

What Value Myth Over History?¹

A speech prepared for delivery at the May 2016 Anguilla Literary Festival^[1]

There is a question about history that has troubled me for years. The question is, which will serve us better in striving to construct the Anguillian civilisation: fact or fantasy, history or myth? Should we try to know our own history in an accurate sense, or are we better off building on a mythology that meets our present ideological and psychological needs?

The question arises because I regularly hear Anguillians with a reputation as intellectuals, or at least as public speakers, distorting incidents in Anguilla's history. Whenever that happens, I am tempted immediately to correct the error. Then, as I realise how much the audience is relishing the falsehood, I pause. I ask the question, is there perhaps some value to the myth being presented as history?

I start with some local mythologising. Every Saturday morning in Anguilla at 10:00 am, there is a popular radio talk-show on a local radio station. The programme begins with a presentation by an African American lady on the psychologically damaging, long term effect on Black US slaves of the vicious doctrine

¹ A speech prepared for the delivery at the May 2016 Anguilla Literary Festival, but not delivered when I realised it was too long. I gave a summary instead.

taught in the Willie Lynch speech. While the lady announcer relates what is, in reality, no more than her promotion of the latest self-improvement book she is selling, the panellists sit around the studio table, listening to their programme's introduction, looking solemn and sorrowful. The American author's breathless prose assures us that,

As a race of people, we will never be physically free until we free ourselves mentally. It is about understanding that hundreds of years ago, a system was designed, by Master, to build a Mental House of Slavery that would control our ancestors and destroy our race from within. This system is no longer forced upon us; therefore we voluntarily decide to live in Master's House. If we come together, as a people, to stop pulling each other down and start lifting each other up, we can create a new system, build a New House, to reclaim our greatness, wealth, and success, to become a united race of people.

As her narrative progresses, she summarises Willie Lynch's speech. He was a West Indian slave-owner who was invited to the colony of Virginia in the year 1712 to teach his divide-and-rule methods to slave owners there. The secret for assuring control over the 'Negro' for at least the next 300 years, he explained, was to take the differences among the slaves and make them bigger. He says,

I use fear, distrust, and envy for control purposes. These methods have worked on my modest plantation in the West Indies and it will work throughout the South. Take this simple little list of differences, and think about them.

...

. . . You must pitch the old Black male vs. the young Black male, and the young Black male against the old Black male. You must use the dark-skin slaves vs. the light-skin slaves and the light-skin slaves vs. the dark-skin slaves. You must use the female vs. the male, and the male vs. the female. You must also have your white servants and overseers distrust all Blacks, but it is necessary that your slaves trust and depend on us. They must love, respect and trust only us.

Black academics and historians have conclusively established that the Willie Lynch speech is a hoax. There was no slave-owner known as William Lynch in the West Indies during this period. No credible historian has ever written about the Willie Lynch speech. None of the abolitionists of the anti-slavery movement mention him or his alleged speech. None of the tactics he outlines was important to slave-owners during the eighteenth century. The divide-and-rule tactics he espouses are completely different from the real divide-and-rule tactics used by the slave-owners. The terms “fool-proof” and “re-fuelling” in his alleged speech are twentieth century terms that did

not exist in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. In 1712, there was no geographical part of the American Colonies known as the South. The evidence suggests the Willie Lynch speech was composed as recently as the year 1993. Louis Farrakhan made it famous when he mentioned it in his 1995 Million Man March speech.

Professor Manu Ampin, of Oakland, California, a professor of Africana Studies, specialising in African and African American history and culture, urges us to rely on first-hand research, instead of myth, as the most effective weapon against the distortion of African history and culture. Primary research, he urges, is the best defence against urban legends and modern myths.²

As Professor Ampin so ably argues, we will not solve our problems, and address the real issues confronting us, by adopting half-baked urban legends. If there are people who know that the Willie Lynch speech is fictional, yet continue to promote it in order to sell books, or even to “wake us up”, then we should be very suspicious of these people. They lack integrity, they openly violate our trust, and they willingly lie to us in the pursuit of their personal profit. Surely, it is now time for critical Anguillian thinkers to bury the African American myth of the Willie Lynch speech and take a more mature,

² http://manuampim.com/lynch_hoax1.html

West Indian approach, one more suited to our new Caribbean Civilisation.

