

Abstract:

The Current Decline of Folklore in Brazil explores the gradual disappearing of the Brazilian folklore and highlights its historical factors by creating a timeline on how the issue has grown, in order to develop an approach on how we can revive the folkloric culture in Brazil.

Folktales and myths are passed down from generation to generation for the same reason: they teach us basic life lessons we will never forget. They are timeless examples and constant reminders of what is important or not, of what is wrong and what is right. However, these folktales and myths are no longer a strong pillar holding the 21st century generation.

This research allows you to visualise the real scope of the problem generated by the lack of interest from people towards the Brazilian folklore. However, as most of the answers to this lack of concern are related to the media and technology we must understand that these powerful tools are meant to be used in our favour. To change the misconception that we do not need myths and folktales in a society we must use mediums to develop a wide range of contents such as books, movies and video games that can become as successful and compelling as the world abroad, making us proud of our culture as we used to be.

This research paper explores the gradual disappearing of the Brazilian folklore and highlights its historical factors by creating a timeline on how the issue has grown, in order to develop an approach on how we can revive the folkloric culture to Brazil.

Departing from that same line of thought, the following essay will begin assessing the importance and relevance of myths and folktales in society as well as the ways in which they have shaped our present world. These explanations will further lead us to the specific case study of the Brazilian folklore.

Myths and Folktales can be traced far back in time, and in most cases, we cannot even attribute them to a specific author. These types of artworks, as I like to refer to them, are the product of a society at a certain period. Myths and folktales, were later on orally passed down through several generations, shaping beliefs, superstitions, moral values and commonly spoken expressions. Such expressions became the pure essence of the world we live in today.

The reason why we learn fictional stories is not just to entertain us as children, it is because during childhood we are like sponges; ready to absorb every drop of knowledge the world has to offer. Our brain is a blank canvas that is ready to be painted. Thus, we are told myths and folktales because we lack education and understanding about the rules of society. Before being introduced to stories that portray mundane scenarios, we did not know anything beyond the horizon, where and how the horizon ended. However, the passage from mother to daughter, or father to son allowed the myths and folktales to travel in time and arrive here, on time to teach us how to survive, adapt and experience life to the most.

Scholar Joseph Campbell¹ states that, “Myths are clues to the spiritual potentialities of the human life.”² These potentialities, spiritual or not, are lessons addressed through myths. Take for

¹ Joseph Campbell was an American mythologist, writer and lecturer.

² Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth* (New York : Anchor Books, 1988), 5.

example Icarus³ from the Greek mythology. Apart from all the “fantasy” in the story, the message is to listen to people who are more experienced than us. Icarus’ myth is a timeless archetype that is still applicable to today’s children. Meaning, when tales and myths were created, they were carefully developed with the intent of addressing an issue either in a distant past, or in a unimaginable future. Myths are made to endure, and as Campbell said “[...] Living a human life in New York or living a human life in the caves, you go through the stages of childhood, [...] into the responsibility of manhood, marriage, then failure of the body, gradual loss of its powers, and death. [...]”⁴.

Myths are a constant reminder of what is important or not, of what is wrong and what is right. Through them we are able to give the first step towards the lifelong process of learning how to analyse and interpret daily situations of the current social system. The lessons provided by myths are spread on a wide range, and the most famous examples come from the Greek mythology. They can vary from behaviour criticism, as the myth of Narcissus, to a reminder of our own weaknesses like the myth of Achilles. By following myths we will be able to find and explore all potentialities the system has to offer to ourselves.

Joseph Campbell argued that a group or a society that shares the same mythology is constantly in harmony, myths evoke balance among the people. Once we all share the same beliefs there are no different labels, since there is only a single conviction in which we all agree there is no space or reasons for rebellion and rage. However, we are humans and we have become culturally diverse from one another. We have evolved into so many different cultures and sub-cultures, that it is hopeless to insinuate that there is such thing as a perfect mythology, and then expect people to blissfully embrace something new from what they have been told their entire lives. In this case it

³ Icarus is the son of Daedalus, the creator of the Labyrinth. The tale say that Icarus and his father were both imprisoned at a Labyrinth, and in order to scape Daedalus made two pairs of wings using wax. Daedalus warned Icarus to follow his path and to stay away from the sun, otherwise his wings would melt and he would fall, but Icarus did not listen and ended up flying too close to the sun, so he fell on the sea and died.

