

An Investigation of the Impact of Amerindian Mythology on Trinidad and Tobago's Forest Folklores

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Introduction

African, European and East Indian traditions have often been credited as the primary sources of Trinidad and Tobago's folklores, with very scant mention being made of the contribution of Amerindians-the islands' first inhabitants. Their status as a minority group may have contributed to this. Despite the presence of the Santa Rosa Carib Community, much of Trinidad and Tobago's native culture and traditions have been largely westernized. This paper places well-needed spotlight on the Amerindian contribution to this country's folklores. Given that early native groups migrated from South America to Trinidad and Tobago from 5000 B.C to 1800 (Boomert 2000), it is appropriate that ethnographic examples, from the South American mainland, be included in the following discussion.

Animism was a common element in African, East Indian and Amerindian belief systems, thus providing an element of continuity for the "changing, recasting, [and] enriching" of their religious concepts, rites and mythologies (Eliade 2004, 11). In Amerindian societies – as in East Indian and African - mythological creatures had spiritual significance and were therefore revered by natives. Being brought together through the system of colonization, caused these cultural groups to learn from each other. The local story tellers consequently became bricoleurs, providing a cocktail of mythological raw material upon which they created a highly cross fertilised creole legendary tradition (Elder 1972: 7). They salvaged and pieced together various features of their individual folklores to form a "heterogeneous repertoire" of myths through the act of bricolage (Strass 1969:11). Bricolage refers to the arrangement and juxtaposition of previously unconnected signifying objects to produce new meanings in a fresh context (Baker 2004:17). The result of this mythological bricolage is present in the forest myths of these islands. This paper is a comparative analysis of the forest folklores of Trinidad and Tobago in relation to the myths of the South American Amerindian groups. Of particular interest are the characters Papa Bois, manicou (*Didelphis marsupialis*), quenk (*Pecari tajacu*), and Mama D'Leau from Trinidad and Tobago's folklores.

Methodology

The comparative analysis undertaken, took into account both the characters and plots of these myths. The primary objective is to identify the similarities and differences between South American Amerindian and Trinidadian myths relating to bush and water spirits. In critically examining the characters, attention was paid to their names, features and function in stories.

Papa Bois: Trinidad and Tobago's Yawahu

One of the most popular folklore characters in Trinidad and Tobago is Papa Bois (Keeper of the Forest). He is the spirit that protects the forest and its creatures. Papa Bois, also known as Maître Bois (master of the woods) and Daddy Bouchon (hairy man), at times appears in the form of a very old, short, muscular, hairy man with cloven hooves and leaves growing from his beard (Besson 2001: 1-2). He is said to assume the shape of a lappet (*Cuniculus paca*), deer (*Mazama Americana*) or monkey (Anthony 1976: 41). He also is said to heal wounded animals and warn them of snares set by hunters. As a means of protecting the animals, Papa Bois leads hunters deep into the forest where he entraps them.

Papa Bois is similar in character to Yawahu, the Arawak bush spirit in South America. Roth (1970: 171) describes Yawahus as “hairy people having so much hair that one cannot see their faces.” This creature appears in the mythology of various Amazonian tribes, with each native community having its own unique descriptions of him. Of particular similarities are the Yurokon of Carib mythology, the Upper Amazonians’ Curupari and the Brazilian Capor (See Table 1 below).

Table 1 South American Bush Spirit

Native Communities	Geographic Location	Yawahu Spirit Descriptions
Caribs	British Guiana	Face, body and limbs covered with hair
Tupi	Upper Amazon	Monster with red skin and long shaggy hair.
Rio Negro	Uruguay	Bearded dwarf
Tupi	Brazil	Attributes are uncertain but often portrayed as having cloven feet and a bright red face
Tukanoan	North West Amazon	Dwarf-like beings

Within Tukanoan mythology, the bush spirit is known as the “Master of Animals”. He is also known as Master of Fish, and is described to be a dwarf who is the protector and keeper of the forest and all its terrestrial game animals and aquatic creatures (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1987: 7). The „Master of Animals” not only rules over all the animals, but sees to it that none is unnecessarily killed and that they are treated with care (Olson 2011: 240). To guarantee successful hunts, shamans must visit with the “Master of Animals,” through hallucinogenic trances, in order to negotiate for prey (Urton 1985: 120). Hunting, therefore, plays a socio-religious role in Amerindian cosmology, and lent itself to mystical powers. The forest was therefore perceived to be a sacred place where spirits dwelt. This notion is clearly reflected in Trinidad and Tobago’s forest folklores.

