John Laudun
Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
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Tallying Treasure Tales:
Understanding History through Local Legends

Introduction

Good morning. Thank you for having me. I want to begin by thanking Director Chogjin for the invitation to talk with you today, and I do hope we get to talk— and for his leadership in the partnership between the China Folklore Society and the American Folklore Society. I also want to thank my colleagues An Deming and Yang Lihui for all their friendship and their help during my time here. I appreciate them acting as if it was no burden. They are the reason I love being a folklorist. And, too, I have found that Deming actually makes me sound smarter in Chinese than I am in English.

This morning I would like to do two things. First I want to give you a version of the talk I gave in Goldmud. It is an attempt to explain the appearance of a particular legend within a collection of legends by working through the network of ideas that the legends both encompass (hold) and advance. We will, I hope, discover the same thing that many of you know so well: that sometimes oral tradition holds the key to local histories and that history is kept in the tradition, and some stories are kept in memory, because they speak a truth that is otherwise hidden from ordinary view.

In the second half of my talk, I want to explore with you some of the computational methods that lie behind my interest in legends. I confess that I began with legends in general, and these legends in particular, because they helped me think about the relationship between landscape and imagination, which is the topic of the book that I am in the middle of finishing, but as I finish this book, I am already thinking of the next one, and having focused on material, or tangible, culture for the past five years, I wanted to return to intangible culture, to the verbal cultures that make up so much of our lives — after all, only a few of us in the present moment make material things but all of us make our worlds with words.

My particular interest in words is how people create times and spaces into which their imaginations may enter. Some call this effect a storyworld. It is a peculiar cognitive phenomenon, and as such it has attracted a diverse collection of scholars, few of whom are folklorists. Some of my argument to you is the same one I make in the U.S.: that cognitive and computer scientists have already begun to do this work. We would, first, be foolish to ignore

their efforts, and second, we should collaborate with them. Together, the investigation will be much richer. You are perhaps surprised by computer scientists examining narrative. On the one hand, it is the product of computational linguistics efforts to extend their systematization of language. On the other, it is the adaptation of such systems in service of things like search and advertising: this is how Google can anticipate what you will type. You will find that the names for this kind of investigation are as diverse on the computer science side as they are on the humanities side: machine learning, artificial intelligence, natural language processing.

I am here today not as someone who has expertise in Kunlun culture but rather as someone who has spent a long time thinking about the relationship between the human imagination, what we sometimes call culture, and the landscape. The particular text that I am going to discuss today is deeply embedded in a particular landscape, but as I hope to make clear that landscape has a history and that when we pay attention to folk culture, we often learn surprising things.

What I have for you is a legend circulating within a minority culture that draws upon a network of ideas, and histories, found in adjacent cultures, some of which also have a minority status but perhaps different relations to the majority. In this case, the question of minority is an interesting one. The minority culture which I want to explore is African American, and the majority cultures are harder to delineate than might be expected. The region is known for its Francophone Cajun and Creole cultures, both of which have struggled to find a place for themselves in an economic and political world dominated by Anglo-American cultures and language. In terms of immigration history for Louisiana, Africans are among the single largest group, eclipsed only by Germans. Acadians are a smaller number, and though there have been numerous historical efforts to erase various immigrant cultures — too many to trace even quickly here — it is Cajun and Creole culture for which the region is best known today.

In the middle of Cajun Country, as the region is sometimes called, is the town of Rayne, a town of about 8,500 people mostly known for it annual Frog Festival, where one both gets to race frogs and eat them. Rayne is interesting for a number of reasons, but the one important to us today is that it is 34 percent African American according to the 2000 census. That means the town has the highest proportion of African Americans of any of the towns in the region. One potential explanation for this large ratio of blacks to whites (one to two) in Rayne, where other towns typically have a ratio of one to five, was the availability of land in the late nineteenth century. The result is that African Americans in Rayne sometimes possess a good portion more land than African Americans in the surrounding areas, a factor which plays a small role in our present discussion.

Today's case study is a legend told in first-person by an African American man who was born in Rayne, grew up in Rayne, and has raised his own children in Rayne. He is known throughout the African American community of the town for his ability to perform, and perform well, a wide variety of discourse genres, which in common parlance are known as "shit talking." Oscar Babineaux can talk some shit, people will tell you, and they mean that in the best possible way. (A brief note here to explain that shit talking is the local term for joking, telling stories, and reciting poetry as well as for trading insults and play ing verbal tricks on one another. E.g., woman who played with mother's day.)

