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Topic

The factors affecting retention and retelling of Trinidadian folkloric knowledge among the young adult (18-25) and older (60+) age groups in Trinidad and Tobago.

Abstract

This paper seeks to address the concerns about the disappearance of folkloric knowledge among Trinidadian youth. This research follows the hypothesis that there is a correlation between variations in form, content and context of folklore and its memorability and likelihood of being passed onto the next generation via the oral tradition. Participants were asked a series of questions relating to their personal experience of acquiring the folkloric knowledge, and analysis was performed on results to ascertain the value they placed on Trinidadian folklore, their conjecture about its future and willingness to preserve it. Upon completion of the research it was surmised that the younger generation does not have a significant lack in interest in folklore, and in fact, surpass their elders in the value they place on it, however both generations lack confidence in their own ability to carry on the tradition, as well as faith in the oral medium itself. This should incentivize the population to adapt this knowledge to appeal to an increasingly audiovisual technological society with different concerns.
Introduction

Folkloric knowledge and the carrying on of the oral tradition is a vital part of cultural preservation. As Sperber (1996) noted, “To explain culture… is to explain why and how some ideas happen to be contagious” (p. 1) Certainly, this description applies to folklore, a “stable, cohesive mechanism, where traditional, often anonymous, communication is evidenced, imitated, and transmitted within and between generational groups.” Besson (52). Thus the contagion, or manner of spread is intergenerational. This definition is incomplete however, as it ignores the role that child culture, that is, horizontal transmission of folkloric knowledge. The word folklore is etymologically suggests the collective knowledge or instruction of a people or a culture. Historically this has been accomplished using the voice, that is, orally, as language was one of the first technologies developed specifically for the transmission of knowledge. The oral tradition, as it is called, is especially important to Trinidadian and Tobagonian culture. The relatively young nation is home to one of the most ethnically diverse populations of the Caribbean due to the history of West African enslavement and East Indian and Chinese indentureship. Under the duress of often deliberately placed obstacles to communication (such as the separation of peoples from different nations and tribes), the creation of new language systems was necessitated, the uprooting of cultures was also the catalyst for the hybridization, mutation and creolisation of the oral traditions of those Caribbean societies to suit the socio-cultural and entertainment needs of this new nation.

For example one Trinbagonian tale which finds its origins in ancient West African
customs is that of Gang gang Sarah, a witch who is thwarted in her flight back home because of eating salt and losing her powers, similarly the Soucouyant, a woman who sheds her skin and transforms into a ball of fire by night can be thwarted by salt. This bears a striking similarity to the belief held by the Vai of Liberia that a witch or sorcerer that removes his/her skin can be defeated by a sprinkling of salt and pepper as a desiccating agent. “This is probably one of the roots of the mythology of the soucouyant of Trinidad” (Carol Boyce Davies, 815) Furthermore the these stories or traditions are subject to the influence of others belonging to more dominant or visible cultures; children are much more likely to know Aesop’s fable of the tortoise and the hare than “How The Tortoise Break He Back”.

This immediately contradicts with the description of folklore as “stable” and this investigation purports that oral tradition is inherently fluid by the nature of its medium (live, dynamic retellings) which must adapt to its environment in order to remain relevant and contagious.

It is irrefutable that folklore has some influence on the individual, as J. D. Elder, a Trinbagonian anthropologist, relates folklore to identity formation. Despite holding significant interest within academia, Caribbean folklore remains undervalued, seen by the general population as promoting “low-culture” values, both historically as in Isabel Maclean’s 1910 book which described the “dreadful beliefs” of the “Jamaican Negroes” and in the present day as these stories are referred to pejoratively in the common parlance as “Bungo talk.” Similarly this attitude is popular in Trinidad, the subject of famous playwright Freddie Kissoon's play "Zingay" being the satirization and derision of the lower class Trinidadian's superstitious fanaticism. Thus its potential as a didactic tool has been largely ignored. (Anatol, 2000).

The importance of Trinidadian folklore can be underlined by the presence of a variety
of literary works, collections and anthologies recounting these stories, some of which have been translated into various languages both for international and local sale. Trinididian folkloric imagery can be seen reflected in various Carnival costumes and bands such as Matthew Alexis’ “The Magic Dwelling of Papa Bois” representing Downtown Port of Spain and taking the stage in the Parade of Kings in 2004, Carnival, a highly televised and internationally promoted event this would suggest a large amount of public appeal to the aesthetic of these stories and characters. Similarly, many companies and organisations find in their naming some of the icons of these stories, so that we have the NGC’s Bocas Lit Fest collaboration titled “Douen Islands” while Papa Bois shares the name of the eponymous Papa Bois Conservation organisation. Folklore serves a variety of functions within the culture. It serves to instill social norms and etiquette, as well as as a tool to encourage obedience in children, for example, in the induction of fear in disobedient children by assuring them they will be more easily fall prey to douens. They can serve as pedagogical and mythological tools, used to explain natural phenomena for example in How the Tortoise Cracked His Shell. They are used as framing devices for expressing political opinions, as in Leroy Clarke’s famous statement that Trinidad has become a “douen society”, “For me, the interesting description is the douen facing one way and the feet the opposite way. It is as if it doesn’t know whether it is going or coming.” (Leroy Clarke) in which he associates the backwards feet of this character with the country’s lack of direction, a term which subsequently became part of the parlance of news editors and political correspondents. Another example is in the song Lagahoo and La Diablesse by Trevor “Tulu” Burnett, which compares important political figures to these creatures. Thus it can be agreed that folklore is valuable to the individual as well as the wider Trinididian public.

