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Taming the Spider Man: From Anti-Colonial Hero to Neoliberal Icon

By Adom Philogene Heron (University of Sussex)

Anansi the spider was born a deity many years ago in the forests and villages of West Africa. He was known to the Akan peoples of this region as *Ananse Krokroko* – “the great spider” – who was a trickster god of supreme wisdom, cunning and intelligence. However, with the rupture of the so-called “middle passage,” Anansi was transported to the New World and transformed amidst the cultural intermingling of Caribbean plantation society. He became Anancy the Spider Man, the folktale hero of Caribbean slaves. In this new context Anansi came to embody a subaltern Creole ethic of survival in opposition to the violent privations slavery.

After long days of toil slaves would gather and share stories of Anancy's daring exploits. They would hear how the protagonist used wit, cunning and illicit means to outsmart his larger, stronger opponents and achieve his goals. Such stories, and the anti-colonial oriented values of adaptability and autonomy they celebrated, provided the ideological base for a multiplicity of “Anancy tactics” that have persisted through slavery and colonialism into the present. For locals, Anancy tactics are the informal economic activities of market “higglers,” hucksters, hustlers and middlemen who exchange goods and services on the margins of the market outside of the regulatory gaze of Caribbean states. However, today we have reached a contradictory and disconcerting new chapter in the cultural tale of Anansi as such survival tactics are coming under threat.

I suggest that we are now at a perplexing millennial moment in global capitalism. Leaving behind the undeniable havoc of structural adjustment and the “lost decade” of the 1980s, today we witness an apparent twist in the neoliberal narrative. A new, friendly-faced brand of win-win neoliberalism has emerged since the 1990s, which claims to position “the poor” as central subjects, agents and beneficiaries of free market development. I question these claims by challenging the notion of microfinance – the provision of credit services for the poor - as a panacea to poverty in the Caribbean. Rather than producing prosperous nations of entrepreneurs, the proliferation of private profit-driven microfinance initiatives serves to embed a global neoliberal logic in local Caribbean subjectivities. This process invariably dispossesses people of a long established cultural means of survival.

One change is that Caribbean women, whose informal economic activities were under-recognized due to the gendered nature of Anancy, are being formally acknowledged as “entrepreneurs” and offered loans to develop businesses. However, in parallel to progressive discourses of female economic empowerment lies evidence of a malign manipulation of Anancy and the value system he embodies. By tapping into a pre-existing cultural disposition towards ‘hustling’ and informality in the context of declining Caribbean state welfare and private-sector wages, the poor are being forced not only to fend for themselves, but through high interest rates attached to microcredit, they

subsidize the growth of a profit-driven, privately owned micro-credit sector. This process of extraction is ensured through a group lending and collateral secured loan apparatus that produces self-exploitation amongst credit recipients who live in fear of peer pressure and of loss of property should they not keep up with loan repayments. As a result, Anancy tactics – the cultural resource that emerged in opposition to the exploitation of capitalist plantation regimes past - are co-opted and tamed in the neoliberal present to enable the parasitic expropriation of wealth from Caribbean subaltern subjects. Therefore, the once wily, cunning and free Anancy is rendered docile, disciplined and ultimately dispossessed.

However, as in many tales of Caribbean subaltern groups, there are moments of redemption: There are “higglers” who, to use a Caribbean term, *over-stand* (understand to a superior extent) the propensity of such loans to dispossess, and hence reject offers of micro-credit. The tenacity with which these informal traders resist the capturing and taming of their economic practices is testament to the resilience of Creole subaltern values of autonomy and freedom that remain very much alive today.

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