

CHAPTER 2



THE PARABLE OF THE FOOTBRIDGE

Creativity and Change in the In-Between

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Like many spiritual sages, Sufi masters tell stories to convey the wisdom of their practices. One such story is the parable of the footbridge. On a windy day, as the story goes, an old man needed to visit a sick friend. To reach his destination he had to cross a rickety footbridge that spanned a deep gorge. As he walked onto the bridge the wind whipped him from side to side. Fearful, he held on and looked down into the void. His head spun. Behind him was his past, a known space from where he came. Before him was his future, an unknown place to where he was going. In an unsettled state, his mind suddenly cleared. Sparked with an unanticipated jolt of energy and creativity, he envisioned a new world filled with possibilities. For Sufi masters like Ibn al-'Arabi, the twelfth-century Andalusian mystic, the old man on the wind-whipped footbridge had experienced *barzakh*, that which connects two things that had been separate – health and illness, life and death, the social and spirit world. For Ibn al-'Arabi, crossing a footbridge that connects two worlds positioned the old man in 'the in-between', a place of existential risk that also inspires creativity and renewal, a space that ultimately provokes fundamental change.

In this chapter, I suggest that anthropologists use the creative power of 'the in-between' – the classic concept of the liminal – as one way to heal the wounds of contemporary social life. My central model for such practice is the sorcerer among the Songhay people of Niger in West Africa. The Songhay sorcerer is a liminal figure who is always already between the village and the bush, between health and illness, between life and death – a vantage that makes him or her a spiritual guardian. From the vantage of the between,

the Songhay sorcerer becomes a keen observer of social relations, a person who dares to use the power of the between to transform social turbulence into social harmony. Like the Songhay sorcerer, or *sohanci*, immigrants, the chronically ill, and anthropologists have long and intense experience with liminality. Like the *sohanci*, they can also be keen public observers of social life who can use the insights derived from liminal experience to chart paths that lead to innovation, invention and a future of greater social harmony and social justice. Through narratives that highlight the creative liminality of sorcery, the immigrant experience, and illness, I attempt to show how the anthropologist can use the public sphere to produce knowledge that makes life sweeter in a contemporary world in which wisdom is in short supply. What could be more important for the future of anthropology? What could be more important for the future of us all?

Barzakh: Exploring the In-Between

When you study the anthropology of religion you are sometimes compelled to stretch your imagination to the limits of comprehension – and beyond. If you allow the imagination to stretch with experience, especially when confronted with the ineffability of something like Victor and Edith Turner's descriptions of *communitas* or a sudden confrontation with death, you often find yourself in what I like to call 'the between' – the space of imagination and artistic creativity. The philosopher N.J.T. Thomas (1999: 109) suggested that 'the principal reason that the imagination is thought to be particularly relevant to the arts arises from the ability of artists to see and to induce the rest of us to see aspects of reality differently or more fully than is ordinary – to see things as we otherwise might not'.

Such an orientation to the imagination is often linked to religious beliefs and to what William James first called 'radical empiricism' – the sensing of the unseen. The great scholar of Sufism, William Chittick (1989: ix–x), following the insights of William James, among others, wrote about the importance of the imagination in Islamic belief and practice: 'In putting complete faith in reason, the West forgot that imagination opens the soul to certain possibilities of perceiving and understanding not available to the rational mind . . . By granting an independent ontological status to imagination, and seeing the visionary realm as the self-revelation of God, Islamic philosophy has gone against the mainstream of Western thought'. The impulse of the imagination enables us to follow a path leading towards a truth of being, a space between things.