The issue has been raised with increasing frequency that Trinididian folklore is in jeopardy of disappearance, with modernization frequently blamed for this phenomenon. The
invention of the television and subsequent influx of visual American media after the 1960s is of particular interest, as this is seen to have taken the place and role of entertainment of children. However the aging population of those who still practice storytelling as well as a reluctance to take up this tradition among younger persons is also credited. It is thus of the greatest importance that a closer look be taken at the phenomenon of disappearance and mutation of these stories be undertaken so that a strategy for optimization of their continued survival and propagation be found.

Methodology

This investigation, following the example of previous research was carried out via a series of face-to-face interviews with Trinibagonian citizens. This was effected for two age groups; an older age group consisting of individuals aged 60 and older, and a young-adult age group consisting of individuals from ages 18 to 25, based on the premise that the youngest generation of adults are less likely to be familiar with folkloric information and less likely to retell these stories themselves, as well as the belief that the integration of television into Trinidadian society following the nation’s Independence in 1962 was a contributing factor in the demise of the oral tradition. It was established that it was important to establish a familiar rapport with interviewees in order to encourage natural responses that spoke to personal experience and opinion rather than shorter, more sanitized or reserved responses. This was achieved by allowing time for the exchange of pleasantries and casual discussion beforehand not relating to the topic, as well as by recording audio via a cellphone which was placed on a table between interviewer and interviewee, which was less invasive than using a microphone or camera, which could cause interviewees to feel more self-conscious. Questions about
income and salary, as well as about the interviewee’s religious beliefs were also avoided as they could be deemed as too personal, leading to a breakdown in the established familiar rapport. As an unfortunate effect of this choice, results could not be analysed in relation to socioeconomic status, however it is strongly advised that further research be conducted into the effect of this factor. Interviews were prefered to surveys for a number of reasons. Primarily, surveys, written in hard copy or distributed online privilege the younger age group, who are relatively less likely to suffer from visual impairments, illiteracy or lack of technological competence needed to fill an online survey. This was also beneficial as it allowed for the quantifying and analysis of lateness of responses, which could be used as an indicator of how well the subject was able to recall the relevant information, which would provide evidence as to whether or not the cognitive aspect of aging itself would have a negative influence on ability to transmit folkloric knowledge. It was also observed in the conduction of test interviews that responses were more spontaneous in the context of a face-to-face interview, i.e. they were subjected to less self-censure or, especially in the cases of the younger test subjects, researched responses.

Questions were also posed in simple, layman’s terms, relying on local parlance and English Lexicon Creole English wherever possible in order to be as accessible as possible to those lacking formal educational backgrounds. Questions regarding earliest exposure to Trinidadian folklore, emotional reaction to these tellings, media in which folklore was presented (oral tellings, video, musical or rhythmic, via radio or in illustrations as well as across different contexts, such as at home by parents and guardians, by other children, by teachers within the educational context or by religious or community elders were also observed. This was done in order to test the significance of different forms and sources of folkloric knowledge to assess whether they were more or less memorable. After supplying geographical and birth information, interviewees were each asked to name 5 children’s
stories they remember “off the top of their head[s]” they were then asked the same question, but specifically prompted for “Trinidadian folklore stories.” This was done so as to determine whether Trinidadian folklore factored automatically into their memory of storytelling or whether it occupied a less privileged place in their memory. Whether they could name as many Trinidadian folklore stories or characters as non-Trinidadian ones was also observed in order to assess the degree of dominance of external folklore. Interviewees were also prompted to name a favourite character originating from Trinidadian folklore. This was done in order to ascertain whether they had any significant attachment to or identification with particular types of story or characters, to assess the influence of content of the stories themselves, as well as further helping determine whether the individual had a positive or negative attitude towards Trinidadian folklore. Any significant hesitation was noted, as well as the positive, negative or neutral emotions with which they associated these stories, in order to perceive whether appeal to emotions influenced the retention of folklore.

The role of family and community values on influencing retention of this knowledge was also assessed by asking about the degree to which these retellings were encouraged by parents and religious leaders forbidden. The value which the interviewees attached to the folklore was ascertained through questioning whether they were presented to the stories or characters in an educational context against whether they themselves would encourage this practice. Finally questions appealing to personal opinion were posed, asking whether interviewees felt there was a significant risk of disappearance of Trinidadian folklore and whether they themselves would feel comfortable retelling these stories to a small audience. This was done to gain insight on whether there is some truth to the claim that the younger generation lacks the knowledge, confidence and optimism to continue the oral tradition. After this series of interviews were conducted, members of the community involved in folkloric preservation efforts were sought out and a similar interview was done. Questions
about personal experience with folklore were posed to get an idea as to whether the factors identified as rendering this knowledge more memorable and valuable would also lend themselves to making someone more likely to be involved in preservation.

