Citadel I inserted myself into the conversation. "When were you last up there?" He looked at me and shrugged "Ah, I haven't been there in years. It's pretty far, and anyway there's no reason to go. He pondered a while and continued: "Some people go", he added, *"pou fèt yo"* - for festive occasions.

"It's an important place, isn't it?", I probed, inviting him to say more.

"Pa pou mwen" he responded. "Not for me. It really doesn't have any use. Never did, really".

I looked at my colleague and our eyes met. Remèd had just given us the most urgent piece of information we gathered that day, and it capped observations we had been making in conversations all week with both urban and rural, young and old, men and women folk: there is a widening gulf between nation and state that runs so deep that it separates people from the very history of their statehood, and it separates their values as farmers, workers, masons and merchants in their notions of citizenship. Even when one of the hemisphere's greatest monuments to freedom has been in the back yard for two centuries.

Beyond names such as Toussaint Louverture, Henri Christophe, and Dessalines, popular stories rarely incorporated the experiences of everyday individuals and families into the grand history of their communities or the state. These communities share a bond of exclusion from history: they are excluded from history, even when the relics and monuments of the past are all around them. No one in the urban or rural communities Yves and I visited could name anyone from their family or community who had played any role in any event they considered to be of civic importance, but you can bet they could easily name people who had left for New York.

We tend to think of social media as electronic. But word of mouth is the oldest and most effective social media. Well before the current era, social media have evolved through bards and *grios* and their popular sagas and interactive historical epics. Their messages have been kept alive through countless ways all over the world in which people strengthen their bonds to create their collective identities, propagating their values beyond their immediate families.

Stories that are commonly told in Haiti to children by *met cont*, ("masters of the stories") the local traditional storytellers, gave high marks to much loved, traditional characters' ability to trick friends and family members and to outsmart adversaries, but social or civic values are hidden. These traditional stories remind the everyday citizens of their survivalist character, the reliability of the bonds they feel with each other, and their exclusion from the grandness of the state rather than ownership of it.

To some degree the traditional trickster stories reflect an assertion of the self, a libertarian quality of resistance. But stories about heroism and sacrifice for community are mostly about distant elite politicians. Those stories end with the heroes, after short-lived apotheoses, being assassinated, burned at the stake, or kidnapped. But the trickster, with whom the everyday citizen of the nation feels a bond, survives.

A community's data and values are recorded and transmitted via its stories, poems, songs and other oral traditions. Folk tales portray the essence of a

culture. They convey core values and traditions, the stuff of social bonds. National character is shaped by popular stories that reflect social bonds between people and groups of people. This is well understood by opinion shapers, educators and revolutionary leaders throughout history. As we all know, colonial and political and other types of experiences can affect those stories and their content, even to the point where values can be diluted or deleted altogether. Irrespective of how it is propagated, the traditional story is the most powerful social medium. In essence, the traditional story is the oldest app for broadcasting information and values. Civic engagement across barriers is not unusual. The values conveyed by traditional stories can also help groups overcome divisions.

There are many strains common to West African "trickster" traditional story telling that are widespread in countries where the experience of civic engagement were purposefully erased by slave owners. These traditions include the participatory *"cric crac"* riddles found all over the French Caribbean, Haiti's Bouki and Malice stories, and the "Aunt Nancy" (transliterated from Ghana's "Ananse") stories found in the African American community in parts of the American South.

But the tradition of weaving the stories of local individuals and the genealogies of local families into accounts of local history, a tradition that binds people to their communities and reinforces the sense of ownership and collective responsibility, is rare in parts of the Caribbean. That practice defines a historiographic commonality that is as important to a community's social fabric as a public square is to a community's geographic space. Its absence is widely felt in the lack of respect for public spaces and common property in local governance in many countries.

Another rarity the centrality of values that place the wellbeing of the community above the wealth of the individual. This tradition is characterized by a recurring moral that centers around the message that a good individual (the story hero) is one whose desire takes second place to the wellbeing of the community, for which all are responsible. Though Ghana's Ananse has survived the middle

passage as Haiti's Malice, the "moral tensions between his individual desire and collective moral obligation" (J.W. Shipley, Indiana U. Press. 2015) have not traveled so well. For many political and social reasons, much of the civic content that is abundant in African traditional stories is missing in Haitian folk tales.

But not totally. I have encountered some older story tellers in the Haitian and Jamaican countryside who are able to release deeply embedded civic messages from the idioms in the stories. The images that people associate with everyday idioms reflect deep conceptual metaphors that underlie the meanings of those idioms. (Gibbs and O'Brian, European Journal of Cognitive Psychology Vol7 Issue 3). These are widely used in oral tradition, for example the use of certain animals, foods or plants to convey political, sexual or social messages. But younger story tellers do not seem to "get the message" unless it is very obvious, and therefore do not convey it. It may not be an issue of the age of the story tellers per se, but rather a newer "school" of story-telling, characterized by a tendency to drop otherwise important story elements, and having a smaller repertoire of stories.

This is as much a problem with the stories themselves as with the civic education of the story tellers. From a governance standpoint this could reflect a problem with resilience. Might it be possible to building inclusion in governance by finding civic content in traditional stories and sharing them more widely through today's story tellers and movie makers and educational content?

Such efforts are to be commended and supported. I know of at least one organization that is collecting traditional stories from the American South and the Caribbean that convey strong civic content, so that they can be shared among traditional story tellers and educators.