I recorded this legend text myself in July 2000, and it is one of several legends he told as *memorates*. I will play it for you in a moment, but before I do, let me give some context to the conversation as well as a brief summary of the text that will help to orient us in the discussion that follows. I approached Babineaux because his daughter had played for me a recording she had made of her dad performing an African American toast with a rural setting. As some here may know, most contemporary African American folk culture is associated with urban settings, but there are deep rural roots as well as contemporary rural practices that are worth further study. In addition, according to his own performance ethic, Babineaux felt obliged to draw me in, and because I was not his usual audience, he ended up telling me a bunch of legends. (We can discuss why if anyone is interested.)

All of the legends he told me were vivid first-person accounts, rich in dialogue and drama. A number of them featured common motifs found throughout a number of Louisiana folk cultures, but never before had I come across a talking pirate. In the legend that follows, an adult Babineaux stops by his family's home place and discovers his family is, once again, digging for money. He prays with some members of the family, and then he joins his nephew in bringing water out to the people digging. Along the way, they encounter a pirate up in a tree who asks for something to drink. At first they comply, but when they later refuse, the pirate threatens them, at which point a shovel flies through the air, and inserts itself into the tree.

So, the things to keep in mind: digging, treasure, wind, pirate, shovel, tree.

Babineaux Text

> PLAY RECORDING.

Morphologies & Paradigms

So, what is that pirate doing up in a tree and why is he threatening a bunch of African Americans? The answer is more interesting for the route that it takes us through adjacent cultures and into history. (This is my Claude Lévi-Strauss moment.)

This text is one of 20 from a larger corpus, all of which were collected in Louisiana by folklorists like myself:

- Four texts are taken from Barry Jean Ancelet's *Cajun and Creole Folktales*;
- Four texts are taken from field research done by an undergraduate student, Jeffrey Broussard;
- Two texts are taken from my own research among African American speakers in the Louisiana town of Rayne; and
- Nine texts are taken from the *Swapping Stories* collection, with a tenth text taken from unpublished materials gathered for the collection and made available to me.

The smallest text in the oral collection weighs in at a mere 67 words (BRO 004) and the largest text at 1025 words (LOH 164). At 655 words, the Babineaux text is one of the longer texts in the oral collection.

Unlike the texts I collected from web and literary sources that tend to focus on the origin of the treasure, most of the stories in the oral collection focus on the experience of looking for treasure, with only a handful treating the origin. Two texts include both, which I take as evidence in the larger project that what we have is a morphology wherein the experience, which I label *tau*, dominates in the oral tradition and the origin, labelled *alpha*, dominates in the literary tradition.

The four texts in the oral collection that consist of only the *alpha* component include a report from Broussard's collection (BRO 4) and three texts from the *Swapping Stories* project (LOH 157, LOH 162b, LOH 163). Two more texts feature both a *tau* and an *alpha* component, one in chronological order, *alpha-tau*, and one in experiential order, *tau-alpha*.

There is a lot more to be said about these components and how they play out across the collection, but today we are concerned with how that pirate got in a tree and why he is threatening African Americans. With that in mind, when we focus on the origin stories, we find the following:

- In one text (BRO 4), pirates shoot a crewman so that his ghost will protect the treasure.
- In a second text (LOH 162), a family fortune is first buried in a barrel of flour and then when the money is transported west by a family member, and *two slaves*, the family member dies and is buried with the money by the slaves.

- In a third text (LOH 164), a slave is killed after promising to look after the family fortune so that his spirit "would continue to guard the money."
- In a fourth, rambling story with little to recommend it beyond the idea of there being gold still buried somewhere (LOH 157), a dead man is attached to the treasure and transportation is involved, a regular feature in the *alpha* narratives.

A rough sketch of an ideational network would report the following associations: treasure, tree, dead man, pirates, slaves. I have not focused on trees in this particular presentation, but you will have to take my word that they are a significant motif in these legends.

Is there, then, a text that allows us to bridge from slaves to pirates in a way that is other than the two occupying the same role within this corpus? There is another text that points the way: LOH 163 tells the story of famous pirate Jean Lafitte moving to Texas to escape being arrested for all the things he has done wrong, while also referencing what he has done right. Lafitte takes up residence in Galveston, but still conducts business in Louisiana. One day he has to abandon a ship in Sabine Lake, full of treasure.