Chapter 1: Documenting Folklore

The existing academic research concerning analysis of the oral tradition in Trinidad was found to be limited, focusing on a literary approach and usually found in the introductory chapters of folklore collections.

Existing literature was generally in the form of collections of folk tales rather than research about them. One example is in Pandit Deonarine G. Maharaj and Jagat Birbal Ramdial’s collection of East-Indian folk tales. The pandit states that “the popularity enjoyed by the cinema, television and newspapers has served as a form of distraction and weakens the spirit of the Kheesa,” where kheesa means the oral tradition which exists in competition with the aforementioned visual media.

The method of collecting these folk tales involved visiting areas with significant Indo-Trinidadian populations such as Penal, Arouca, Tunapuna, La Romaine, El Dorado, Caroni, California, Palmyra, Caratal, Cunupia and Princess Town. Although creating the distinction between Trinidadian folk-tales of African and East Indian origin is useful for literary purposes, I noted that this is based on the presupposition that Trinidadian folk-tales develop in isolation of one another and without mutual influence. Ashram B. Maharaj also conducted a study based on data collected between 1989 and 1990 privileged older interviewees, with

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1 Several stories were collected by D. Maharaj between 1930 and 1990 with illustrations by Vishnu Roopnarine, along with A. B. Maharaj’s data in Indo-Trinidadian Folk Tales in the Oral Tradition
no teller under 50 years old. The fact that some interviewees died over the course of the study increases the impetus to record these stories in film and audio, “so that the relationship between the past and the present, the old and the new, may be understood and in some cases, restored.” Common themes were highlighted, motifs suggesting a hazy link with the context of India, such as the role of King and Queen characters as well as those suggesting some mutation, such as in Fisherman and the Conch-Shell, which is a typical envy-your-neighbour tale but which reflects the environment and struggles of post-indentureship as the main character leaves the estate for work on the sea, unwilling to return to life in his father and law’s home. Topical issues were also encountered in these stories, such as in The Wit of the Advisor, in which an inter-religious marriage prevails against a scheming attempt to stop it. Thus, we have our first examples of how folklore adapts to its audience in order to remain relevant. The 1950s saw a revival of Hinduism\(^2\) in which the community “undertook a radical new trajectory” (Steven Vertovec, 71) following a period of conversion of East-Indians to Presbyterianism to provide them upward mobility, however little investigation was done into the influence this religious conversion and subsequent cultural revival might have influenced the content or form of the stories.

Anansi the spider is the most popular folkloric character within the Caribbean, and thus the subject of several story books and academic papers. Anansi’s Journey looks at new data on Anansi from both Ghana, taken as the source of the folktale and Jamaica, where the tale has been brought and creolised. The author points out the lack of sustained analysis of Anansi tales having ever been undertaken on such a scale, especially from a cross-cultural or historical angle. Studies were conducted across West African regions. One factor noted was that tales concerning a physically vulnerable animal playing the universal archetype of

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\(^2\) See Vertovec, pages 60-71 for an explanation for how India’s independence spurred on these changes following a period of Christian-like concessions being made to increase respectability of the community.
trickster, such as the character that would become Brer Rabbit, otherwise known as Konpè Lapenn, were the ones which thrived the most in the Caribbean region. It can be regarded as appealing to the “profound longing within the human psyche for freedom or to thwart oppressive forces.” (Ivan Van Sertima, Trickster: The Revolutionary Hero). This study notes the written translation of oral tradition removes the stories contextually and aesthetically from the subject matter and that research was usually only done to accomplish a published collection of stories, such as “Akan-Ashanti Folk Tales” by Rattray in 1930.

I would also like to note that this method of translation privileges a singular interpretation of each story, rather than reflecting the variation which would exist regionally or from teller to teller. This effect could be exacerbated with the passage of time as other collections are written informed by existing literature rather than recorded oral retellings. “The West African Folk Tales”, published in 1917 was written by trainee teachers restricted its analysis to the Gold Coast. This smaller sample size allowed for a less generalized view of the retellings, however, William H. Barker and Cecilia Sinclair influenced the translation of the stories from Twi, inculcating them with British cultural traits and Aesop-like morals in order to make them palatable for sale in England. Rattray explains the Asante tales were a medium through which the people could air political criticism through mimicry of elders personified by other characters. “The tales mirror more or less accurately the ideas of the people and their general outlook on life.” Subsequent to this change in aesthetic was the 19th century popularity of “Anansi stories” with the white Caribbean populations and Europeans alike, with the publication of many more collections. One such collector expressed in an 1899 Gleaner article that the tradition of Anansi tales was actually at risk of dying out, citing emancipation and modernization as to blame. It can thus be considered that the sentiment that folk-tales are dying out is nothing new, but part of the awareness of the fluidity and precarity inherent to this tradition. However, none of these studies probe into the factors influencing
the sustained popularity of a folk-tale. This will be the subject under this paper’s investigation.

Chapter 2: Analysing the Responses

The following chapter presents the data collected from both age groups, with quantifiable information tabulated and qualitative details analysed afterwards. “TF” here is an acronym for Trinidadian Folklore.

