

Oscar, the Symbol of Freedom and Control in Old Providence Island

In this occasion, I want to talk about Oscar. He was my key informant and my principal company while I was in Providence, but the people on the island thought he was “mad”. So, I wrote a book about Oscar because what Crab Antics just tries to identify is what is in common in the society of Providence, but sometimes you find out the general rule from the way in which the rule is broken and that is what Oscar did.

Frequently, individuals who are just a little outside a given paradigm are found in societies. Oscar was one of these people. I didn't necessarily recognize it at that time because I didn't have a paradigm. But he was a really extraordinary man and he told me many things about the people which I wouldn't have been able to find out by myself.

Anthropologists usually write about a community, and describe it as if it were a unity since everybody is the same in terms of common behavior. But many anthropologists get most of their information from what they call a key informant; this is part of the *participant observation* methodology. Gerardo Reichel Dolmatoff and Victor Turner are examples of two anthropologists who obtained most of their information from one informant. Pedro Rodríguez was in Bogotá and he went to see Reichel Dolmatoff and told him that he wanted to tell the story of his people, the *Barasana* of the Vaupes. On the other hand, Victor Turner studied the *Ndembu*, a Bantu people in Africa, and he had a key informant, Muchona.

So, my key informant, the person who led me around the island, who told me who lived where and what they were doing was Oscar. The problem with Oscar was, as I found out then, that you didn't know when he was telling you the truth or when he was telling you what he was making up. So I had to check what Oscar told me as much as I could with somebody else. If he told me that Frank Newball was related to Oscar Howard and they had children out of Providence, then I would have to find Oscar Howard or Frank Newball and I would have to ask them and, in that way, check what Oscar had said. This is how I learned the truth, but Oscar was definitely my first hand informant. I had other key informants who worked close to me but they didn't know as much as Oscar did about the island as a whole. They gave me information about their own families or about the

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owner of a boat or when a house was built or something like that. But for Oscar, the whole Providence was his home, literally speaking.

One of the things about Oscar, which moved me to write the book about him, was that he seemed to be a symbol of the island as a whole. I'm not saying that everybody on Providence was a little mad, but what I want to say is that Oscar was independent. He always managed to find food, clothes, cigarettes, matches and whatever he needed for his daily necessities. He carried a sac on his back in which he had everything from open cans to very elegant clothing; he was the original recycler, if you want. Before recycling and sustainable agriculture theories, Oscar was already doing it.

For those of you who have not read the book *Oscar*, I will give some examples of how he acted upon the other people on the island, especially people who for some reason or other, he didn't like much. In those days, many of the houses weren't built on the ground; they stood on stilts, especially some in Old Town, Bailey and Rocky Point, and in other areas too. What Oscar would do was sleep under the floor of the house, but before he went to sleep, he would listen very carefully to the voices in the houses above, I know that because I went with him sometimes. So, if there was a voice in the house that shouldn't be there, then he would make a mental note of it.

Another thing that he did to get the information was to apply coconut fat on his feet and then he was able to walk around the house very, very quietly about three o'clock in the morning to look into the rooms. This game would tell him who was in the house, and if there was someone in the house who shouldn't be there, he also made a mental note.

His other favorite trick was to take the washing clothes in the night or early in the morning. He would put them in his sac, go to another house, take the other laundry clothes from the line, put the other person's laundry on the line and, in addition, he would pick whatever clothes he thought was good for keeping, like a new shirt or some news pants. Then he'd take the rest of the laundry and put it on someone else's line. So, nobody knew where their laundry clothes were, somebody who was living in Rocky Point might find his laundry clothes in Bottom House.

Let me say again that he did this to people who he thought were not quite proper. I often asked him the reason, and he would tell me "I saw someone in somebody else's house where he shouldn't be" or he asked for a meal or cigarettes, and if they said "no", something would happen to them.

But the most important thing was that Oscar was very concerned about respectability, but only of certain people on the island. He had been trained as an Adventist pastor but he had been kicked out of the Adventist training college in Colon, Panama. So, many of his victims were in fact Seventh Day Adventists. Once we went to the Adventist church in Rocky Point to hear a visiting pastor from Panama, his name was James Racking. This pastor was very famous in the area, and the day we visited the church he was dressed in a beautiful white suit, a wonderful cravat and blue shirt, and he had white shoes: a man who was the absolute epitome of Respectability. He gave us a sermon that was full of fire and told us how sinful we were. He was saying "this singing, this dancing, this smoking, this eating of meals and this drinking are in the United States but it is also in Providence". And Oscar would say "Amen". Then, when we sang the hymns, Oscar would sing one line behind; but before the last hymn ended, he had already left. We didn't know where.

