

# MERMAIDS, IMPS AND GODDESSES: THE FOLKLORE OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

*The beliefs that informed our identity*



**GÉRARD A. BESSON HBM,**  
Historian and Author,  
Trinidad

The identification of what is our national heritage is something of a challenge, whether as colonial buildings, history or as folk traditions. This is the case because of the nature of Trinidad and Tobago's historical experience, especially as expressed in the work of those who take upon themselves the Sisyphean task of recording and interpreting this unfolding landscape. These thinkers have had to contend with not just the changing times, but also with competing narratives in a segmented society.

## **Tobago Mermaids**

You see, as one would expect, these islands are not like other islands. In the case of Tobago, our elder sister, she was once a part of an older British Empire, some say the first one, along with Barbados and Antigua, St Kitts, Jamaica and the North American colonies. These are all places where historical traces, in terms of European residue, are still stumbled upon in bushy outcrops. I myself have stumped my toe on a bell almost buried in the red earth of Parlatuvier in Tobago that might have rung on a plantation when these islands served as depots for the mass transmigration of souls in transit from a suffering beyond belief to a place that one would hope would be the Paradise of the just.

That being the case, Tobago's windmills stand today as silent reminders of that residue, which the "Tobago Wedding" as a folk festival parodies as it catches and contains, like a breath caught between laughing and crying, a moment in its cultural treasury.

Tobago has, and maintains, that quality. When I asked the old man at Black Rock about it, he answered, "Mermaids, I don't know anything about that." When pressed, persuaded and flattered, he said, "Mermaids, they look like Kings of old, or warriors of long ago." "Mermaids! Kings? Warriors! How you mean?"

He couldn't say, exactly. It took a while to work out, but it went something like this: in Tobago, like other places, the experience of slavery served to erase most memories of origin and identity, but could do little about intuition and belief in the higher powers that both mirror and shape our own experiences, destinies and so forth, so, although the memory of names like Yemanjá and Oshun had faded, the certain knowledge that the Waters beneath the Earth and in the Sea were the vehicles of Divinity had endured. This notion remained strong amongst a people who had been taught to forget themselves. But, when seeing the contents of the cartouches of the world maps on the walls of the Great Houses that depicted the antics of a crowned Neptune with an Oceanus trident in hand surrounded by a court of denizens of the deep out on the rolling sea, the old folks of Tobago smiled and understood that they were always right in the understanding of the universality of the Divine, while not bothering too much with the vagaries of gender. The colonial experience demanded a twin-framed view of the world, where one's visions were viewed through another's lenses.

## **Becoming Trinidadian**

In Trinidad we had something of a different experience. Trinidad is new, as Caribbean experiences go. Before 1783 and the Cedula of Population, which should be regarded, according to Professor Carl Campbell of the University of the West Indies, as our first constitution, Trinidad was a very sparsely populated place. There were just over a thousand people living here, that is counting the handful of those who thought that they were of European descent, those who actually were and the few blacks that hovered between bondage and idleness – you see, there was no real economy. As far as the First People were concerned, they lived "here" which meant, as far as the eye could see and the heart imagine. This included these islands and

**Opposite: Duennes, the spirits of children who died before they were baptised, roam the forests of Trinidad playing tricks on living children. Illustration by Stuart Hahn**

the mountains of the Paria peninsula as seen, washed on a clear day, all the way to Venezuela.

Whereas most islands in the Caribbean Sea took hundreds of years to develop a comprehensive society, Spanish Trinidad acquired one, virtually fully structured, overnight. In the space of less than fifteen years, 1783–1797, suddenly there were 1,500 Europeans, half of whom were French, and 18–20,000 Africans, who were enslaved. And some 11,000 “Free Blacks and People of Colour.” Almost all of these were French-speaking, Catholic, and, interestingly, one could say uniquely, that they were products of miscegenation. They formed the vast majority of the free population.

It was around this demographic that our first blush with identity-forming mechanisms took place. This was where our first attempts to make sense of what we could barely comprehend in terms of self-realisation began. We started off as sojourners, Afro-French-Creoles, in a strange land. In someone else’s place. One’s identity must of necessity relate to something and as such has to be ‘invented’ at the appropriate historical moment. So this was the place to which this crowd brought their collective memories of past experiences. The born Creole.