Table 1: showing responses of the interviewees born before Trinidadian independence (aged 60+) to questions based on Trinidadian folklore.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Interviewee</th>
<th>Dolly</th>
<th>Paul</th>
<th>Lucille</th>
<th>Carol</th>
<th>Rudy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>Arima</td>
<td>Woodbrook, Port of Spain</td>
<td>Sangre Grande</td>
<td>Sangre Grande</td>
<td>St. James Port of Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TF stories recalled</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-TF stories recalled</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family attitude</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotive response</td>
<td>Disbelieving</td>
<td>Fearful, excited, amused, believing</td>
<td>Fearful, disbelieving</td>
<td>Excited, amused, believing</td>
<td>Disbelieving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believed that TF should be taught in schools</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believed that TF was at risk.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favourite folkloric character</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Anansi</td>
<td>La Diabla</td>
<td>La Diabla</td>
<td>Papa Bois</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary sources of TF</td>
<td>Oral telling</td>
<td>Oral telling, books</td>
<td>Oral telling, newspaper articles</td>
<td>Oral telling, newspaper articles</td>
<td>Oral telling, newspaper articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believed they could retell TF stories.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Maybe</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 showing responses of the young adult group of interviewees (ages 18-25) to questions based on Trinidadian folklore.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Interviewee</th>
<th>Ridje</th>
<th>Tyler</th>
<th>Joshua</th>
<th>Nasha</th>
<th>Kafrika</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>Lopinot</td>
<td>Signal Hill, Tobago</td>
<td>St. Ann’s</td>
<td>San Fernando</td>
<td>Belmont</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TF stories recalled</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-TF stories recalled</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family attitude</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family told stories</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotive response</td>
<td>Fearful, believing</td>
<td>Amused</td>
<td>Amused</td>
<td>Excited, amused, believing</td>
<td>Excited, fearful, believing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believed that TF should be taught in schools</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Believed that TF was at risk.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Favourite folkloric character**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Duppies</th>
<th>Papa Bois</th>
<th>Douens</th>
<th>La Diablesse</th>
<th>Anansi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Primary sources of TF**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Oral telling, books, school</th>
<th>Oral telling, extra-curricular</th>
<th>Oral telling, school</th>
<th>School, oral telling by friends</th>
<th>Audio tapes, books, oral telling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Believed they could retell TF stories.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Maybe</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Maybe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Analysis of Results**

Folklore seems to have taken on a different role, according to the responses to questions about the interviewees first exposure to storytelling. Generally, the older group reported having devoted sessions of storytelling. Carol, the 74 year old female said “you know you’d sit around outside in the night and somebody would give you the story of big belly uhm tin foot and so on” and others mentioned sitting in the living room with maternal relatives or during a wake ceremony as was the case for Lucille, aged 94, while those of the younger group referred almost exclusively to bedtime stories. This potentially influenced the perception of the folklore in ways outside of the scope of this study, although the trend seemed to be that those in the younger group regarded folklore as mythology rather than entertainment, and reported amusement and excitement with the least frequency. It was possible that incorporation of folklore into extra-verbal forms, resembling the cultural products most popularly consumed, were most fixed in the memory of the younger group, who reported books, films and illustrations taking precedence over oral storytelling in their minds.

One of the most obvious results of the investigation was that almost none of the respondents made reference to folklore stories of Indo-Trinidadian origin. This may have been due to the sample consisting of a majority of Afro-Trinbagonians, however I noted that Indo-Trinidadian respondents were able to describe stories and characters of African origin. Only 2 out of the 10 candidates were Indo-Trinidadian, however the only mention of such
characters were jinns, by Nasha (aged 21). It could thus be surmised that the idea of folklore as ethnically exclusive is unrealistic especially in a pluralistic society such as Trinidad. The bias towards the folklore of one ethnicity could be due to the relative scarcity of literature containing collections of East Indian folktales, as well as East Indian folklore being less visible in illustration and visual media, with 0 mentions across these media. One politician (Ronnie Williams) attempted to explain this type of phenomenon, stating that Indian culture was “alien” and not part of Trinidadian culture. “Indo-Trinidadian culture is similarly marginalized at the state-funded "Best Village" folkloric contests.” (P. Manuel, 324)

Music was only mentioned once, by Rudy (aged 74) in reference to the famous calypso by Edwin “Crazy” Ayoung, entitled Suck Meh Soucouyant. Many interviewees suggest having heard music or rhymes related to folklore, but they were not able to name or recall the melodies. It can thus be surmised that music was not a very effective medium for transmission of folkloric knowledge due to not being memorable. However this could also be regarded as the most obvious loss of the disappearance of folklore. “Songs and games, tricks and catches are also important ingredients in the folk culture of our people eg our popular folk song there’s a brown girl in the ring. The inventiveness of children makes a concrete contribution to folklore. Think of the numerous rhymes passed on orally from generation to generation of sch children.” (Dean Maharaj, 1989)³ As this folklore tends to be transmitted horizontally, further investigation into changes in child culture should be conducted.