In Sufi thought, this space is often called the *barzakh*, the bridge or isthmus, that links two distinct domains – a place that is between things. The

barzakh figures prominently in the works of Ibn al-'Arabi who wrote that the in-between is

something that separates . . . two other things, while never going to one side . . . as, for example, the line that separates shadow from sunlight. God says, 'he let forth the two seas that meet together, between them a *barzakh* they do not over-pass (Koran 55:19); in other words, one sea does not mix with the other . . . Any two adjacent things are in need of *barzakh*, which is neither one nor the other but which possesses the power . . . of both. The *barzakh* is something that separates a known from an unknown, an existent from a non-existent, a negated from an affirmed, and an intelligible from a non-intelligible. (Crapanzano 2003: 57–58; see also Chittick 1989)

Vincent Crapanzano (2003: 64–65) wrote evocatively about the cultural and philosophical significance of the in-between.

If we take the imagination, as Sartre and in his own way Ibn al-'Arabi do, as presenting that which is absent or non-existent, we have to conclude that it is through an activity, which rests on the non-being of its object – the image, that we uncover those gaps, those disjunctive moments of non-being, that punctuate our social and cultural life. The imagination also provides us with the glosses, the rhetorical devices, the narrative manoeuvres, and the ritual strategies to conceal those gaps. We uncover, as it were, non-being through an act that postulates non-being, as we conceal that non-being through a non-being we declare, in ritual at least, to have full being – plenitude. What is more 'real' than objects of ritual? . . . Is it this paradox that leads to the continual (if repetitive) elaborations in ritual and drama, in literature and art, especially and most purely in music, of the asymptotic moment of crossing, that renders imaginative frontiers so menacing as they fascinate and enchant us? Such subterfuge, if one may call it so, is a source of unending social and cultural creativity – or is cessation – through repetition and the declaration of that repetition as ultimate truth.

Following this line of thought, the imagination, in its artistic exuberance, compels us to wake up and see the world from fresh perspectives. This notion underscores Victor and Edith Turner's thinking about *communitas*, and follows the sage advice of Jean Rouch who liked to say that the imagination compels us to tell stories, which give birth to other stories. As I once suggested, 'the imagination always brings us back to the story' (Stoller 2008: 170). These are sometimes tales about events that 'at least for the moment cannot be explained and can barely be described' (Rorty 1979: 370).

The key point here is that in the indeterminate space between things we often experience 'negative capability', the ability, as John Dewey (1929) explained, to creatively thrive in states of incompleteness and contradiction. It is a reality that undermines our unending 'quest for certainty'. The difficult and

risky reality of being between things can not only prompt a reconfiguration of being but can also chart a course towards reinvention.

Sorcery and the In-Between

Songhay elders like to say that if your path is a good, it will be a long and tall one that takes many years to navigate. That path continuously leads you to crossroads that separate one world from another. One of my Songhay mentors, the late Amadu Zima, spent most of his life wandering the spaces that stretch out between things.

During my time in Mehanna, a town on the west bank of the River Niger near the Niger–Mali border, I liked to visit Alfaggeh Abdoulaye, a Muslim cleric who spent much of his time in a small mud-brick room, the dusty study of his compound. He crammed into that room hundreds of books and maps. There we regularly debated the finer points of Muslim theology, the potency of herbal medicine and the limits of science. On my way to these regular visits, I would often see an old man standing near the crumbling wall of his compound, which was across the way from the cleric's house. I would routinely greet him, and he would always return my greetings with what seemed to me a noticeable degree of kindness.

How is your compound?
We are in good health.
How has your day been?
Not one problem.
Would you give my greetings to your family?
They will hear them.

Over many years we exchanged such greetings hundreds of times. Despite the warmth of the greetings, not once did the old man invite me into his home. Indeed, we never had a conversation, but I had no reason to suspect that he might be anything other than a very pleasant person.

One evening I once again saw the old man standing by his compound door, which had been fashioned from a sheet of corrugated tin. As had been our practice, we exchanged warm greetings. This time, though, he waved for me to approach. In his youth he must have been tall and strong, but age had bent him like a water-logged tree branch. Deep lines crisscrossed his square face. Yellowed from years of exposure to dust and wind, his eyes teared with irritation. Even in that dire condition, those eyes suggested a deep kindness.

