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Folklore and Change

Introduction

May I preface my paper with an anecdote, which I shall entitle "The PACD Story". This story might have been heard by many among the participants in this Congress, but perhaps may have not had the chance to ponder over its implications in change and development. The story may either be empirically probed, or it may be merely apocryphal. Nevertheless, it seems that it certainly has very broad implications in the process of change and modernization. Here is the story - - -

Long before 1972, and during the years when the PACD was at the height of its "popularity", it ranged through the whole length and breadth of the archipelago in its attempt to spread the gospel of community development. According to the story, its field men reached the farthest corners of the Island of Panay and there discovered that a few villages still used the wooden plow, to the shock and disgust of these apostles of change and modernization. In that state of indignant agitation, these apostles promised the people that they would return to the village with iron plows. Truth to tell, they returned, perhaps after incessant bargaining with the bureaucracy, with the plows as promised. They delivered a truckful, with the belief and thought that now the villages would then be on the way to change, in which their economic well-being is insured by this very important change in their livelihood.

But, and a very BIG BUT, the villagers just viewed the iron plows with indifference, and the next planting season, they still used the wooden plow. The planting was followed by the period of ripening and the harvesting of the rice crop.

Of course the dry season silently crept in, and it was time for the anthropologists to leave the easy life in the university to undertake the necessary field work to validate their being students of man. Thus, one such anthropologist in search for a village to study from which to gather data to validate his theories found himself in that remote village where the iron plows had been delivered earlier. He saw the plows still bundled under the houses of the villagers, and

his rather sharp mind led him to enquiring about the plows. The answer he got was that they were delivered before the planting season last, and was informed that they had not used the iron plows because of the belief that iron drives away the spirits--bad or good, the spirits that render the land fertile, rather the beneficent spirits that protect their crops from the malevolent ones. Such an explanation was indeed in consonance with the beliefs regarding iron which is a charm that certainly keep the malevolent ones from harming man.

Truth to tell, however, our anthropologist being a very brilliant gentleman said to have led his class in an American university while he was studying for his doctoral degree, brought realization to this simple folk that iron need not be considered an amulet to keep the spirits away. Rather it should be utilized to bring about the release of more spirits from the depths of the earth, considering that iron itself is produced from the bowels of the earth. These spirits are certainly those that would give fertility, or those that will protect the rice plants from the various diseases that are heir to any flora. Truth to tell again the villagers were skeptical about the explanations of this strange gentleman, who in spite of his being able to speak their language, is considered alien to their life style. However, there were a few who expressed but reluctantly the desire to try the iron plows. To be exact, however, come next planting season, only two of the few who said they would risk the ire of the spirits brought out two plows and used them. Certainly, the plowing of the fields was quite without difficulty for indeed the iron was stronger and could go deeper in the ground than the wooden plow.

As the rice began to gain color, those that had been planted on the field which was cultivated with the iron plow were indeed greener than those that were planted on fields cultivated with the wooden plow. The denouement of the story reaches its zenith when harvest time came around for the two fields that were cultivated with the iron plow yielded more than twice the harvest of last year during which the farmers used wooden plow. For the courage of the two farmers in their attempt to test the validity of the statements of the anthropologist, they were acclaimed as village "heroes", not without the corresponding gratitude expressed to the resourceful anthropologist.

I am not sure that story could be empirically proved, but perhaps it could be apocryphal. Empirical or apocryphal, it certainly has meaning in the context of the relation between folklore and change. In other words, folklore has a role in the process of modernization, a role which would open a whole new vista of understanding man and his society; an entirely new dimension of cultural perception both for the agents of change and those upon whom change has to be introduced.

Functions of Folklore

Before I attempt to present to this Congress an analysis of the above anecdote, I wish to discuss in brief the general role and function of folklore in human society to introduce you into a world that shall make us understand or perceive the context of the anecdote in terms of the process of change - a change from traditional belief systems to modern concepts.

In presenting the description of the function and role of Folklore, I shall utilize in a rather extensive manner the work of William R. Bascom (in Alan Dundes: The Study of Folklore. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965). Hence, all discussions on the functions of folklore shall be primarily based on Bascom's work. From Bascom's work, therefore, one can draw four functions of folklore. First, amusement, but it may not be accepted primarily as one that brings humor to society, but rather underneath this humor lies deeper meanings. Behind this humor, "folklore may mirror the familiar details of culture, and incorporate common situations from everyday life,..."

The second function of folklore is that which it plays in validating culture, in justifying its rituals and institutions to those who perform and observe them. Myth does not explain, to paraphrase Malinowski; rather it serves as a "warrant, a charger, and often even a practical guide," to magic, ceremony, ritual and social structure. In more specific terms, Malinowski writes that

Myth fulfills in primitive culture an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale,

but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral vision. (Myth in Primitive Psychology, p. 19).