In this regard, both groups expressed, without prompt, the belief that American media specifically poses a threat to Trinidadian folklore. Although both groups generally listed Grimm’s fairy tales such as “Cinderella” and British book series such as that of Enid Blyton

³ See Panel Discussions on Folklore (1989) for more candid notes from experts on ethnography about recent concerns in cultural preservation.
before local folklore came to mind, exclusively the young group listed movies and TV series aimed towards children such as Disney’s “The Little Mermaid” or “Winnie the Pooh”. Ridje, himself raised in Lopinot credited the perceived lost storytelling culture to “trinidad becoming more developed and more urbanised bc many of them are skeptical whereas in the past you would have staunch believers...kids prefer to play nowadays on their iPhones”, hinting at the on-demand nature of entertainment. The youngest of the older group describes his experience with the onset of “TV culture” in Trinidad saying of radio programs, “yes, we had the American culture it was cowboys and Indians and so, but now...cowboy and Indians it [represents] good and bad- but now it’s...Iron Man...specific characters it’s no longer just about... you have to go and buy [products] to [play] it, there’s no, imagination.” Thus consumerism and a culture of character-worship is to blame. By and large, the younger group blamed the inherent fluidity of oral tradition for its precarity, especially blaming the inconsistency of retellings. According to Tyler, “some people say she was a Soucouyant some people say she was a witch other people you know it’s always altered in a tiny way there’s no like set story like how you get with like the Disney stories.” Despite the belief that children were “becoming more skeptical” (Joshua), the younger group expressed an initial lack of disbelieving responses to folklore they were exposed to, although it was implied that they generally grew out of this.

Many interviewees, despite expressing negative or absent family attitudes towards folklore, I believed this was due, either to the influence of child culture (horizontal transmission) or self-taught/library research, or else some combination of the two. One interviewee from the older age group, Dolly (74 years old) credited her lack of folkloric knowledge to growing up as an only child in a rural area in Arima, without storytelling by parents, and a minimum of social interaction with other children, “I used to go from [Santa
Rosa] church to school from school to church and home.” Another person from the older
group, displaying more folkloric knowledge, mentions putting on improvised skits about the
characters while in a group of 5 children at the Lloyd Best Institute.

School has also been cited as playing a role in either encouraging or stymieing this
transmission. Especially within the younger age group folklore was mentioned as introduced
in a scholarly setting as early as in second year, 2 interviewees mentioned having to do
projects based on folklore, both in a literary context. Even more commonly mentioned were
uses of folklore in extra-curricular activities. For example teachers would speak about
folklore in relaxation activities or in extra curricular activities. Tyler exemplified this, having
attended a theatre camp in which old Carnival mas characters and folklore characters formed
the curriculum. I credited this experience for his knowledge of lesser known characters such
as Gang gang Sara. School as well as library research were cited as the main sources of
contextual or historical information about the stories, with family members usually regarding
the tales as mythological. Among the older group, none were taught folkloric knowledge in
school except for the youngest among them, Paul (60 years old) who mentioned that it was
discussed in the context of ethics lessons. In Recollections and Representations of Folk in the
Classroom, Popova suggests that although folk is more commonly integrated into literature,
history and social studies, educators should be encouraged to utilize these stories in science
subjects as well. “Exploring the defeat of a soucouyant by having her count innumerable
grains of rice before sunrise in math class, or the effects of salt and pepper on her discarded
skin in the sciences, can lend a new, exciting, and locally connected facet to traditional
instruction.” (Popova, 67)
A correlation was observed between interviewees displaying a negative opinion of the value of Trinidadian folklore and a low interest in preservation of the tradition. Rudy, a 70 year old male stated that he didn’t believe stories were at risk of disappearing and “are held up to ridicule to this day.” He also expressed that he did not believe folklore had a place in the classroom because they were “not appropriate type of thing for more educated people we have around now.” and that they did not encourage literacy, “we were always directed to read.” Lucille, the 94 year old woman also expressed that “it is not educative,” while Dolly, the 74 year old woman expressed that these stories were not to be believed in. Only 2 of the older group did not share this opinion, compared to all 5 of the younger group. Since one of that group was the daughter of one of the negative-attitude group, it can thus be supposed that the low opinion of the value of folklore is not necessarily inherited. The daughter, having received folkloric knowledge in the form of newspaper articles which were encouraged as part of literacy, benefitted from seeing the folklore presented in a form that was associated with status and entertainment, “there was a series in the newspaper Papa Bois uhm the douens and so on so we it was like every Sunday so we would listen out look out for them eagerly and our parents encouraged us to read them.” she expressed her own opinion that “it is just as ...if not more enriching” than the typical items of a school syllabus.