⁴ Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth* (New York : Anchor Books, 1988), 44.

can be religion, but one must also acknowledge that aside the religious realm there are also people who do not identify with it, and the question that comes to mind is, “If myths evoke balance, what happens when there is no balance?”.

Journalist Bill Moyers⁵ asked the same question of Joseph Campbell in the documentary “The Power of Myth”, when he asked, Campbell answered, “What we’ve got on our hands. If you want to find out what it means to have a society without any rituals, read the *New York Times* [...] The news of the day, including destructive acts by young people who don’t know how to behave in a civilised society.”⁶ Nowadays, we are very likely to find ourselves in a environment where mythology is no longer strongly established. Society used to provide rituals of passage, from childhood to manhood, it was an important step for all in the community to watch the children grow into more responsible and independent beings, the infants were aware of the switch period when they would have to change their behaviour. In the Amazon rainforest, where Sateré Maué tribe rests, we are still able to grasp remnants of what it used to be like in the past. The bullet ant ritual is practiced to allow boys to become warriors. Around the age of twelve, boys are submitted to the ritual by wearing gloves full of bullet ants, and from there they are supposed to stay with the gloves on for full then minutes. A painful rite, where the boys get their arms paralysed and sanity played due to the hallucinations caused by the ants stings.

Rituals like the bullet ant, or any that symbolises a transition, derives from mythology, and now that we no longer embrace myths the way many civilisations did, we find ourselves in a scenery where people do not know the rules, and they end up making their own. Campbell said, “[...] These kids have their own gangs and their own initiations and their own morality, and they’re

⁵ Bill Moyers is an American journalist and political commentator. In *The Power of Myth*, Moyers conducted the interview with scholar Joseph Campbell.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

doing the best they can. But they're dangerous because their own laws are not those of a city.[...]"⁷, the product generated by the lack of myths is a chaotic environment.

While myths are expressed differently in varying cultures, its lack also presents distinct implications for certain countries. Brazil for example, has been losing the folkloric aspect of its culture as a result to being widely exposed to the international world abroad. Unfortunately it only concerns few Brazilians, but it is a subject of extremely important matter. The decline of folklore in Brazil is an issue that goes far beyond than the people behave.

Brazil was discovered in 1500's by Portuguese captain, Pedro Álvares Cabral, and upon its discovery the land was meant to be a colony of exploration. Thus, all the goods extracted from there were taken back to Europe, sold and the profits belonged only to the Portuguese crown. It was obvious that if the Portuguese were the explorers they would not bother to do the dirty work as they acquired slaves for that. For many centuries Africans and Indigenous Brazilians were enslaved to work until the last day of their lives, when their bodies were no longer able to realise even the most simple task. Initially, the relationship between these three races was not peaceful, there was no clear communication between them apart from abusive gestures of superiority from the Portuguese. Each race resisted the influence of the other, and only after two hundred years they began a process of reciprocal sharing of their traditions. They had noticed it was impossible to remain untouched by each other's culture and the result over time was miscegenation which is what we have in present day Brazil: a rich culture composed of three different backgrounds.

The three main foundations of Brazil can easily be spotted in history books, the way people look, and the way people talk. Luís Da Câmara Cascudo⁸ wrote in his book, *Oral Literature in Brazil*, that "The Brazilian oral literature will be composed of the elements brought by the three races to the memory and use of the present people. Indigenous, Portuguese and African people had

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Luís Da Câmara Cascudo was a Brazilian anthropologist and folklorist who wrote over 30 books on the Brazilian Folklore.

songs, dances, stories... A long and widespread admiration surrounding the men who knew how to speak and tell the stories out loud”⁹. Oral literature is possibly the strongest realm of the Brazilian folkloric culture, since the only side of history that has been written was the one told by white Portuguese man who had access to education. Through oral culture we have the present folklore that portrays characters from the three backgrounds: Saci Pererê¹⁰ (Figure 1) is a mischievous boy of African origins, Curupira¹¹ (Figure 2), is the protector of the fauna and flora who descended from the Indigenous tribes, and the Headless Mule is a woman cursed by having an affair with a priest, a tale that comes from the Portuguese.

However, the cited characters did not just become who they are by having only one version. If you take Saci, the most popular of the Brazilian folklore, before the arrival of foreigners, this same boy was portrayed in a entire different way. He used to resemble indigenous figures, he had a brownish skin tone, two legs and a tail. After the Africans were brought by the Portuguese, Saci gained a entire different look, he became known for having a skin as dark as coal, for only having one leg and always carrying a pipe in his mouth, and for wearing a red hood in his head. Saci inherited features from each root. Perhaps that is why he is considered to be the most illustrious among Brazilians.