There is another fictitious story that is regularly heard on the radio, and at gatherings of Anguillians who discuss Anguilla's struggle to become self-sufficient and self-governing. That is the epic tale of the refusal of our ancestral Anguillians, newly freed from slavery in 1834, to be forcibly removed from Anguilla and deported, as the Chagos Islanders were, to the new colony of British Guiana. We are assured of the fact, by persons who appear to know, that the colonial authorities put pressure on our forefathers. They were told they must leave the drought-stricken and infertile land of Anguilla and emigrate to the lush and welcoming fields of Demerara, Berbice and Essequibo. However, the stalwart Anguillians stoutly resisted, refused to be moved, and clung patriotically to their beloved "rock". As a result, we are informed, the British were blocked in their plan to strip Anguilla of its black "indigenous" inhabitants so that they could re-populate the island with the white, unemployed and homeless of Britain.

As usual, this myth springs from a genuine historical event. The records show that, after the short-lived Apprenticeship Period ended slavery in Anguilla, some three boat-loads of newly-freed Anguillians boarded ships and sailed to British Guiana. The correspondence

between the Governor of the Leeward Islands and the Secretary of State in London reveals that the Anguillians had been lured by promises of free land, to be given to them if they would help to populate the supposedly uninhabited interior of Guiana.³ Far from encouraging the Anguillians to leave their island, the colonial government was concerned at the Guianese attempt to rob the Leeward Islands of much needed, newly-freed labour. The Governor in Antigua begs the Secretary of State to register a protest with the Governor of British Guiana, and to demand that he stop stealing Leeward Islands citizens.

And so, we read in the records that it was with much relief that, some three years after they departed, the Governor of the Leeward Islands reported to London that the majority of the emigrated Anguillians had returned to their island, disenchanted with the snake-infested conditions they met in the jungles of Guiana.

Each time I hear the story repeated, questions flash through my mind. What role does this myth of the valiant Anguillian resistance to the alleged British effort to deport them to Guiana play in the development of a modern Anguillian consciousness? What could be the agenda of

³ CO.239/56, Despatch No 61/71 of 28 November 1838. Sir William Colebrooke, Governor of the Leeward Islands, to Lord John Russel, Secretary of State.
CO.239/55, Despatch No 40/2040 of 10 July 1839: Colebrooke to Lord Russel.
CO.239/59, Despatch No 34/1620 of 15 July 1840: Colebrooke to Lord Russel.
CO.239/59, Despatch No 35/1624 of 18 July 1840: Colebrooke to Lord Russel.
CO.407/6, folio 184, 23 January 1840: Lord Russel to Colebrooke.

the persons who perpetuate this urban legend? Is it a foundation-part of the conspiracy theory that the British are out to destroy Anguilla, as some suggest? Is it intended to drive us to self-hurting actions that will damage our own long-term development interests? Is it a deliberate effort to drum up racist discord against the British for political ends? Or, is it a genuine misunderstanding of the historical record? And, is it a positive myth that will help Anguillians to become stronger and more self-sufficient?

Maybe Barbados can teach us a lesson in honest historical research. Barbados, after all, is the centre of one of our great seats of learning, the Cave Hill Campus of the University of the West Indies. We all know the important place that “General Bussa” plays today in Barbadian national consciousness. Which educated West Indian does not know the tale of the heroic role that the slave Bussa, a Ranger on Bayley’s Plantation, played in resisting the cruel system of Barbadian slavery, resulting in his death at the hands of the white Barbadians plantocracy in the Bussa Rebellion of 1816?

The only mention of Bussa in any contemporary record is the Report of the Assembly on the Rebellion, published in 1818. It includes the testimony of five slaves, only three of whom mention the slave Busso or Busssoe (never Bussa) as one of the participants. There

is nothing in the contemporary record that suggests Busso was the leader of the Rebellion. It is only in the narratives written many years later that he begins to be given a prominent role in the Rebellion.

After independence, and with the introduction of a National Heroes system, there was an obvious need for there to be a genuine Barbadian National Hero of the resistance to plantation slavery. The void was soon filled. Barbadians now enjoy several detailed, completely made-up, biographical studies of this genuine hero of the two-day Easter Rebellion: the plantation Ranger, Bussoe. Out of the thinnest of historical fact has blossomed an entire industry, circling profitably around a mythic biography of the Right Excellent Bussa, National Hero. A large, imaginary statue of Bussa, broken chains of slavery dangling from his wrists, exults in freedom in the centre of the ABC Highway.⁴ As a result of what we might call ‘this little white lie’ about General Bussa, countless Barbadians feel prouder of their heritage. No doubt, the Bussa myth serves the admirable purpose of whipping up patriotic sentiment, and feelings of pride and national identity. But, it is not history.

I ask myself, what damage must this tale of the fictitious “Bussa” do to the psychology of the objective

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https://www.totallybarbados.com/barbados/About_Barbados/Local_Information/People/Barbados_National_Heroes/838.htm

black Barbadian intellectual who bothers to do the research, and who must eventually realise that his feelings of pride and self-worth have been constructed on a modern fabrication? Should he encourage this fraudulent strategy for the development of a national consciousness, or should he insist on the truth? What torment must honest Barbadian academics go through who are too terrified of political and social back-lash to speak out against the promotion of this fiction as truth?