Although it could be supposed that the frightening content of some of these stories would render them less enjoyable and then less likely to be transmitted, results would suggest a positive correlation only with the intensity of emotional response, rather than whether the emotion was amusement, fear or excitement. Emotive satisfaction is described by Sekoni in “The Narrator, Narrative Pattern and Audience Experience of Oral Narrative Performance” (1990) as the ability of the narrator to emotionally manipulate the feelings of the audience, encouraging the continued captivation of the audience’s attention.
In fact, only the participants who reacted with neutral, unimpressed, skeptical or disbelieving reactions showed an increased likelihood to respond negatively to folklore being taught in a classroom setting or told to children. Indeed fearfulness might encourage an interest as suggested by Nasha who became interested in folklore later in life due to hearing stories related to real-life experiences of sleep paralysis induced visions of her friends at university. Ridje, growing up in Lopinot expressed that stories were told in tandem with communal gossip, “they would tell me about people who were a bit suspicious or suspect in the village” and stating he himself had several “paranormal experiences.” This had the effect of rendering the information more vivid and he describes himself as being “petrified, like I wouldn’t even come out my room but as I grew older like the experiences I would have had and continuing reading about folklore literature and all that instead of being afraid I became fascinated.” Fearful associations with folklore were evenly distributed among the age groups with only 1 interviewee from each group expressing a lack of fear, both having been raised in urban areas and one from the older group expressing that he was only fearful when spending the night in rural areas of Trinidad (Arima). “grew up in siparia which is kind of considered country side so the folklore tales would be a little different compared to those than in urban areas or suburban so from young I knew about different folkloric people like the douen the La Diablesse…” The relation between rurality and folkloric knowledge could be an interesting avenue for future research.

It was hypothesized that religion too, both within the community, school or in the home could play a role in suppressing or encouraging the transmission of folkloric knowledge. In the younger age group, the Results proved however, that although religion affected whether or not a person believed in folk tales to a degree, they did not necessarily cause one to reject that knowledge being passed on to the next generation. For example Kfrica (aged 21) described her family’s attitude thus, “it was negative in the sense of my
my parents being like christian and religious and stuff...basically... they would still expose me to it but they would just make sure that that it’s known that it’s not real”. Similarly, Joshua (aged) stated that his parents made sure to add the disclaimer that the stories they told were “fake.” Tyler, whose father was a pastor expressed that “[his parents] always thought any kind of heritage-y stuff was like demon stuff...devil worship” Both Nasha and Ridje who attended Muslim schools, the former a part of a Muslim family expressed that these stories were forbidden in these contexts, stating “Anything that wasn’t Islam...you could get into trouble.” However the two of them expressed great “fascination” with the subject matters of folklore in adulthood without religious influence, as Nasha expressed, “No problem with it. We were muslims so we wouldn’t really talk about that... would be mostly associated to evil things you probably wouldn’t want to bring that into the house by talking about it but I see no problem with it.” The only older person expressing religious inhibition was the 94 year old woman Lucille who expressed that in a church sermon the word Soucouyant was used to refer to “an evil person interfering with others,” although literacy needs of her daughter superseded any need to forbid folkloric information. Thus the survivalist tendency of Trinidadian parenting results in the literary medium being prioritized over the oral, thus there is greater impetus to stress to parents that exposure to storytelling could be used as a pedagogical tool, perhaps improving public speaking skills. This could also be an area for future research.

In both groups I noted each individual had low confidence in their own capacity to retell these stories although this favoured the younger group, with 3 persons answering in the affirmative and 2 giving maybes compared to the older group’s 2. Among the reasons given for this confidence were former experience “I was part of an acting group a couple years back. And we had a portion of our stage show that we had to do and for my segment of that portion I got to do stories and I told an Anansi story. “ (Tyler). Familiarity with the subject
matter due to frequency of exposure was another reason, “over the years you hearing more or less the same story over and over it tell differently but you hearing it and because of that it would stay with you, you don’t even need to read it over.” (Joshua). Other respondents mentioned their enjoyment; “Because I’m good at telling stories and I like to... go through all the emotions.” (Carol). There was a greater degree of uncertainty among the younger group, indicating that it depended on the nationality of the audience, i.e were they Trinidadians or tourists who would accept a more generalized telling. The younger group also seemed more aware of the holes in their folkloric education, with Kafrika stating, “not with my current wealth of knowledge, no, not accurately, but if I were to obviously research some things then I think- yeah.” The older persons seemed more concerned with their ability to recall details from the stories. It was noted in the older group, especially for the oldest interviewee, that there was apparent trouble remembering certain details, with this candidate stating “I too forgetful” as her reasoning for not considering herself able to retell these stories. The expert interviewee, Theodora Ulerie confirmed this idea, stating that she did not tell stories to her own children owing to a lack of confidence in her retelling abilities prior to completing a theatre course. Thus storytelling should be viewed as a skill in and of itself, with greater incentive to teaching this skill.