Oscar didn't like Seventh Day Adventists because he had been kicked out of this church, but what he was also protesting against was what he considered the bad example that this man Racking

was setting, because he did not fit into the ways of the congregation, with his dress and his appearance. The congregation might have seemed to accept him, but Oscar was expressing what they really felt about this outsider, who had come to tell them what they had to do, as if they were the worst people in the world. So, in this way, he was speaking for people who could not speak for themselves. Then, there was a sense in which he was the conscience of people.

On the other hand, what Oscar did with all the information he had collected about people, was basically give information that they wouldn't like at all. In Santa Isabel Island, there was a square and people used to go there to buy a *cerveza* and drink it there. The square was quite near the *Alcaldía* but also very close to the Baptist church. So, Oscar would come on Saturday or after church on Sunday, and he would begin a sermon with quotes from the Bible. I checked these quotes and I couldn't find many of them in the Bible. Oscar was very good at using language in the way in which the Bible is written to get the attention of the people around. Once he had about 20 people around him, he would begin to give his sermon but more specifically about the people whose houses he had been sleeping under or whose houses he had been walking through and what he had found out. So, the crowd grew and people would say: "Oh, don't listen to what Oscar is talking about ...Oscar is mad" and immediately they would turn away and they would say "What did he say?" There was ambivalence because people didn't want to hear about their activities, but they were very interested in hearing about somebody else's. Thus, Providence didn't have a newspaper, radio or television, but Providence had Oscar.

In that sense, Oscar was very, very useful because what he was doing was keeping the moral balance since people felt very nervous about what he would say. Such apprehension was something that kept them in line. They often would ask the question "is Oscar around?", and they looked around for him, if he wasn't near, they would continue doing what they were doing. On the other hand, they all felt curious about what somebody else did. So there was a balance with Oscar as a focus. However, there was a defense mechanism to his doings: when in the crowd people said "Don't to listen to Oscar, he's mad"; with the word mad, people justified themselves and dismissed whatever Oscar said. Thus, Oscar had certain power; by calling him "mad", people tried to get this power away from him and get hold of it. But things weren't static, Oscar was going around all the time, Oscar was anywhere and Oscar was talking.

Oscar was an extremely intelligent man. In his sac he had remains of books in which he could read, so he could talk to you not only about religious matters. In addition he knew the name and the use of every plant grown on the island; he was a wonderful botanic guide. He knew which plants, for example, could cure illnesses and he also knew which plants could cause illnesses, as an Obeah man does. This is why people in Providence believed that Oscar was an Obeah man. In fact, he talked to me and showed me some of the things they do to create an obeah cooking or an obeah spell, and the words and the chants used. However, Oscar never denied it but he never claimed that he was. So, again he left everybody guessing.

There are many people interested in this book in the United States; most of them are psychologists and psychiatrists. The reason is that Oscar gives an account of his life where he speaks about his life beginning with his adolescence, and includes the opinion of his parents as he understood them, the training at the Adventist College and other details. Besides, he made it clear that that he wasn't feeling wrong. He did get married and had children, then his wife left him and he lost contact with his children. I think it was after this that he went ill. He lived in Providence the rest of his life even

though he did go to San Andres a couple of times, but he didn't like people there because they were not as civilized as people in Providence. The point is that as you see the patient in Oscar's life story, you can identify the people and events that surrounded him and that might have eventually caused his break down. This is why the book has been used in psychiatry as an example to try to understand a person as a whole, together with all the influential people in his life, in order to identify *when* and *why* an illness comes around. This is a history life's approach. This is why I wrote the subtitle "An Inquiry into the nature of Sanity?" with a question mark.

Since Oscar was my key informant what I expected was a rational interpretation to try and find out how was the way of life of another culture. The point is that the person who informed me more things was a person watched as a mad man. There is a fact that in Oscar's genealogy, in his family tree, there is a genetic disposition to this mental sickness, to these break downs in which he could not control himself, becoming extremely depressed, going inside himself and it's possible that sometimes when Oscar disappeared, he was in that state. But when he recovered he was completely sane, but very eccentric.

So, just in conclusion let me say that, above all, it seems to me that in spite of his personality, in spite of his things, or maybe because of these things, Oscar symbolizes the freedom and independence that was cherished by all people in Providence. And this is probably why this sensitivity on *The Rock* is one of the deepest and most common feelings which Providence people feel, or rather felt –I believe I must say in the past, and expressed to people from the outside world. That was the difference.

Bibliography

Wilson, Peter Joseph. *Oscar: an Inquiry into the Nature of Sanity?* New York: Random House. 1974.