What kind of treasure might be found at the bottom of the lake? As it turns out, there are a number of historical accounts that indicate that pirates were involved in the slave trade, and one of those accounts turned up in the web collection of the corpus:

> By 1817 the privateers of Jean Lafitte and his predecessor, Luis de Aury, were capturing numerous Spanish slavers off the coast of Cuba. The pirate's barracoons, or slave pens, on Galveston Island were often swelled beyond capacity, containing a thousand or more African chattels. Many buyers came to the island to buy slaves at $1.00 per pound, and three brothers, John, Rezin, and James Bowie, were among the pirate's best customers. In 1853 John Bowie recorded in "DeBow's Magazine" that the brothers, who channeled their illicit slave trade via Black Bayou on Lake Sabine or via the Calcasieu to Lake Charles, realized a net profit of $65,000 in two years time from the sale of 1,500 Africans in Louisiana. [TN 8]

Such an account as this one reveals a clear association between slaves and treasure, through piracy. Slaves were the treasure, and they were traded in the border areas of the new nation. Without saying it, and perhaps without knowing it directly but feeling the rightness of the connection, Oscar Babineaux maintains a legend with a powerful historical lesson.

Method and Madness

In making this series of connections between texts, in order to understand how a pirate got up a tree in a legendary tale told by an African American man living in a small Louisiana town at the beginning of the twenty-first century, I had to compress a number of interesting

features of this corpus of texts when I made my presentation at the Kunlun Culture Forum. I would now like to take advantage of the time we have here to discuss some of the forms of analysis that I used and some of the forms of analysis I would like to use in the future.

I want to be clear that I am the beginning of my exploration of computational studies of narrative. Over ten years ago I wrote a very technical dissertation which examined how time was manipulated in oral history narratives. I was interested in how people not only moved back and forth in time, and in what units of time they moved (minutes, hours, days, decades), but also in how they moved within a given time period (minutes, hours, days, decades). My goal then was simply to explore the complex rhetorical moves individuals make in oral historical discourse. I did not, at the time, pursue any further explanations of why they said what they said, only how they said it and its rhetorical effects.

I want to say more about the analysis of time in a moment, but I want first to note that the foundation of my work then is the foundation of my work now: accurately transcribed texts of actual oral discourse.

My return to the study of narrative is prompted, in fact, by the work of a number of computer scientists over the past thirty years or more who have sought to establish computational models for what they sometimes call analogical reasoning or rhetorical structure mapping. Increasingly, however, they are calling their target *morphology*. (And they are quoting Vladimir Propp in their papers!) Unfortunately for them, but fortunately for us, they tend to base their work on computational linguistics, which typically maintains the sentence as a unit of analysis. When they do scale up their work, they immediately leap to objects like novels or the plays of Shakespeare. I think that there is a very interesting middle ground of verbal genres that have the advantage of both being proved to be meaningful in discourse through repetition in performance and of being of a much more useful middle — dare we say *central*? — size.

Such material is, of course, the stuff of folklore studies. Myths, legends, tales, jokes, and anecdotes.

At the moment, I am interested in legends, if only because I was familiar with a set of legends as I wrap up a book about the relationship between folk culture and landscape. It just so happens that legends, I think, are reasonably well paired with oral histories. Both legends and histories tend to take place on a known, usually local, landscape, and they both tend to deal with a temporal span within human understanding. That is, legends and histories work within similar time frames, often treating, as we have already seen, the same topics and the same eras.

GO TO SLIDES.

Conclusion

In the original paper from which this presentation is drawn, I sought to lay the groundwork for a larger planned exploration of the dynamic intersection between between *ideas*, which when taken together construct something like themes or ideologies, and *events* in a story, which we typically understand as sequentially structured. On the one hand, a network, or networks. On the other hand, a syntax, or a morphology. The larger project focuses, for the time being, on legends because, it seems to me, they offer several advantages for this kind of exploration: they are frequently the most bare bones of stories; they are often flexible in form, with (as we have seen above) sequences inverted while meaning remains stable; and, finally, they are often collaborative in nature, involving multiple speaking subjects, assuring us that their meanings are indeed shared.

Sources

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