The younger group mentioned visual media more frequently than any other form of folkloric information, with 4 out of 5 of them speaking about reading about the characters in books such as the locally produced Nelson Reader, seeing illustrations, or seeing them on TV. Short films viewed on the internet were mentioned by Tyler which, although not named, were likely those of Rochford. Otherwise Ridje mentioned short films “carried out by I think TV6 news, a lot of them like to focus on the slavery because it part of the history of it, but the [folklore] stories also emerged out of the histories;” expressing that the medium was
underutilized in transmitting these tales. Among the reasons mentioned by the older group, illiteracy as well as difficulty in finding books were mentioned by Dolly and Paul respectively, with the latter listing Blackie’s Tropical Reader and Royal Readers. He was quoted saying, “[the books] might have had…the American versions of the, the stories, Brer Anansi, Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby was again their version of the Anansi story…[which contained] foreign illustrations.” The only visual sources mentioned by the older group were from newspaper articles and Alfred Codallo paintings. This could explain the less detailed explanations of the physical appearances of the characters among this group, with the eldest failing to specify the characteristic cow-foot of the La Diablesse, only deigning to mention she had “one foot big and the other small and walking in the night with a thump” as opposed to her daughter, one of the 2 older interviewees having encountered illustrated folklore, who mentioned the “clop of her hoof.” This would also apply to the anomalous members of the younger group having not mentioned visual forms, as in the case of Nasha who expressed similar confusion “the one I liked was the woman who had feet of …I think it was…goat? Some animal feet.” She also pronounced Soucouyant as “soon-coo-yant,” indicating a lack of exposure to the orthography of folkloric terms. Another of the younger group expressed a lack of faith in the oral form of folklore, stating, “when it was word of mouth it was kind of debatable on the details like where they were the characters.”

Within both groups, interviewees were quick to name a favourite character or story, and provided reasoning, for example, “[Papa Bois] is a protector of the environment I just thought he was kinda a leader, in a sense that’s why I kinda liked him as much,” (Tyler), “You always were rooting for Anansi cause… he could always scheme his way out of everything. He’d get into trouble… he was mischievous but…he would work his way out.” (Paul). Almost all interviewees responded that they would read a book or watch a movie
based on this story or character, indicating a demand for more visual and written media surrounding this lore.

Chapter 3: The Changing Functions and Forms of Folklore

Trinidadian folklore has also been used as a platform to promote environmental awareness, as in “Ibis Stew” or Machel Montano’s illustrated children’s book, “Boy Boy and the Magic Drum.” Although this does not follow the iconic characters of an old folklore tale, however as it is being marketed as a old-time bed-time story, with accompanying audiobook recital it can be seen as an attempt to create a modern original story. Although the eponymous Boy Boy is the typical folkloric underdog, young and undersized, like his predecessors he primarily uses wit and magic to beat the odds. However his foe does not represent the master or boss, as in the aforementioned Fisherman and the Conch Shell, or the Buckra character in Anansi stories, but the abstract concept of pollution and corporatism represented by the Factory, “Boy boy lived in Carnival land which was once the most colourful place on Earth. But it had changed since the factory came to town. The factory produced electricity so everyone depended on it. But it was destroying Carnival Land’s beauty. Its’ chimneys coughed plumes of coloured smoke into the air and slippery sludge spewed into the streams.” These are examples of the mutation of form and content of folklore to suit the entertainment needs of an increasingly visual and multimedia-accustomed audience. Carnival has been a source of pushback against perceived disappearance of folklore with
revivalist initiatives such as the aptly named Carnival band “Mas’ Rebellion”, the founder of which states “We didn't want our characters to be knockoffs of other popular heroes. We wanted them to be rooted in our own culture and have meaning drawn from our own stories...Why have a werewolf when you can have a Lagahoo?” The website of the band boasts depictions of costumes bearing background information about the different folkloric characters on which they are based. Artists such as Tracey Sankar-Charleau, despite being entrenched in a family approach to mas making have exercised their own creative influence in rendering the cultural as a personal artistic expression. Sankar-Charleau refers to her creation as “high-mas”, stressing that “the subject is entangled spiritually, mentally and emotionally with the character.” Thus she uses the folklore to as a means of personal expression, stating that her La Diablesse arose out of a period of loss and “personal mas” as well as as a visible, viral platform for showcasing folklore in a way that incites deeper examination. “I hope that when children in school open the papers [on Ash Wednesday], they will see their history in the characters and identify with them. These both appeal to the increasingly visual and technological world of entertainment as well as utilizing the spotlight that Carnival celebrations enjoy and the accessibility and relative permanence of an online presence.

One of the reasons cited for not allowing Trinidadian Folklore a place in the classroom was the use of “dialect” which is a term carrying a negative connotation which interviewees used to refer to English Lexicon Creole English. Famous Trinbagonians such as Paul Keens Douglas, mentioned by 1 interviewee in the younger group, can be credited for pioneering the use of storytelling as a form of “edutainment” geared towards children, having created original stories such as Tanti at De Oval, Vibert, Sugar George, Slim & Tall-Boy. His stories boast international features and translation into French, Japanese and German. This popularity would suggest that the use of “dialect”, that is, English Lexicon Creole English,
actually lent itself to the likeability and memorability of his tales, perhaps because it was the
most immediately accessible and widely comprehensible, essentially erasing the language
barrier created by presenting oral retellings in literary form in Standard English. The use of
radio (Radio Trinidad) and tapes as a medium was also an effective way of reaching the
public, with Tantie at D’ Oval receiving “a lot of airplay”

Douglas also commented on the lack of confidence regarding live storytelling, saying
that despite being vocally gifted, few believe themselves as effective without the aid of a
musical score or set lyrics, which he regards as calling for less imagination.