Some had memories of a West African culture, already mature when they were sold to the ship, others had memories of suffering and of triumphs on other islands, the most important being manumitted, naturally, while there were those who were transporting memories of a Europe that was just emerging from the enfeudom of the Altar and the Throne. In a manner of speaking all were marooned.

This then for Trinidadians was to be home, where we would create our first attempt at forming a common imagination. 1783 and the Cedula was ground zero. It was to be from here that we would proceed to remember our past; this is our first historical narrative. In

the beginning, there was the Cedula, and the Cedula was made Law.

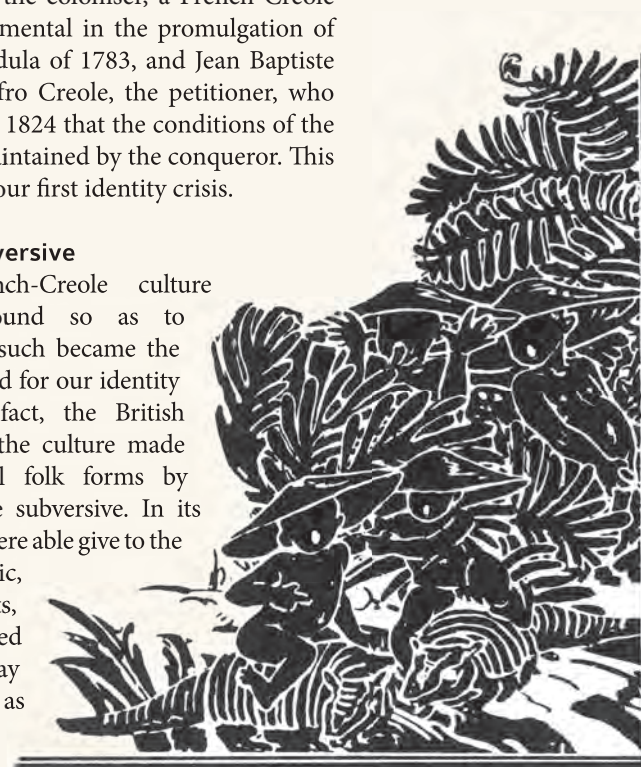
The first recasting of history to make a usable past began then. This was where we created our first myths. The fixed mental architecture that sought to explain the unexplainable, and to achieve this miracle we had to become experts in the art of what the scientists call Creole orality. Storytelling. Which may be thought of in the Patois of the French islands in which they were told: “Sé lè van ka vanté, moun ka wè lapo poul,” or, “it is when the wind is blowing that we see the skin of the fowl.”

All this suffered something of a shock and a setback with the conquest of the island by the British in 1797. They proceeded to teach us English, introduce the Anglican Church and attempted to cause us to forget our heroes like Phillip Roume, the coloniser, a French Creole who was instrumental in the promulgation of the Spanish Cedula of 1783, and Jean Baptiste Phillippe, an Afro Creole, the petitioner, who made certain in 1824 that the conditions of the Cedula were maintained by the conqueror. This may have been our first identity crisis.

#### **Becoming subversive**

The Afro-French-Creole culture went underground so as to survive and as such became the principal method for our identity formation. In fact, the British suppression of the culture made it blossom. All folk forms by their nature are subversive. In its subversion we were able give to the world our music, our Carnival arts, which contained during its hey-day such characters as Dame Lorraine, a take off on

*The Afro-French-Creole culture went underground so as to survive and as such became the principal method for our identity formation. In fact, the British suppression of the culture made it blossom*



*Papa Bois, the custodian of all flora and fauna, is the most widely known of all our folklore characters. He is the old man of the forest and is known by many names, including Maître Bois, the master of the woods, and Daddy Bouchon, the hairy man*

the posturing of the pretend French aristocracy, Piss n' lit, mostly about unmentionables, and the Diab' Molasse, which is the worst thing that could happen on a cane plantation, a slave falls into a boiling vat of molasses: that ghost still haunts the carnival; and of course calypso, which at its best contains the subtle double entendre, perhaps the most subversive of all, and finally, as we entered modern times the steelband. It is fascinating to enter the imagination of Trinidad's 19th century. "Folklore, folklore," she said it like a foreign word. "What you mean?" "Tell me about La Diabliesse," I said, I was interviewing Miss Fairy – actually Miss Augustine Fournillier of Paramin. "La Diabliesse, she is the spirit of the woman who has been wronged by man, you ever see La Diabliesse interfere with woman? Is man who too dam bad."

