

Discussion 1 (English)
Representing Values and Identity

IMAGE: Gérard Valcin, *Coumbite*

TEXT: Patrick Chamoiseau, "A Pumpkin Seed"

Gérard Valcin, *Coumbite*

Information

Despite, or perhaps because of, the poverty and political strife suffered by the Haitian people, Haiti is a center for Caribbean art. Haitian artists are sometimes taxi drivers, schoolteachers, or priests as well as painters. Their work, whether abstract or representational, reflects the close connection of art to the Haitians' spiritual and physical life. Gérard Valcin (1925–88), originally a tile-setter, used intricate geometric patterns and meticulous brushwork to represent the timeless rhythms of the fields in *Coumbite*, painted in 1971.

A Closer Look

Look at the image on the following page, and make a list of cultural elements that you see. Consider lifestyle, geography, climate, and economy. When you have completed your list, answer the questions below.

1. The title of the painting, *Coumbite*, refers to the activity represented on the canvas. Judging by this representation, what is a *coumbite*? Who is involved? What do they do? Verify your definition by checking an encyclopedia or a dictionary.
2. Like other art forms, painting often reflects social structures and value systems. What cultural or social values would appear to be validated in this representation by Valcin? In what ways might his orderly, meticulous world constitute an escape from rather than a reflection of Haitian economic reality?
3. The crop being worked in the fields is sisal. What is sisal, and what is it used for? Is it an important export crop



today? What synthetic products have partially replaced sisal in recent decades? How might this affect the Haitian economy?

In Writing

You work as a fund-raiser for a museum that would like to enhance its collection of modern Caribbean art. The works of several Haitian artists have been targeted for acquisition, among them Dieudonné Cédor, Philomé Obin, and Wilson Bigaud. Your task is to prepare a funding proposal for prospective donors. Select one of the targeted artists and prepare the proposal. You will need to give a brief overview of the artist's life and work. Then, situate the importance of this work in the context of Caribbean art history.

Patrick Chamoiseau, “A Pumpkin Seed”

Information

Patrick Chamoiseau (b. 1953), winner of the coveted French Prix Goncourt for his novel *Texaco*, is one of the foremost living Caribbean authors. He is a proponent of what he calls “créolité,” or the specificity of a distinct Creole identity, which, while part European, part American, and part African, becomes something greater than the sum of its parts. Through his work, Chamoiseau seeks to enhance understanding of the often harsh realities of Creole life. Reflecting the rhythms of Creole speech, the *Creole Folktales* are true to the author’s vision, recounting the stories he remembers hearing as a child in Martinique.

If It Were Me . . .

Each of us had a favorite fairy tale or bedtime story as a child. In addition to entertaining us, many of these stories served a socializing or moralizing function. Perhaps they were cautionary tales, or perhaps they provided positive models for behavior. In any case, the study of such stories gives us a great deal of information about the social structures and value systems of the culture in which they were written.

Think of a folk or fairy tale that you enjoyed as a child. Tell this story to a partner in your class. With a partner, answer the following questions with respect to your story:

1. What message does the tale convey? Summarize the message in a sentence or two.
2. What social values or cultural information are reflected in the story? To which members of the community does the story apply? For these individuals, what are the con-

sequences for noncompliance? What are the rewards for conforming behavior? How might the community benefit from compliance with the stated model?

At First Glance

1. The title of the folk tale is “A Pumpkin Seed.” From this title, what sort of landscape do you imagine for the story? Will it be urban or rural? In what kinds of activities might the main characters be engaged?
2. Read the first sentence of the story, in which you will meet one of the main characters. This individual is described as being “all heart.” How do you define this expression? Give examples of behavior that would be characteristic of someone who is “all heart.” What message or moral can you anticipate from this first sentence? Summarize this message in a sentence or two.

Patrick Chamoiseau, “A Pumpkin Seed”

They tell the story of an old woman who—despite wrinkles, the sufferings of age, the stings of ingratitude, and even loneliness—was still all heart.

Some people are like that: they are made of goodness, their every look spreads tenderness, and from their hands caresses fall all the year round. This elderly lady lived in chinpontong, a Creole way of saying she was up the crick and stony-broke. Her hut was of straw. Her pallet was stuffed with dried grass. Her only valuable was a little bottle of camphorated rum for soothing her aches and pains. She ate watercress, and more watercress, and didn't even have enough strength left to run her fingers beneath the rocks of the riverbed to look for those crawfish we call zabitan. So she was famine's best friend, which proves without a doubt that a friendship is not necessarily one of life's true pleasures.

One fine morning the old lady went toddling off into the undergrowth to collect twigs of logwood, which make such crackling fires. She was going along when all of a sudden, she spied a thrashing of wings in a tuft of rank grass. It wasn't a colibri, or a little blackbird, or a robin redbreast, or a sunbird, or a yellow cici warbler It was a small bird that had never been named by the Creole tongue, and as for this language, it has no idea such a thing even exists. The bird was wounded. Cradling it at her breast, the old lady hurried back to her hut. And though she had not tasted meat, or chewed a morsel of chicken, or sucked on a marrow bone in many a day, she now thought only of nursing the creature: pouring a drop of camphorated rum on the tiny wound and a sip of sugarwater into the parched beak, stroking the feathers, singing lullabies,

snuggling up the quilted cotton bedjacket to ward off the chill of fear. When it was time to eat, she ate her watercress. She ate it the next day as well, and the day after, and all the other days that followed. Caring and attentive, she fed the bird as best she could, bestowing such tenderness upon the patient that each night it fell asleep against her cheek or tucked into one of the deep hollows behind her collarbones. When she had restored the bird to health, she returned it to the forest, to the very same spot where she had found it. There she waited—with a heavy heart—until it flew jauntily away. Then she went back to the sorrows of her hut, and to the fresh sorrow of the bird's departure.