In an interview with Theodora Ulerie, the Creative Director of Culture House,
described as a Scarborough-based initiative to “promote tolerance and understanding as the
cornerstone of the nation.” When asked about whether Trinidadian folklore was disappearing,
Ulerie responded, “It would disappear. Not if I have anything to do with it. I see myself as the
keeper of the ancient stories. I am doing on a continuous basis going to schools and I create
my own stories out of the older.” Her inspiration is described as the love of folklore instilled
by her family as she grew up, “As a child I used to love to hear the stories, one in particular
my great aunt in Arima...we used to hear the story about the lagahoo that would drag a chain
and so on and in the night, then we would hear the chains rattling and I literally believed it
was a lagahoo and it was only in my adult life I found out [my great aunt] was the one who
would drag the chains.” This further supports the theory that evoking fear and excitement, as
well as incorporating extra-verbal elements can increase a story’s memorableness. This
“engrossing” type of storytelling inspired Ulerie to try to carry on the tradition later in life,
although she admits not having told the stories to her own children. Having devised a
practicum Ulerie stated that the biggest obstacle to her revivalist efforts was a lack of
funding, and calls for “a gathering of storytellers, a national conversation where we could
come together and see the value in [folklore].” She describes her current efforts, a series of
three-hour workshops entitled Project Aware: a Wonderful and Rare Earth as “extremely
interactive.”

Workshops begin with ice-breaking activities followed by storytelling by the director.
However, the stories, although inspired by Trinidadian folklore, have an environmental slant
as well as added intrigue, “I do a renewed version because I don’t know the stories and I
really don’t know where to find them I have a story called the curse of the LaDiablesse. I
show that she turned all the trees to stone she was a terrible horrible creature but in the end
she was no longer la diablesse she was Madame Bless she turned all the trees so that she
wouldn’t share her water and her fruit. She was the only person on the island who had a tree.”
The children would then be encouraged to answer questions such as the implications of
deforestation in a “what would happen next?” scenario. Stating that she sees in the arts “a
means of active learning” she also describes plans for an Environmental Story Fest to
encourage children to become storytellers, where 1 teacher and 3 students from each school
must write a story based on an environmental theme, then tell a story for a scheduled event on
Universal Children’s Day. She claims to have already accumulated a group of 20 such child
story-tellers. This project exemplifies a means by which the confidence of the younger
generation in their own abilities can be bolstered in hopes that they carry on the oral tradition,
however it involves the mutation of the content and motifs of these stories, and the omission
of the other aspects of the tales, such as the moral about seduction and sin in the story of the
LaDiablesse, in order to generate public support and increase the perceived educational value
of the stories.
Conclusion

Despite the relatively small sample size, this investigation proved highly insightful into the degree of truth in the often-made sweeping generalization about disappearance of folkloric knowledge which paints the younger generation as negligent and uninvested in their own culture. Rather, it was shown that this loss was less a factor of disinterest and more a factor of lack of confidence in performance of the oral tradition, as well as a lack of faith in the medium itself, low access to resources for reference and systemic devaluation of the folklore. Focus was also placed on the folklore itself in its adaptability to the modern socio-cultural context via a change in motifs and incorporation of extra-verbal and multimedia elements. Specific issues were highlighted such as the racial bias inherent to this disappearance which favored Afro-Trinidadian narratives, and future areas of research were also highlighted such as looking into the role of geography and child culture. Such issues would be better addressed in a larger-scale study which would be extremely valuable to addressing this topical, time-sensitive national issue.

Appendix

**List of questions posed to respondents in a series of interviews**

1. Where did you grow up?
2. What primary school did you go to?
3. When were you born?
4. Can you list 5 children’s stories off the top of your head?
5. Now please list 5 folklore stories off the top of your head.
6. Describe your earliest exposure to Trinidadian folklore.
7. Did your family members tell stories or did they read from a book?
8. Were they the same every time or did they differ from teller to teller and telling to telling?
9. Did your friends or other children tell folklore stories?
10. Which of the following best describes your experience of hearing folklore stories? i.e Were you fearful, excited, bored, amused, skeptical, believing or disagreeing?
11. What is your favourite folklore story or character?
12. Tell me about the character/ briefly describe the story.
13. Would you watch a movie telling a tale of Trinidadian folklore?
14. Would you read a book on a tale of Trinidadian folklore
15. What was your family’s attitude towards Trinidadian folklore?
16. Were you told by your family about the history of the stories or where they came from?
17. Do you think adults tell fewer folklore stories now?
18. Do children?
19. Were folklore stories ever told by your teachers or taught in class?
20. How/ were they different than the stories at home?
21. Do you remember seeing illustrations of Trinidadian folklore? Where?
22. Do you remember hearing songs about Trinidadian folklore? Can you remember any?
23. Did you ever hear folklore mentioned by a religious leader? Were they different than the stories at home? If so, describe how.
24. Do you think there is a risk that Trinidadian folklore will disappear in the future?
25. Would you support Trinidadian folklore being taught in primary and secondary level? Why/ why not?
26. Do you think Trinidadian folklore should not be taught to children? Why/ why not?
27. Do you think you could effectively retell a folklore story for a small audience? Why/ why not?

Works Cited


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