



MAGIC CHILDREN: HAITI

Daniel Morden

Perhaps they don't understand the story. Perhaps their teacher has told them to be on their best behaviour in front of the visitor. Passers-by lean over the hedge behind the school and stare at the gurning stranger.

The big moment comes. Do any of the children have a story for me? A ten-year-old girl puts up her hand. I fetch her up to the front of the "classroom". She takes the tape recorder and begins.

What I heard then, and every day for the next ten days, was the best storytelling I have ever heard from children. The oral tradition was obviously alive and well. She was charming and chilling by turns. Although I had only a vague idea what she was saying her performance was

heard tales of oracular heads, like the Maginogion's *Branwen* and tales of foolishness, like *The Risca Cuckoos*. But the child's rendition made each story Haitian. If in the story a man was to be punished the King wouldn't throw him into the darkest dungeon: the man would be sent to the Police Station. Given Haiti's history that was much more scary. Hunger and disease were constant presences, prompting desperate – and often awful – action.

When I returned to Wales I had to tell these stories as widely as possible. I've told them in churches, schools, theatres and parks. Always they provide strong curiosity. Children are fascinated by their starkness, the dreamlike mood that pervades them. They love to pore over my photographs and hear recordings of their Haitian peers telling, chanting and singing. Their favourite tale is the story of the girl who falls in love with a freshwater merman. Often I tell it alongside *The Bride of Llyn Y Fan Fach*.

Recently I discovered that here the bedtime story is (reputedly) on the way out. British parents, I read, have such hard working lives they no longer have time to read or tell their children stories. British children say that their fathers often drop off in the middle of the story they are reading. Scientists report that the bedtime story is very valuable. From stories children learn how to structure speech and narrative, and so become more articulate. Stories help to teach a child about the world, the twists and setbacks of life. A bedtime story helps the child sleep.

Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. It has much to teach us.

Copies of *MAGIC CHILDREN* by Daniel Morden and several other publications created by the Wales based Charity *The Haiti Fund* are available from Daniel. Email him on herla32@aol.com. All profits from sales will go towards supporting Haitian schools.

Photograph by Phil Cope.

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magnetic. She sang passages and called to her audience who called back. Imagine a ten year old telling (and singing) a love story in front of teenagers.

At first Octave tried to simultaneously translate, but he couldn't keep up. The stories came out in a torrent. The day after each session he would deliver his written translations. Only then would I discover what I had been listening to. There were bizarre, scatological stories, poignant, tragic stories, mysterious and romantic stories. Some were hilarious, some shocking. Many of the tales were familiar. I knew European versions. I

I'm standing in front of some thirty children at my first school, *Ecole Maranahta*. We're as much outside as in – the building has a tin roof held up with poles and no walls. The children range from five-year olds to teenagers. Although they live in tiny huts with no electricity or running water, they are composed, perfect in pressed uniforms. The girls have ribbons in their hair. I'm staying at the university, with all mod cons: I look as though I've been dragged through a hedge backwards. My T-shirt is stained with sweat. The children sit, straight and serious. Through our translator, Octave Perceval, I introduce myself and tell them why I've come. I am a storyteller. I will tell a story from Wales. If they like the story, could they tell me one back? Maybe a story they heard from their parents or grandparents, a story from once upon a time, of Bouki, and the tricks of Ti Malis, or maybe a story of magic. I will record their stories and take them to Wales. I will make a book to send back for use in the school. It will feature the stories I told from Wales and the stories I heard in Haiti.

I have no idea if they know any stories. Perhaps poverty and social pressures mean the oral tradition has collapsed. The only aid work that seems to get through is via missionaries. Perhaps, as in 19th century Wales, the Church frowns on folktales as superstitious pagan things.

I tell my story. It is *The Cow on the Roof*, a gently humorous tale of rural chaos. Not a flicker of a smile from my audience.