And furthermore, he writes with seemingly broad but incisive meanings that

The function of myth, briefly, is to strengthen tradition and endow it with a greater value and prestige by tracing it back to a higher, better, and more supernatural reality of initial events. (ibid., pp. 91-92).

The third function of folklore is that which it plays in education, particularly, but not exclusively, in nonliterate societies. Both in the formal and nonformal type of education, folklore certainly has significant pedagogic function, and it is recognized as one of the most important means of transmitting values, these being the most culturally acceptable sustaining elements in a given society. Thus

..... ogre tales,.... are used in the discipline of very young children, and lullabies are sung to put them in good humor. fables or folktales incorporating morals are introduced "to inculcate general attitudes and principles, such as diligence and filial piety, and to ridicule laziness, rebelliousness, and snobbishness." Proverbs are used to express a threat, which the speaker may not later wish to carry out, to direct another's action where a blunt command might offend, or to incite a person to action through irony. Beginning at age of (puberty), "when a child flies into a rage, when he lies or steals, when he is recalcitrant or violates the code of etiquette, when he makes an ass out of himself, when he is cowardly, he hears actions commented upon in the words of a proverb. ... Some of the verbal instruction during the initiation ceremonies of boys and the preparation of girls for marriage is given in the form of songs; and throughout later life, songs of ridicule are important as a means of censuring behavior.

In many nonliterate societies the information embodied in folklore is highly regarded in its own right. To the extent to which it is regarded as historically true, its teaching is regarded as important and to the extent to which it mirrors culture, it "contains practical rules for the guidance of man."

Fourthly, folklore fulfills the important but often overlooked function of maintaining conformity to the accepted patterns of behavior. Related to the second and third functions, it deserves to be distinguished from them. More than simply serving to validate or justify institutions, beliefs and attitudes, some forms of folklore are important as means of applying social pressure and exercising social control. This function may also be distinguished from the function of education, not simply because it continues throughout adult life, but because it is employed against individuals who attempt to deviate from social conventions with which they are fully familiar. When this happens, a song of allusion, a proverb, a riddle, or a folktale may be used to express disapproval. Or, it may be sufficient "to chide aberrant conduct by inquiring seethingly of the transgressor. 'Did you have no grandparent to tell you the stories?'"

Folklore is also used to express social approval of those who conform, and certain forms such as "praise names" and songs of praise are specifically intended for this purpose. Literally hundreds of societies employ all forms of folklore to express approval of actions of individuals that more or less tend to validate or maintain the stability of the culture, as well as integrating society and maintaining social cohesion.

The PACD Story Analysed

In the course of the previous discussions on the functions of folklore, it seems that these have been totally unrelated to the main topic of this paper. But these had been enumerated to give a clear picture on how folklore could figure in the whole process of change. To go back to the Story, it is evident that there are two levels of understanding or points of view, namely, the view or perception indicated in PACD field men in recognizing a fundamental flaw in the village economic activities, and the view or perception of the villagers in terms of their status in the hierarchy of values understood to be important in the society. A third level or point of

view is the anthropologist's perception of the value of the belief and its utilization to effect a breakthrough in cultural barrier, that this belief had been built between what we call tradition and change.

There are at least two fundamental questions that need be raised vis-a-vis the story. First, the question of the villagers' persistence in using the wooden plow, when perhaps around them other groups of people have already long been using the iron plow, or perhaps they have remained far too isolated that the iron plow could not have been introduced hitherto. I would imagine that these two alternate views may not be the reasons; rather the reason would be cultural, considering that the persistence involved preservation of the villager's continuing friendly rapport with the unseen spirits, both the good and bad, in this case the beneficent ones who provide the wherewithal of their society's existence. For iron in their general belief system is an amulet or charm against the unseen spirits that may do them harm. To use the plow--made of iron at that would certainly create a disruptive element in their relations with these spirits. Taking this possibility of breaking up these relations, the wooden plow had become a symbol of their amity with these spirits. And to introduce the iron into the bowels of the earth is certainly a declaration of "war" against these spirits who hitherto had been quite content in providing them with "peace and order" in their midst.

Second, the question of the PACD workers' concept of economic well-being as embodied in the goals and objectives of the then agency for community development. This meant the introduction of mechanisms to achieve it. Hence, the iron plow in terms of the agency's perceived needs for the community.