The evolution of Trinidad and Tobago into a multicultural space saw the modification of the “Master of Animals” into the “Master of the Woods.” The Tukanoans believe that the Master of Animals is the procreator of all faunal life (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1987: 7). This idea is not indicated in Trinidad and Tobago’s folklores as Papa Bois is only associated with terrestrial animals. Another difference between both entities is the shamanistic relationship. Within Amerindian societies, the shaman must be able to establish and maintain contact with the “Master of Animals” (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1987: 8). The shaman’s inability to do this was believed to cause illness, death, mishaps and a lack of prey for hunters. The shaman/bush

spirit relationship is nonexistent in Trinidad and Tobago's myths but the perceived consequences of this are nevertheless suggested. Firstly, the lack of prey is a common element in Papa Bois tale. Secondly, the folklore is based on the fear of spiritual encounters in the forest. Thirdly, the folklore includes measures that should be taken to save one's life. As Amerindian shamanism faded within the twin island republic, the reverence and rituals that once accompanied hunting diminished. The freedom of negotiating for game was changed to a spiritual hunting prohibition, in which, the Master of Animals forbade the practice of hunting in Trinidad and Tobago's folklores.

Other than the nature of the characters, there is also a similarity in the plot of both sets of narratives. The general plot surrounds a hunter entering the forest to hunt. He accidentally meets the protector of the forest who leads him deep into the woodland, and punishes him for his hunting practices. According to the Trinidad and Tobago folklore, the hunter escapes, living to tell the tales of his encounter. In South American mythology, however, the hunter is often caught and killed or manages to escape by conquering and destroying the spirit. An example of the latter is recounted in the story, „The Man Who Always Hunted Scrub Turkey“ in which the hunter, after being led deep into the forest by the bush spirit, was able to identify and kill it in its animal form, gaining for himself the privilege to hunt as he desired (Roth 1970: 173). It is clear that while there are differences between Papa Bois and South American native bush spirits, there is enough information to draw comparisons between the two.

Mama D'Leau

Mama D'Leau (Mama Glo) is a French term meaning mother of the water (Warner 1991: 179). In Trinidad and Tobago's folklore, she is presented as an anaconda (Boos 2001: 81). Mama D'Leau is said to live in the rivers, and is the protector and healer of its creatures. She is described in tales as first appearing as beautiful woman sitting at the edge of the water, singing silently in the still of the day, where she lures unsuspecting men (Besson 2001: 15). When angered she reveals her true form – a hideous creature whose lower body takes the shape of a huge anaconda. In some tales, she is also described as having a serpent-like face, hair of snakes, forked tongue, an upper body covered with scales, and a giant water-snake from the waist down (Ramsawack 1980: 16).

The Amazonian water spirit, from which Mama Glo might have derived, is recorded in the myths of several Amerindian native communities. Also known as Ori-yo (by the Arawak), Ho-aránni (by the Warrau) and Oko Yumo (by the Caribs), this spirit mainly appears like an anaconda; but may also take other forms (Roth 1970:182). Most often it is believed to assume the shape of a beautiful woman who walks ashore at nights. If a man becomes attracted to her and follows her to the edge of the water, she will hold him by the waist and plunge him into the deep with a triumphant cry. (Roth 1970: 182). The tale “Mama D'leau Mother of the River” identifies with the South American native folklores, as described by Roth, with some minor differences. Mama D'leau does not come ashore but calls her victims to water and questions them about their fishing practices. It is only after they divulge this information that she attacks. After comparing South American native mythology relating to water spirits with Trinidad and Tobago's Mama Glo folklore, it is clear that they are closely related.