She did not see it again until some time later, when she was grazed by a wingtip as she stooped crookedly to pluck her midday watercress. It was the bird. It soared over the hut and swooped to lay a pumpkin seed at her feet. Then off it flew, caroling happiness. The old lady planted the seed in her own tender way, sprinkling it daily with water warmed by a loving heart. Me, with all that attention, I would have sprung up in no time. The pumpkin didn't wait to be asked: sprout, stalk, leaves, flowers, and first fruit. A pretty pumpkin, hefty, with a nice oval shape. Oh, a pleasure beyond words: the old lady harvesting her first pumpkin, all aquiver to think of escaping that watercress for once. She had neither salt nor spices, but so what—a dish of pumpkin would be tasty, yes sirree! She picked it the way one would pick babies if they grew on trees. On the table, she opened it up . . . Oh! Inside the pumpkin was a fully cooked meal: a ragout of good meat and rice, garnished with a sprig of parsley. Her feast lasted only as long as three mouthfuls, for those nibblings of watercress had shrunk her stomach down to the merest memory of itself. But what a

banquet! The first mouthful infused her body with all the aromas of her youth. The second was bursting with every forgotten flavor. The third seemed to fill the aching of her bones, the murmurs of her heart. She was satisfied.

To avoid wasting the leftovers, she carried them to her closest neighbor, a very ordinary person whose only property was a pepper plant, which she guarded fiercely. This neighbor tucked in heartily, giving thanks with loud cries. Then she wanted to see this wonder-working pumpkin up close. Everyday, at noontime, the vine produced a big fruit stuffed with different things to eat (sometimes there was even chocolate sherbet). The sweet old lady, without one word of complaint, saw her friendship with famine come to an end. She went on with her life in a kind of bliss, with the occasional bite of watercress just for old times' sake. But the neighbor, even though she benefited from this godsend, schemed and schemed and schemed, bug-eyed with envy.

Since the old lady had told her the story many a time, the neighbor set out on purpose to do her own good deed. She looked beneath leaves and between roots for the sick bird with the broken wing and the beak stilled by suffering. Nothing! Only lovely birds in the pink of health perched plumb upon their branches. Enraged, she snatched up a stone and brought down a victim. It wasn't a colibri, or a little blackbird, or a robin redbreast, or a sunbird or a cici It was you've-already-guessed-what. She carried it home, poured a bit of gutter water on the wound, plopped the poor thing down on a dirty rag, and went off for a nap. The next morning, in a great hurry, she tossed the birdy into a passing breeze, which it caught as best it could, dragging one wing behind.

Our neighbor now began to scan the skies, watching for

the seed. Sure enough, it arrived. The bird flung it at her without even slowing down. The neighbor planted it, watered it, screeched out some songs for it, and so the pumpkin vine, after stalk, leaves and flowers, produced its first fruit. The neighbor split it right open, licking her lips. Oh! Out sprang a hellish mob of snakes, spiders, skinks, and fat brown mabouyas, all under the unfortunate impression that she was their mother. Their cold maws gaping, they lunged for her breasts. Ladies and gentlemen, the neighbor clapped a hand on her head, took to her heels, and sped off as fast as her legs could carry her. No one knows how she got on board, but in the end she sailed away on a wind that never came back.

A Few Questions

1. In his work, Chamoiseau seeks to replicate the patterns of Creole speech found in the oral folk-tale. Select three phrases in “A Pumpkin Seed” that reflect this oral quality. Be sure to justify your choices. Consider syntax, vocabulary, the presence of the teller in his tale, and the implied audience, among other criteria.
2. What elements of Creole reality are evident in this story? List as many as you can. How would you characterize this reality in a sentence or two?
3. We have already noted that folk and fairy tales can model and interpret behavior for the community. In the case of “A Pumpkin Seed,” which actions are validated? Censored? What social values are reiterated and reinforced in this way?

A Matter of Opinion

Chamoiseau’s championing of *créolité* is not without controversy in Martinique, where it is read as iconoclastic, since it challenges the relevance of *négritude*, or the renewal of black identity through the reestablishment of links with African roots promulgated by the authors Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor. At issue also is Martinique’s current status as a French overseas department (DOM), by virtue of which Martinique is part of France. What do you think? Read the following sentences, and decide whether you agree or disagree with them. Then, talk to two or three people in your class. Do you agree with each other? Explain.

1. The black identity is essentially an African identity, because it existed before slavery and colonialization. Creole is no more than a bastardized form of this identity.

2. The Creole identity is unique and needs to be validated and accepted as such. Being not quite African is no more useful than being not quite European.
3. Martinique is in good shape economically. The country has benefited from its association with France. Martinique should remain a French department.
4. The DOM/TOM (Overseas Departments and Territories) are essentially French colonies, living on handouts, as dependents. Martinique needs a positive, independent vision for the future.

Research Project

You are a child psychologist researching the social values transmitted to children through folk and fairy tales. You are currently preparing a presentation that compares the behaviors and values represented in “A Pumpkin Seed” with Charles Perrault’s “Cendrillon.” Write an essay for publication in a journal.