I had to meet another storyteller, Lumat, who lived even further up the hill, "in the clouds," as Peter "Choco" Tardieu explained.

Lumat cleared up the enigma saying, "The African people have a goddess of love, they knew her as Ezulie Freda. In ceremonies she was adored at the crossroads, the cosmic place where womankind comes face to face with her divine self." I made myself comfortable. "In understanding what women had to go through in life, in order to send a warning, this creature of love and creativity had to be re-invented she become the rod of correction, to frighten little boys and to make them remember that they must pay for their sins." She became the ghost

of the woman who had been wronged by men.

"Ki mélé wòz nan paké bwa Jacques?" said Angelique Romany, who had been listening to the conversation, "what business has a rose in Jacques' bundle of wood?" He also explained that the Duenn did not haunt children, "No, not at all, the Duenn is haunt the parent."

"How you mean?"

"Well, she didn't have time for the boy. She too busy wid she business. Then the night come, she ent see the boy, she ent see the boy, she gone outside, she calling calling, she standing up in the road under the street lamp, alone, everyone inside, she calling him, 'Robie, Robie!' She going mad with fear. The boy loose, he dead, the Duenn take him, somewhere. 'Robie, Robie!' She crying now, she can hardly breathe. 'Robie! What you doing there? You eh hear me calling you, come here!' She was so glad to see him that she cut his tail good."



### Becoming poetry

And then: "This is the story of the ancient one who lived in the heights; who walking through the forest, never met his like... the world went by, he was the only dreamer on the scene, he was sharply etched against all horizons. He became all things. He would catch a glimpse of a form reflected in the mountain pools, among the stones and leaves that lay on the bottom. Sometimes, in the sky, or mixed between trees, sky, a darting bird, a cloud, he would glimpse a passing shape. He was not afraid, he knew that

**LaDiabliesse: the spirit of the woman who has been wronged by man.**  
Illustration by Alfred Codallo



all was I – endless reflections of himself upon the earth and in the sky. He called many things by their names – Tucuche and Tacarib, so to be known forever after. Everywhere he went he made a name for himself.”

Papa Bois, the custodian of all flora and fauna, is the most widely known of all our folklore characters. He is the old man of the forest and is known by many names, including Maître Bois, the master of the woods, and Daddy Bouchon, the hairy man.

Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott remembers when he was a Mi Jean meeting Papa Bois somewhere in the misty mountain villages of Trois Pitons in his native Ste Lucie; it went something like this: “Bonjour Mi Jean, Mi Jean the philosopher,” said the old man. “Bonjour, Papa Bois. How come you know my name?” asked Mi Jean. “But everyone knows you very well, my friend. High and low, from the cloudy mountaintops to the villages among the smoke and rum, hasn’t everyone heard of Mi-Jean the jurist, the intellectual? Come, sit.

Do not be modest. You are among equals.”

“I see you have a cow foot, ain’t that so?” said Mi Jean, pointing.

“Yes, yes. A cow foot – you have an eye for detail. Would you like some tobacco? What are you reading?” Enquired the old man politely.

“Everything! This book have everything in it you want to know about. Cow foot... wait... ah go find it,” said Mi Jean, busy with the index. “Cow heel...”

If you should meet with Papa Bois be very polite. “Bon jour, vieux Papa,” or “Bon Matin

Maître,” should be your greeting. If he pauses to pass the time with you, stay cool, and do not look at his feet. Lumat laughed, and said, “Tan moun konnèt lòt nan gwanjou, nan nwit yo pa bizwen chandèl pou klèwè yo.”

That means, when a person has known another in the day-time, he does not need a candle to recognise him in the night.

Anita Tardieu, Choco’s great-grand aunt, said to me that the family had magic words: three, one was a secret, the other two were for fire and for locks. She said she saw her cousin “Pussy” use the word for fire, which he uttered when he saw a bush fire about to wipe out his chive, rosemary and thyme. Then she had to intervene when a youngster, who had overheard the word for locks, locked his siblings in a motorcar, but did not know the word for unlock.