You know I've been watching you, he said.
Watching me?

You've come here for many years.
 True.
 And each time you greeted me with kindness and respect.
 I nodded.
 You never asked anything of me.
 I nodded again.
 I know your name, but you don't know mine.
 A moment of silence filled the space between us.
 My name is Amadu Zima . . . I like you.
 Not knowing what to say, I remained silent.
 Come into my house so I can tell you my story.

The old man invited me into his compound, which was barren – not a bush or tree growing, no chickens or sheep or goats – just sand, dirt, a few scattered tin bowls, a laundry tub, and an outdoor hearth, and three blackened stones forming a pyramid, on top of which sat a large cast iron pot. There was one rectangular mud-brick house for the old man's wife and daughter, who were not there. I followed the old man into his house, a conical hut with a mud-brick base covered by a thatch roof. The hut's thick walls kept it cool. Amadu Zima slept on a rusted metal bed frame with a straw mattress. We sat down on a frayed palm frond mat he had unrolled in the centre of the hut. Smooth and clean wadi sand made the hut's floor soft and cool.

Amadu Zima noticed that I was staring at what appeared to be a sorcerer's altar at the back side of the hut.

You know about that?
 A little, but not too much.
 We looked at one another and he gave me a warm toothless smile.
 If you want to tell my story, you must get it right. Go and fetch your machine.

I ran to my house, packed my tape recorder in a backpack and made my way back to the old man's house. Here's what Amadu Zima told me about his life.

He was born an orphan on the Niger River island of Sinder. His father, a Wogo man (a Songhay-speaking ethnic group that lives on Niger River islands) died before he was born. His mother died when she gave birth. His father had no brothers or sisters and his mother's people lived far away. A noble family on the island adopted him as a captive, meaning that they clothed, housed and fed him in exchange for his services – work in the village. When he grew into a strong young man, he farmed, fished, and repaired mud-brick houses. Although his 'family' looked after him, Amadu Zima did not like the stigma of being a 'captive', a status not unlike that of a slave.

As a young man, Amadu Zima left Sinder and began to travel. He had no plan other than to walk and meet people. He made his way across the River Niger and walked west. In one village, a farmer hired him to work his millet

fields. After several months, he left that village and continued west, finding another place to work as a farmhand. Eventually he came to Aribinda, a town in Burkina Faso where Kurumba people live. There he met an old man who no longer had the strength to farm his large holdings; his sons had left, and he had no one else to help him.

Amadu Zima went to work for this kind man. During the first planting season, Amadu Zima worked tirelessly. When he harvested what he had sowed, he produced more bundles of millet than the old farmer had ever seen. Amadu Zima lived with the old man for two years. In time, people told him that the old farmer, who seemed unremarkable, was, in fact, a great sorcerer who knew how to make crops flourish – even in conditions of drought. Asking nothing of the old farmer, he laboured for him for seven years. They loved one another like father and son. One day the old man approached Amadu Zima.

Would you marry my daughter, and remain in Aribinda?

I'm not ready to marry, Baba, he replied.

Then what do you want?

The only thing I want, Baba, is magic.

The old sorcerer told Amadu Zima to take his machete and walk to a tall termite hill that rose in the very centre of his millet field. 'Cut it down', he instructed. When Amadu Zima did so he saw a wide deep hole and heard movement from below. A python slowly emerged from the hole. Using the machete, Amadu Zima killed the python and, for good luck, cut it into seven pieces. He returned to the old man's house and showed him the fruits of his labour. The old man smiled at his fictive son, and said: 'Cook one piece of snake a day for seven days. With python in your belly, the magic words I'm about to teach you will carry power'.

