

Reputation and Respectability

Fifty years after Crab Antics.

Professor Peter J. Wilson's reflections

I wish to thank Universidad Nacional de Colombia at San Andres for inviting me and bringing me back to these islands. I never imagined that my visit would be filled with such a mixture of happiness and sadness since many of the people I wanted to see since I left Providence have already passed away. But also, I believe I didn't expect many of the changes the Archipelago has gone through.

In spite of the changes, the spirit of the fisherman as I saw it some fifty years ago is very similar to what we heard from the video that Camila presented to us about fishing. The feeling of independence of the fisherman represented in Captain Archbold and his relation to the Institutions reminds us of the independent spirit of those fishermen who used to go fishing three times a week with the sea at their hands, available as their main resource. Nobody used to tell them when to go fishing; they did it when they felt they should; I remember that people used to feel sad when their men didn't go fishing. Through this example I wish to explain that the meaning of political freedom that we handle in western society is not the same one used in this type of Caribbean society since the fisherman used to go fishing because he was free and his performance in it depended entirely on his will; not on what institutions defined. He didn't have to ask permission in order to go fishing, and nobody needed to know where he went or how many pounds or kilograms of fish he could catch, nor how much fuel he needed for his boats or whether these had an engine. This makes me think that the current situation of fishermen on the island and their conflict with authority derives from the fact that Institutions impose their laws through regulations and sanctions that fishermen don't want to accept; they are regulations that, in my opinion, restrict the liberty and independent spirit of the fisherman.

Another example that comes to my mind is the following. If after his journey, a fisherman arrived with great quantities of fish and lobster, and this was evident to the other fishermen, the latter would avoid the successful fisherman from bringing more fish in his next fishing journey. They would find a way to do some damage to the bottom of his boat so that his fishing would not be successful. As a result, of course, much fish would be lost and the boat would sink. This particular way of acting can help us

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understand how reputation works. It is an organizing principle of this Caribbean society, which activates in order to preserve a social balance and a common order for all: equality.

In the past, when most people used to demand fish, they used to choose who to buy it from according to the general concept of the community with respect to who was a “good fisherman”, and this usually meant someone in particular. The quality of his product and his success gave him the reputation of being a good fisherman and so he got the highest number of clients.

The same principle can be applied to the owners of small orchards and farms. When I was in Old Providence, most islanders had small strips of land that ran across the mountains in parallel form, where they grew their crops. The farmer, whose crop was within the sight of passers by, that is, close by the road, was considered to be lucky since everyone could see his crops and this helped him show his talents as a good farmer. It was usual though that if he was too successful, people would take away his plants or would move his fence at night, but he would only realize it later; then there could be a conflict. In fact, invasion and claims about invasion show how sensitive people are about their property, and it is also sign of the close identification of people and their land. Invasion is a way to make fun of the real or imaginary inequity that exists among people (see Wilson, 1973:93).

Sometimes, in order to resolve their conflicts, the community would go to the Mayor; other times to the elders who would solve the problem. To most of them, reputation was the mechanism used to obtain effective balance within society. With respect to the idea of political freedom that I mentioned before, I could tell you that in most eastern communities where I have worked, two legal systems coexist, the one from the government and the one from the community. The same happens in Providence; there is a legal system imposed by Colombia, and a system of social coercion of the people, which is based on reputation and respectability. All the community was aware of the two, and they knew they were all under the same conditions.



With respect to reputation and respectability in man and woman from Providence, it is a fact to say that both had ways of behavior that differed according to their social condition. Just as man expressed, through his actions, his worth, woman should respond to what society expected from what was feminine. Their behavior made them either respectable or reputable. With respect to kinship, man felt this was a way of expressing the feeling of equality at a juridical-political domain; while woman felt it was a way of expressing emotional or sentimental links at a domestic domain. This does not mean that both did not create affective links or advanced actions at a political domain; they both did, but with their differences (see Wilson 1973:152).

Another way of illustrating how reputation works is with artistic abilities. Playing the guitar was something that many could do, but some had more talent than others and this gave them reputation. However, when you had a talent for something you didn't necessarily became powerful in other areas. This is where reputation is mostly validated, acting as a mechanism of control and balance in society.

Being good at something gave you reputation. Being a good fisherman was not related only with the capacity to catch fish; it was also related, as Captain Archbold said, to being acquainted with the sea. The art of sailing was transmitted from generation to generation as if being a good fisherman was linked to that. However, sailing was not necessarily linked to fishing since all those born on the island were supposed to be good sailors. The reputation that sailing captains got in their voyages to Puerto Limon, Panama and Cartagena, was due to their ability to sail not to their ability to fish. Since Providencia is located in the middle of the Caribbean Sea, people are obliged to know the sea, since this is their source of living.

I must admit that respectability is a value that takes place among the socially privileged people in Providence, and it gets in conflict with reputation every time equality as a factor of social control is at risk. People who feel excluded from privileged spheres do not always conform to their condition, and therefore try to have access to spaces of domination and respectability that others occupy. In fact, generally, people from Providence do not see themselves as high class respectable people, but they do not consider themselves as not respectable either. However, they are ruled by the ideals of respectability.

I would like to add too that even if a man's reputation is interdependent to a woman's respectability, and there are differentiated practices for each gender, examples of the woman's search for respectability can offer us other elements for a better comprehension of these two features. The church, one of the social spaces mostly assigned to woman, is a social institution which is closely related to domestic and secular life, since it condemns the behavior of man and relieves woman of guilt over poverty, misery and difficulties with men (see Wilson, 1973:131). This is seen mostly in protestant and catholic churches of the island, the Adventist one being the one that demands most submission and surrender. So, the more Providence islanders approached the ideals of life set by the church, the more respectable they were; and, besides, if the family was well off or belonged to the high class, you would be more respectable. Every islander's nature and ambitions were judged, condemned and/or accepted by the rest of the society, according to the value scale the community handled (see Wilson 1973: 132).

Since woman was the one who forged respectability at home and in church, Providence islander women made great efforts to better their social conditions by guarding their girls' respectability.

The most common methods were by marrying their girls with a man from a higher class. This social practice was related to the search of “improving the race”, since this was an effective way to becoming respectable.

It was favorable for women to keep close to the activities of the church and to follow what this institution promoted, since it helped them become accepted by the family of their future husband and by the rest of the society. The mother had to preserve their daughter’s respectability by avoiding her pregnancy before marriage. This would be one of the factors that would damage the family’s respectability and their wish to go up the social scale; it would cause frustration to the mother, who would react aggressively due to the fact that her daughter would have made her feel ashamed and would have spoiled her search for respectability.

Reputation and respectability are also affected by gossiping, since this is used as a mechanism of social balance. I would not dare say that this happens with the same intensity all over the Caribbean, but in Providence it is an antic that is used with frequency to damage someone’s respectability or to moderate their reputation. The idea of a pot full of crabs competing against one another in order to get out of it, applies to the use of gossiping as it denigrates the condition of respectability and reputation of a person, revealing aspects of the private life of people at their backs, in order to show that “no one is better than the other”.

I wish to finish my exposition by saying that the validity of this ethnologic approach to the people of Providence, developed fifty years ago, can be a useful ethno historic element into future research about the ideas, practices and behaviors that have persisted in the Caribbean, no matter how much the society seems to have changed.

References

Wilson, Peter Joseph. 1995 [1973]. *Crab Antics: a Caribbean case study of the conflict between reputation and respectability*. Prospect Heights, Waveland Press.