“Sé pou on dòmi an poulyési-poul pou sav si ka ronflé,”

she said smiling. You must sleep with fowls to know if they snore.

‘They’ say that the vampire tradition came to Trinidad with some old French families, the majority of whom became priests and nuns. There was a commingling, a miscegenation with a similar African tradition. Of this an Englishman wrote: “A ball of flame along she came, flying without a wind.” Some say there is a school for Soucouyants up Saut d’Eau Road. A priest remembers walking along Las Cuevas beach one night seeing a ball of fire coming



*If you should meet with Papa Bois be very polite. “Bon jour, vieux Papa,” or “Bon Matin Maître,” should be your greeting. If he pauses to pass the time with you, stay cool, and do not look at his feet*

**Papa Bois: custodian of all flora and fauna. Illustration by Alfred Codallo**

*By the 1960s a gradual loss of language, plus the politically inspired ending of the agricultural lifestyle, saw the demise of a variety of folk and oral traditions. Our 19th, early 20th century Afro-French Creole cultural memory became lost through emigration and immigration, as well as being eclipsed by other realities*

along. As it went by he recognised a parishioner, an elderly woman, inside it. In the meanwhile Lord Executor sang: “At last the bugle call, I’m not sorry for man at all... sans humanité.”

Loup Garou, the science man, the shape changer, the Obeah man, the poisoner on the estate, the spectre haunts the plantation’s graveyard. He is phantom at the crossroad. His creature is the one who passes through the night, black and naked, a chain around his waist, dragging. The coffin balanced on his head, has tree candles burning. What a way to transport bush rum. The Obeah man is a businessman, you understand. As they say: “Léfan ka valé kalabas, pas li konnèt bondali.” Which is to say, an elephant can swallow a calabash because it knows the size of its asshole.

**Becoming modern**

Now, to lift another corner of the handkerchief of history. The Afro-French-Creole culture entered its twilight in the period of between the world wars. French Patois was increasingly seen as a leftover from a long ago time, as modernity quickly overtook us. It stigmatised one as being real old fashioned.

By the 1960s this gradual loss of language, plus the politically inspired ending of the agricultural lifestyle, saw the demise of a variety of folk and oral traditions. Our 19th, early 20th century Afro-French Creole cultural memory became lost through emigration and immigration, as well as being eclipsed by other realities.

The ‘old gods,’ Papa Bois, Loup Garou, Soucouyant, La Diabliesse, the Duenns, all started to fade away, as gods do when there is no one to believe in them anymore. More than two thousand years ago Plutarch wrote of the obsolescence of the oracles, which signalled the end of the classical age.

The politicising of Trinidad and Tobago by the newly emerged Independence movement brought along politicians who for the purpose of institutionalising a different mechanism for

identity formation, one of their own invention, found it necessary to erode not only the British colonial influences, but also to diminish the status of the century and a half old Afro-French-Creole cultural identity.

This was a tragic loss. In placing, through its political rhetoric, the local European-descended French Creoles and those Afro-Creoles who supported the original culture in terms of language, religion, an agricultural lifestyle and the freedom to have an independent denominational education, into political opprobrium, an ambivalence, a sense of loss, of mixed feelings about each other, a dissonance, a decrease of racial harmony, emerged within the society on the whole. It is yet to be reconciled.

This along with the quickly vanishing built heritage has engendered, collectively, a deep psychological division whose repercussions are yet to be recognised by those who record such things. The culture never recovered. Colonial suppression had made the culture go underground and thrive in its subversion, politicisation of the culture killed it dead. “Nom mò; zèb ka lévé douvan lapòt-li.” Which means: the man has died, grass grow before his door.

Presently to attempt to enter into the imagination of the now virtually disappeared Afro-French-Creole past, to become involved in its vast belief system, which includes magic, music, songs, verse, bush medicine, prayers, folktales, customs and superstitions, one has to listen well to the words of anthropologist Maya Deren who did some seminal work in Haiti in the 1950s and who wrote: “Myth is the twilight speech of an old man to a boy. The speech of an elder in the twilight of his life is not history, but a legacy; he speaks, not to describe matter, but to demonstrate meaning. He remembers that which has been, according to what could and or should be. From material circumstances of his experience he plots, in retrospect, the adventure of the mind which is the myth.” ■