Having taught Amadu Zima everything he knew, the old farmer sent his fictive son on his way. Amadu Zima walked south to the land of the Bariba in Northern Benin. There he found an old man who needed a strong hand to help him farm his fields. Amadu Zima's Kurumba magic produced remarkable crop yields – yields that in his long life, the old Bariba man had never seen. For seven years, he worked for the old Bariba man, who housed and fed him. One day Amadu Zima announced that we wanted to return home to Niger. 'What can I give you, my son?' he asked; 'Knowledge of healing plants and magic', he answered.

Amadu Zima continued his life of travel in the spaces between things. Following the seven years he had lived with the Bariba healer, he spent a year with a *sohanci* sorcerer and spirit-possession priest in Sangara, a village in Western Niger. Each of his hosts had wanted Amadu Zima to remain. Each time, he refused, preferring instead to leave with the magical secrets of his masters.

Eventually Amadu Zima, ever an outsider in-between things, settled in Mehanna where his keen observation of human behaviour enabled him to become a renowned healer and village *zima*, the priest of the local possession troupe. Every year, he performed rites that protected crops from pestilence. Every year, he organized a *yenaandi*, the spirit-possession ceremony that ensured ample rains during the planting season. He married his first wife, and soon thereafter welcomed a daughter into the world. For the first time in his life, he had a family and a real home. Even so, he yearned for a son. His wife never again became pregnant. As the years passed Amadu Zima continued to serve the people of Mehanna, who liked and respected him. He knew more about them than they knew about him. That is the way of the sojourner in 'the in-between'.

One year his wife sickened and died. Grief sapped his energy. Then sickness grabbed the wandering healer and spirit-possession priest – a severe case of scoliosis. In continuous pain, he could no longer actively organize spirit-possession ceremonies. What is more, Islamist clerics had settled in Mehanna. In the past Sufi clerics had tolerated spirit possession and the old ways of healing people of village and bush illnesses. The new clerics condemned the old practices. They equated the old ways with *Iblis*, the devil.

Wandering his existential path in the in-between, Amadu Zima adjusted to a solitary life in his compound. People would sometimes visit to seek cures for their illnesses. In time, Amadu Zima had earned enough to marry again, but his new wife never became pregnant. Fewer and fewer people came to see him. Resigned to his life of isolation, he began to notice a white man who greeted him with respect. The white man asked for nothing in return. One day, seven years after he first exchanged greetings with that white man, he invited the anthropologist into his compound and told him the story of his life.

Why are you telling me this?

I would not tell my life to anyone, he answered. I like you. You like me. You want to learn my ways.

Amadu Zima taught me what he knew about the spirits, about plants, and about farming magic.

During one session, Amadu Zima pointed to a tin of Nescafe coffee.

That tin, he said, is for you. Open it.

Inside the tin I discovered a brown mixture – a resin that would, according to Amadu Zima, enable me to walk strongly on my path.

You prepare hot coals in a brazier and sprinkle them with the powder and breathe in the smoke. Take it with you to America, he said, and tell my story.

It has been a very long time since Amadu Zima rejoined the ancestors, and yet his memory is woven into my being. The Nescafe tin he gave me is positioned prominently in my study. From time to time, I open the lid and pinch the resins that he long ago gave to me. I remember the soft gaze of his cloudy eyes and the smooth tone of his voice, a tone that reflected both kindness of heart and sadness of spirit. He led a life filled with the thrill of risk and the despair of disappointment. In the indeterminate space between things, he became a keen observer of life, a custodian of knowledge who did what he could to sweeten the life of the people among whom he lived.

What is his legacy?

Amadu Zima confronted solitude and despair with patient grace. His path was long and tall. Even in the face of uncertainty and difficulty, he walked his path with dignity and determination. When he reached a fork on the road of his life, he took risks. He chose his new direction and accepted the consequences. Amadu Zima's life in the in-between suggests that sorcerers are not only keen observers of social life, but the custodians of knowledge. The orphan from Sinder spent years patiently acquiring knowledge, which he refined during his short time in the world. In time, he then passed it on to the next generation. As his story demonstrates, no matter the difficulties we face, when we tap into negative capability, we expand our imagination and create ways to ensure that knowledge is conveyed to future generations. That was Amadu Zima's path and his gift to the world.