In fulfilling their promise to return with the iron plows, the PACD workers were certainly true to their words. However, in being so they may have failed to understand the persistent use of the wooden plow. Apparently, folkbeliefs connected to agriculture and iron were never in the minds of these workers as having implications in their attempt to introduce the implement. It was possible that the "advent" of these workers were not readily welcomed; rather these have been treated with difference because they came from some far away place called Manila or thereabouts. But deep in the villagers' minds, there could have been the fear that sooner or later the spirits will manifest resentment against the introduction of the iron plow, and their life will have become a state of misery for they will have

contributed to the disruption of their peaceful relations and perhaps co-existence with the spirits.

Here indeed is a classic example of conflict between tradition and change. Tradition on the brink of being relegated to merely a thing of the past, but in the state of being preserved by the villagers' complete indifference to the use of the new implement, an instrument of change, and protected by their belief in the spirits' capability of inflicting upon them diseases or creating events that will entirely destroy their very existence. Here, folklore had served both as an educative force or mechanism, as well as in maintaining conformity to the accepted patterns of behavior in the community. At the same time, the belief served to justify their contempt for the use of iron in activity that is so crucial to their existence. As such, therefore, the folklore played a crucial role (also) in keeping them away from the ire of the spirits.

But it did not take them long in their "complacent" thought that they had somehow stayed the onslaught of change. For a more "sinister" agent, in the person of the anthropologist, arrived in their midst. This time, he was not just one proffering to help but one who rationalized for them that indeed the iron plow is not anathema to their belief system. Such a rationalization could even bring about a direct confrontation between them and the spirits. This confrontation would certainly result into something beyond their control.

In the midst of this great dilemma, there were a few among the villagers who seemed to believe the "intruder". Thus, come next planting season, two of them used the iron plow, not necessarily with full mental abandon throwing away all precautions, but with some amount of difference. Preparation of the fields was finished, the planting accomplished; greening and ripening followed, and yet there was no calamity that befell the two villagers that used the iron. Rather, it turned out that their fields yielded the best and healthiest harvest that year. One could imagine the great joy that envelop the two farmers' families for such abundance. And it could also be imagined the great release of the people from the structures of their belief systems. Come next planting season, it could be imagined also that the whole village had a great feast in the use of the iron plow, the implement that changed their whole outlook in their rather drab but contended lives.

In using the same folkbelief in changing the peoples' perceptions of their own relation with the unseen spirits, the

anthropologist discovered an unknown field in which folklore could be used in the process of modernization. It may be safe to assume that the student himself was just testing an idea, which he did not expect to effect a whole new view of perceiving a people's understanding of their own environment, particularly the spiritual environment. In other words, folklore need not function according to which it merely entertains, or maintains stability of a society, or justifies human relations with one another and with the unseen spirits in the world, or to educate the people that possesses such folkbeliefs.

Concluding Remarks

When change becomes inevitable, and it is one that is undertaken, both guided and directed, it becomes a necessary mechanism that those who are involved in this guided and directed change must be steeped in the culture of the people on whom change has to be foisted. And to understand this culture, the change agent has to have a thorough knowledge of the folklore--the belief systems--of these peoples. However, it is not merely knowing and understanding these folk beliefs, but it goes far beyond what is generally perceived on the surface of that culture. Rather, it is a question of internalizing the essence and nuances of that culture. Admittedly, this is one of the most difficult processes by which change could be effected, particularly in areas that are tradition bound.

At this point, however, it should not be construed that it is only the folklore that is significant in the basic understanding of a society which one would like to modernize. A wholistic view of the society is most important, for it gives the agent of change an understanding that ramifies in all aspects of society. It is furthermore important that the interconnections of the various elements in the culture should be understood. The paradigm cited in the present paper shows the interconnections of the elements of culture. Let us take note the following interconnections and interactions in the process of an introduced change: The PACD workers "intruding" into a society that is not bothered by change; the intrusion is one in which the fundamental base of their culture is subject to disruption; hence, possibly a deep fear of the consequences of the introduction of an item that is certainly alien to the world of their unseen spirits. The

possible conflict that arose in the process of inter-action and reactions is somehow smoothed over by the arrival of one who understood the meaning of all the belief systems of people in their lives.

The matter of confrontation between traditional beliefs and modern usage of those beliefs is indeed interesting to see, for here the anthropologist's understanding of this possible and potential conflict becomes the turning point between acceptance and rejection. It is safe to assume here that the people saw the real connection, beneficent as it were, between iron and earth, and between spirits that were to be released from the confines of the earth and the people who shall be the recipients of good that shall result from that event. In other words, the rapport that is established between the anthropologist and people became the key to that important change, both understanding that the folk beliefs have a role in the total life patterns of the people.