Mystical Creatures

American native mythology also influenced the folklore of Trinidad and Tobago through the spiritualization of game animals, in particular the quenk (*Pecari tajacu*) and the manicou (*Didelphis marsupialis*). South American native cosmology is polytheistic and animistic, revolving around the belief in a vast number of spirits related to the nature, and reflecting human animal distinctions and transformations (Reid 2009: 24). Among the animals with spiritual significance for the Amerindians are peccaries (quenks) and maniou (Boomert 2000: 462 - 464). Animals in mythology are conceived as either psychopomps that accompany souls into the beyond or as the dead person's new form (Eliade 2004: 93). In Trinidad and Tobago, both the quenk and manicou are perceived to be the souls of the dead who often make human/animal transformations. For example, in the story of „Zanda – Hunter with the Sepee,“ Zanda was able to transform from human to quenk (Ramsawack 1980: 4-5). Many stories are also told of the manicou being transformed into a man. In „The Devil's Manicou,“ for example, after having shot one of these creatures, the hunters observed it change into a baby which then warned them against continuing their hunt (Ramsawack 1980: 6-7).

In the Amazon, it is widely believed that the souls of people, who were sacrificed to compensate for animals killed by hunters, remain in the visible world in animal form. These animal-people in their lifetime were those who did not obey social norms, and hence were made to replenish the animal species as a form of punishment (Reichel-Dolmatoff: 1985: 120). Shamans believe that deer, tapirs and peccaries are among a group of animals identified as “images of people” (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1985: 121). As a result, hunters are advised to hunt these animals with extreme caution. It is believed that the continuous killing of such animals would lead to illnesses, accidents, bad frights, nightmares and visions of monstrous tapirs. These spiritual associations caused some native communities to reluctantly hunt deer, tapir and peccary. (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1985:110). The Tukanoan, for example, refer to the tapir as the “old man of the forest,” and sees it as an ancestor. Reichel-Dolmatoff (1985) also notes that South American native communities often associate these animals with rape, incest and father-in-law issues within their respective societies. There is, however, no indication of such symbolism in Trinidad and Tobago's folklores.

Discussion and Conclusions

The folklores of Trinidad and Tobago were formed out of the combination of several mythologies; in other words, through the act of bricolage. The South American native influences are reflected in the characters of Papa Bois, Mama Glo, and animals such as the quenk, deer and maincou. Both these mythical characters and animals are representations of the forest spirits in South American mythology. The anthropozoomorphic imagery of Papa Bois and Mama Glo reflects the flexible relationship between human beings and animals, similar to the beliefs of native communities in South America. Thus, these images provide a link between the natural and the spiritual worlds (Reid 2004: 261). These folklores also indicate a sacred /profane dualism. In South American cosmology, the sacred has strong masculine associations while the profane is considered feminine. Being masculine, Papa Bois, represents the sky world and is therefore sacred. Mama Glo, a female mythical being, is associated with the anaconda and water. On all three counts, Mama Glo is part of the profane underworld.

Morphologically, the forest folklores of Trinidad and Tobago are close to those of South American native communities. Both sets of myths underscore the importance of the forest and water creatures, the presence of protector spirits (with similar features), and the presence of the hunter/fisherman as well as human/animal transformations. The spiritualization of animals in Trinidad and Tobago's folklore points to the existence of

fragments of a South American cosmology that adheres to the total spirituality of the universe. This clearly suggests that several aspects of South American native mythology continue to be an intrinsic part of Trinidad and Tobago's folklores. The cosmological belief in bush and water spirits from the Amerindian era "underwent continual changes as a result of the numerous cultural contacts" with Trinidad and Tobago's contemporary population (Eliade 2004:11). After centuries of mythological bricolage, the Amerindian myths transformed and developed into what is accepted today as Trinidad and Tobago's folklores.

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