Immigration and the In-Between

When people leave home and emigrate to a new land, they find themselves between the familiar and unfamiliar, between host and home country. Emigrants leave behind not just their languages and cultures, but the smells and tastes of being home-in-the-world. Then, as immigrants, they must adjust to new sets of alien circumstances – new languages, new customs, new rules and new regulations – and different and sometimes disagreeable ways of doing things.

Even after many years in a new host country, do immigrants ever feel at home? Do they ever fit it? Are they ever fully integrated as 'one of us'? Like the sorcerer wandering the dangerous spaces between the social and spirit worlds, immigrants find themselves always already in indeterminate spaces. Years after their arrival, many of them remain strangers in a strange land, wondering if they have said 'the right thing' or worrying about committing a behavioural faux pas that might reveal the depths of their otherness. Sometimes they fear they have crossed a regulatory line that might result in deten-

tion and eventual deportation to a homeland that may have changed so much that they might feel lost in the country of their birth. Having lived in a host country, they, too, will have changed. Where is the immigrant's true home?

Boube Mounkaila, a Songhay merchant from Niger who sells 'leather' bags at the Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market in New York City, thinks about these questions each and every day. Boube came to New York City in 1989 as a young man. When he arrived, an African cabby directed him to an address where he might find compatriots in Harlem. He easily found an enclave of immigrants from Niger who offered him a bed in a crowded, bug-infested two-room apartment – just upstairs from Sylvia's famous soul food restaurant on Martin Luther King Boulevard. He bonded with his flat-mates and, being a particular quick-witted young man, easily learned idiomatic English. He had a natural ease with people, which enabled him to sell his wares – knock-off purses – at a brisk pace. He started selling bags on 34th Street in Midtown Manhattan near Macy's. In reaction to complaints from this up-market business district, then headed by none other than Donald J. Trump, the police dispersed the African street traders. Boube and his compatriots relocated to East 86th Street, and worked that busy street until the police moved in again. Finally, Boube moved up to Harlem's 125th Street, where his street table offerings attracted local Harlemites as well as American and European tourists. In time, the City of New York, citing health hazards, shut down that bustling street market and moved many of the merchants to land owned by the Malcolm Shabazz Mosque. Boube set up shop on 116th Street at the Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market, where he runs his business to this day.

When he came to New York City, Boube left his wife and young child in Niger. He promised to send them money every month, and said that his time in America would be short and profitable. He predicted that he would return home in three or four years, and that upon his homecoming, he would have the financial wherewithal to provide a sweet life for his immediate and extended family. However, increasingly strict immigration regulations, which Boube and his friends studied, prevented him from visiting home.

To shorten a very long story, Boube remained stuck in between New York City and Niger for twenty-five years. In time, he knew enough about American finance to create a small stock portfolio. Living the metropolitan life in New York City, he moved in with a Japanese woman who became his common law wife. They had two children – a boy and a girl, who grew up learning Japanese, Arabic, Songhay and the particular kind of English that New Yorker's speak (Stoller 2002).

From his vantage in between host and home countries, among three languages (Songhay, French and English), and in between two modes of commerce (street capitalism and Muslim conventions of trade), Boube, like the

Songhay sorcerers of Niger, embraced negative capability, which not only enabled him to take risks but to see clearly into his future. He transformed himself into a creative trader, a citizen of the world.

But life in the in-between can be filled with stress. He missed his wife and daughter. He missed his relatives in Karma, a village on the east bank of the River Niger. In the late afternoon, he missed the wind-carried aroma of grilled meat and savoury sauces. He missed the slow pace of life in which people took time to sit down and talk with one another. Boube also had to worry about his immigration status. If he visited his wife and daughter in Niger, would he be able to return to the United States, his business and his New York family?