The problem of 'white-washing' history is not unique to us in the West Indies. The British are notorious for misusing their own history for national purposes. There is an interesting article by Simon Akam, an Oxford-educated Reuter's correspondent in Sierra Leone, in The New Republic⁵ in which he explores the question, "*Why don't the British teach their students about imperial history?*" He points out that

There is no British Imperial History 101, so to speak. As it is, instruction of British history is wont to concentrate on "Hitler and the Henrys"—World War II and the colourful Tudor monarchs of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Henry VIII and his six wives first among them.

And, he concludes that

⁵ <https://newrepublic.com/article/88797/british-empire-queen-elizabeth-india-ireland-africa-imperial>

The lacuna in the British curriculum, the refusal to discuss imperialism in-depth, is not accidental. Rather, it reflects the fact that Britain as a nation has not settled on its own view of its past.

Why is the history of the British Empire and of British Colonialism cleaned up and bowdlerised in their High School curriculum? Could the answer be that the historical facts are too shameful? Would the real truth about colonialism make British people cease to feel so proud of their Britishness? Is the myth of the decent British administrator bringing civilisation to the savage colonial a better narrative for the present-day British soul?

Historian David Abraham urges that myths are important to human civilisation.⁶ Myths existed before art, before language or the written word. The mythic cave paintings of Lascaux in France and Alta Mira in Spain are over 30,000 years old, created long before modern languages developed.

Myths have a role to play in human life and imagination. Myths are undoubtedly important for the growth of human civilisation. Myths sprung up long before religion. The stories in the Book of Genesis are a retelling of universal mythic themes such as the Creation of the World, the first Man and Woman, Heaven and Earth, the great Flood, Dragons and Serpents.

⁶ <http://www.davidkabraham.com/OldWeb/Beliefs/Education/mythology.htm>

The great mythic themes were known before literature. All great works of literature are based upon mythic themes or stories. Noah's Ark, Jonah and the Whale, Moby Dick, and even the movie Titanic, are all stories about man's struggle with the sea of the unconscious.

Myth was before philosophy and science. The same questions that religion used to ask, our sciences now try to answer. Even though we are now more enlightened and technological, we still need to feel protected, warm, well-fed, happy, and doing good.

Could it be that feeling proud about ourselves and our heritage is of such great importance for public wellbeing and social cohesiveness, that it justifies tweaking the past, replacing the facts with myth. Is there, then, a legitimate role for myth in national consciousness? Is there is a valid reason, in terms of national development, for powerful myths to become more important than accurate history? The answer to the question I posed at the beginning becomes clear. It is never justifiable for myth to supplant historical fact.

This is the view of most serious academics and historians. Sir Anthony Seldon, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Buckingham, urges⁷ that

⁷ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/british-empire-students-should-be-taught-colonialism-not-all-good-say-historians-a6828266.html>

History teaching should always be honest, or it is merely propaganda by powerful interest groups. The history of the British Empire was not all bad, and not all good. Understanding its subtlety and its importance to British and world history is essential for every single student.

Why does it matter what happened a long time ago? Professor Penelope Cornfield of the University of London has written⁸ that history is important because it is inescapable. It connects things through time and encourages students to take the long view of connections. All people are living histories.

We speak languages we inherited from the past. We live in societies with complex cultures, traditions and religions that were not created on the spur of the moment. We use technologies we have not ourselves invented. Each individual is a personal variant of an inherited genetic template, known as the genome, which has evolved during the entire life-span of the human species.

Understanding the linkages between the past and the present is absolutely basic for an appreciation of the condition of being human. The study of the past is essential for rooting people in time. People who feel themselves to be rootless live rootless lives. Some of us, unfortunately, lacking a sense of roots, grow up with a

⁸ http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/why_history_matters.html

weak or troubled sense of our own placing. The result has been the rise of the gangs and the taking up of guns that we see in our towns and villages today.

The only cure for ignorance is education. The Anguilla Public Library's radio jingle that "Reading is fundamental" must take root, so that the next generation of Anguillians will pay more attention to learning the facts and avoiding the half-truths and untruths that our present generation seem to enjoy so much. There is, in my submission, nothing intellectual or excellent in the promotion of historical myth.

It is only by encouraging in Anguilla the writing and publishing of poetry, plays, novels and academic texts that an intellectual tradition will be established in Anguilla. The founders and promoters of this Anguilla Literary Festival are to be congratulated for leading the way in this effort. This celebration of local authorship, and the enjoyment of regional and international art and literature, introduces into our community an urging for the supremacy of intellectual excellence.