After twenty-five years of longing for Niger, Boube finally visited his family in Karma, Niger. His family and neighbours greeted him like a conquering hero. He had had the courage to step out onto the wind-whipped footbridge. Against considerable odds, Boube had returned home. He built a new compound for his family. He purchased land for a riverside orchard of mango, lemon and guava trees. He acquired a small dry goods shop and asked his brother to run it. He had become a big man in his village, but he felt like an outsider. Life in Niger had changed. His life in New York City had changed him.

Ill at ease, he eagerly returned to New York City. When I saw him soon after his return, we discussed the fate of immigrants.

I thought I'd love it in Niger, he said. But I didn't. I couldn't wait to leave.

There's an American writer, I told him, who wrote a great book, *You Can't Go Home Again*.

That's God's truth, Boube said in Songhay. God's truth.

As Boube Mounkaila's story suggests, life in the in-between is not an easy one. It's not easy to live with incompleteness and uncertainty. It is far more comfortable to observe the wind-whipped the footbridge than to wander onto it and see clearly what the future might hold. Amadu Zima wandered onto it, as did Boube Mounkaila. In both cases, their odysseys have been filled with wonder and disappointment. Beyond the wonder and disappointment, their stories showcase the creative power of the in-between to precipitate degrees of positive change.

Illness and the In-Between

Serious illness is a challenge to our being-in-the-world. Most of the time we live in the village of the healthy. In that space, we rarely think long and hard about our health. If we get sick with the flu, we suffer aches and pains, take

some medicine and, in time, return to our normal physical state in the village of the healthy. Some of us, however, have been consigned to the village of the sick, a space in which treatment brings us to remission rather than to cure. In remission, you are neither sick nor healthy. You are between health and illness – an indeterminate state from which there is no exit. You interact with people – even loved ones – who live blithely in the village of the healthy. They tell you to have a positive attitude. They say you must be courageous and strong as you wage ‘war’ against your illness. You know what they know, but they do not know what you know or what you experience in the village of the sick. Faced with mortality, how can they know what it feels like to think about your illness each and every day. You seek out other residents in the village of the sick. You may not know them, but without saying a word, they know what you know, and that shared connection gives you a measure of comfort.

The lethal insecurities in the village of the sick can be bleak. Even so, there can be many existential surprises in these indeterminate spaces. Being continuously between health and illness can sometimes bring insight and unimagined revelation. Like the old man on the wind-whipped footbridge, the cancer patient may well experience an epiphany, an existential clarity that compels profound and productive change.

I have long lived in the village of the sick. Diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin Lymphoma (NHL), an incurable blood cancer, I have been in remission for more than fifteen years. When I first endured chemotherapy and immunotherapy treatments, the prospect of a premature death propelled me to think clearly about my life. Given the pressing finitude of my state, what changes should I make? How might I best use the time I had left? What would be my legacy?

As an anthropologist I had been very much concerned with my scholarly career. I have written scores of ‘proper’ research proposals as well as a series of essays and books. Like most of my colleagues, I hoped that my work would refine disciplinary thinking and bring me a modicum of disciplinary recognition. Prior to my diagnosis, treatment and remission, I never wondered why I was doing anthropology. Cancer changed my professional priorities. Caught in a space in between health and illness, I thought it important to write more narrative ethnographies, memoirs and fiction – all in an attempt to reach a broader audience. As you can tell from this chapter, I drifted more and more towards storytelling in order to create a connection between myself – the anthropologist-writer – and a broad-based audience of readers. If my stories were well told, they just might make a reader think a new thought or even feel a new feeling. Following the example of the Songhay elders who taught me so much, I also came to understand the importance of mentorship. Like Amadu Zima I realized that I, too, was a

custodian of knowledge. Was it not now my obligation to pass on what skills and knowledge I had acquired to the next generation of scholars? With the value of hindsight, I understood that this sense of obligation conformed to the Songhay theory of learning. As the Songhay elders like to say: the most important task of the master sorcerer, master blacksmith, or master weaver is to pass on her or his knowledge to the next generation who, in turn, will use it in their own way. They, in turn, would then pass it on to successive generations. At that existential point in between health and illness, in between life and death, I walked onto the wind-whipped footbridge – the *barzakh*, a space where I might understand my past and imagine my future (see Stoller 2004, 2008, 2014).

Anthropologists and the In-Between

Anthropologists have long been wanderers in the spaces between things. We continuously live among languages, cultures and worlds. As scholars who engage in long periods of fieldwork, we become experts at ‘being there’. Then for even longer periods of time, we return ‘home’ to a state of ‘being here’ (see Geertz 1985). Indeed, some of us find ourselves in the nether state, following Merleau-Ponty (1964), of being everywhere and nowhere, which powerfully defines the imponderable qualities of *barzakh* – being between two separate entities.

Being between things shapes anthropological practice-in-the-world. Given its centrality, it is important to refine our thinking about being in between things. Clearly, there is a long disciplinary history of writing about ‘the in-between’, especially from the analytical perspective of Victor and Edith Turner and their notions of liminality and *communitas*. ‘Liminal entities’, Turner wrote in his classic work, *The Ritual Process*, ‘are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed custom, convention, and ceremonial (V. Turner 1969: 98). In that same essay, Turner described the traits of people who find themselves in liminal states. He suggested that they tend to be humble, and willing to uncomplainingly submit to orders. Sometimes, they might submit to painful processes – ritual scarification, tests of endurance, or chemotherapy and radiation treatments. The Turner model of liminality showcased how processes of transformation propel the passage from one status to another, from child to adult, from single to married, from novice to master.

For Songhay sorcerers, immigrants, cancer patients or anthropologists, liminality is usually a state without resolution. When cancer patients are in remission, they are permanently stuck in between health and illness. Even if immigrants are well established in their new situation, they continue to

find themselves between host and home countries. In continuous liminality, which is the lived reality of the Songhay sorcerer, the immigrant, the cancer patient, and the anthropologist, you are always in the in-between, and can never return to your previous status. Being continuously liminal means that people may well essentialize you as an apprentice sorcerer, an immigrant, a cancer patient, or an anthropologist. It is often a state that gives rise to a sense of social connection so powerful that it can undermine previously noticed differences in age, gender, social class and ethnicity. Victor and Edith Turner referred to this state as *communitas*. In 2012, Edith Turner wrote that *communitas* ‘occurs through the readiness of people – perhaps from necessity – to rid themselves of their concern for status and dependence of structures, and see their fellows as they are’ (E. Turner 2012: 1). She goes on to critique an anthropology that diminishes the importance of *communitas* in human experience:

Anthropology has given the world a great store of scientific understanding of society, its bones and muscles, its illnesses, but it has not allowed itself to get mixed up in such matters as person-to-person feeling unless they are analysable and unless the analysis shows some kind of objectivity about human identity and consciousness. This book, however, tackles *communitas*, togetherness itself, taking the reader to the edge of the precipice of knowledge – and beyond, over the barrier of the scientists’ analysis and into experience itself. Light draws on what the real thing is, and we feel lucky it exists. Then we can make discoveries.

In *communitas*, which results from being in a position of liminality, we step out onto the wind-whipped footbridge and experience the trials, tribulations and revelations of *barzakh* – of being always already in between things. What can our anthropological vantage in the in-between contribute to public discourse?

Creativity, Invention and Public Anthropology

We live in a world filled with seemingly insoluble problems. Carbon emissions have increased at such alarming rates that climate experts have had to push forward their dire predictions of ecological devastation. In the face of climate change denial, feckless politicians, especially in the United States, do nothing to confront the most important issue of our times. Instead, they roll back previously insufficient environmental regulations. Our air is getting dirtier. Our water, which is in increasingly short supply, is less safe to drink. Droughts and floods disrupt our supply of food, which, given decreased health regulation, is increasingly unsafe to eat. The future looks even bleaker if you add to this list an ever-expanding income inequality that is in large

measure linked to widespread political dysfunction. From the creative vantage of the in-between, what can we do, if anything, to change a pattern that leads us towards eventual extinction?

One strategy is to more fully develop a media-conscious public anthropology. Among many others, I have long advocated a more fully developed public anthropology in which we extend slowly developed insights into media-saturated fast culture. Such a practice would be a form of 'guerilla anthropology', a term coined by Bruce Kapferer at the outset of his ongoing cross-cultural project on human inequality. In an interview for the University of Bergen Magazine, Kapferer said:

To me, in a sense, guerilla anthropology is anthropology. Anthropology stands outside of all disciplines. To put it crudely, most of the disciplines practised at universities have been born in the nineteenth century and in the history of nationalism, which began the modern state . . . Many unexamined assumptions regarding the nature and possibility of human beings were present that required challenge. Western philosophy offered a radical critique but it, nonetheless, could not escape the limitation of many assumptions that were culturally and historically embedded in it . . . But anthropology also took seriously other systems. These other systems were not necessarily bound by the same principles or frameworks of understanding that our own worlds were. Anthropology is a guerilla discipline in the sense that it comes from outside a largely Western comprehension of things, and challenges ruling assumptions . . . The critical guerilla anthropological perspective will lead to important reassessments of conceptual and theoretical perspectives that are still dominating discussions on problems associated with inequality. (Kapferer 2018)

Most of the guerilla anthropologists I have met understand, I think, that the old colonialist ways of solving social problems or understanding the world do not work anymore. Our various systems of politics, economics and scholarship have become ineffectual and counterproductive. In this context, the guerilla approach to anthropology, which emerges from long-standing experience in the in-between, is perfectly suited to living in, coping with, and understanding contemporary social worlds. In my work as a public blogger, I have attempted to present an anthropological perspective on contemporary social and political issues. In that work I often extend the wisdom of the aforementioned Songhay people (an exercise in guerilla anthropology) to the pragmatic analysis of our social, political and existential issues.

But is public anthropology public enough? Are our slowly derived insights reaching narrowly defined audiences. Even if a greater number of scholars have become the masters of expressive accessibility through narrative ethnography, documentary film, drama, poetry and media installations, who is consuming what we produce? In the widespread discussion about digital media and public anthropology, one element is often overlooked:

the power of the story and storytelling. Indeed, powerful experiences like *communitas* defy denotation; ‘*communitas* can only be conveyed through stories’ (E. Turner 2012: 1).

Jean Rouch understood this principle. During the 1980s, I spent time in his ramshackle projection room, which was just upstairs – some very creaky stairs – from his ramshackle office in the Musée de L’Homme. Bringing their films to Rouch’s projection room, young filmmakers sought commentary from the master of the documentary. Rouch would usually ask the same set of questions:

Is the story a good one? Does it work?
Will the story connect with the audience?
If the story doesn’t work, how can a better one be imagined?

From my perspective, which has emerged from experiences in the Songhay world, the world of cancer, and the world of anthropology – worlds very much in between things – the capacity to understand and transform the social world emerges from the story. Narratives can compel people to imagine their future. Given the overwhelming technological changes that have transformed contemporary social life, it is easy for anthropologists to forget Jean Rouch’s central question: where is the story? (Stoller 2018).

As the old man in the Sufi parable came to understand, the existential realities of the footbridge sharpen the past and foresee the future. From the vantage of the in-between, we are better able to find the story and foundation for social change.

If we find the story, we also find ourselves.

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