⁹ Luís Da Câmara Cascudo, *Oral Literature in Brazil* (Rio de Janeiro: Ediouro, 1969), 20. Translated from: “A literatura oral brasileira se comporá dos elementos trazidos pelas três raças para a memória e uso do povo atual. Indígenas, portugueses e africanos possuíam cantos, danças, estórias [...] uma já longa e espalhada admiração ao redor dos homens que sabiam falar e entoar.”.

¹⁰ Pronounced: [sa' si].

¹¹ Pronounced: [kuru' pira].



Figure 1. The illustration above belongs to my final project from Integrative Studio 2. The character portrayed is called Saci Pererê, he is the personification of all the roots of Brazil condensed in one single character. Initially his figure and personality was idealised by the indigenous, and further on his physical features were shaped by the African and Portuguese presence.



Figure 2. The illustration above belongs to my final project from Integrative Studio 2. Curupira, is a character of indigenous origins who protects the fauna and flora. Curupira rides on a wild pig while he keeps the forrest safe. His ankles are twisted, he has his feet pointing back instead of the front, it is his most striking feature and he uses it to mislead hunters.



Figure 3. The illustration above belongs to my final project from Integrative Studio 2. The Headless Mule is a tale that was developed under the Portuguese influence and religiosity. The Mule is supposed to be a woman who had a love affair with a priest, and because of that she must be punished by becoming a beast every night. The tale says that the spell will be broken when somebody takes a drop of the Mule's blood with an unused piece of wood.

One cannot determine the creators of the folkloric tales, but one may define what composes a folkloric tale. According to Da Câmara Cascudo “[...] It takes a certain chronological indecision, a space that makes fixation difficult in time. It can be said the time, an extensive time, but not restricting to the indication of a decade. It often happens that a production that became popular becomes folkloric when it becomes anonymous, old, resisting oblivion and always cited, in one or another denouncing medium of environmental predilection.”¹², he also states that “Folklore remains distant from the contemporaneity.”¹³.

I personally have noticed that in Brazil we face an opposing movement in response to the last cited quote of Da Câmara Cascudo. From the time I was a child attending primary school I was taught by my teachers everything they knew about the folklore, not only the stories of the unique characters, but also the traditional dances, food and everything that was related to the theme. During the month of August the school was decorated with folkloric symbols, there were parties where you could dress up as a character, in class presentations and personal reports about the stories. It was all very different from what I see now. I asked myself, “Is folklore really disappearing or it is just a misunderstanding as I grew older and left the topic aside?”.

I was intrigued when I started to analyse the facts and so I wanted to interview people and for my first interviewee I figured that there was no better source than somebody who currently attends the same primary school as I did. It was the perfect situation I could put in contrast with my experience as I had described above. My younger brother, who is ten years old, did not know he was being interviewed, I simply asked him basic questions about folklore, what he knew and most importantly what was being taught in school. To my disappointment and surprise he said that in

¹² Luís Da Câmara Cascudo, *Oral Literature in Brazil* (Rio de Janeiro: Ediouro, 1969), 12. Translated from: “Para que seja folclórica é preciso uma certa indecisão cronológica, um espaço que dificulte a fixação no tempo. Pode dizer-se a época, uma época extensa, mas não a restringindo mesmo a indicação de uma década. Natural é que uma produção que se popularizou seja folclórica quando se torne anônima, antiga, resistindo ao esquecimento e sempre citada, num ou noutro meio denunciador da predileção ambiental.”.

¹³ *Ibid.* Translated from: “Afasta-se do Folclore a contemporaneidade.”.

school they do not really teach those things anymore, and all the knowledge he had came from our father and old books he would find around the house. The primary school I attended is Christian and used to be well engaged into social and cultural activities, so if they were not teaching about folklore, why would a non-religious school bother to teach their students about it? The Brazilian educational system is quite closed in regards to cultural and anthropological studies, so I had lost hope in schools.

To find a better understanding I conducted interviews with a total of sixteen people via Instagram and through an online survey I created. What I heard from my interviewees could be put together into one single speech and you would not be able to tell the difference from one person's opinion to another. They had all agreed on the fact that the folklore has declined, that from the time they were young until now the folklore culture has vanished away in front of their eyes, and if you asked a child about some characters they would not even be able to tell who they are.

The circumstances that led Brazil to reach this present state of cultural unawareness and denial was caused by the fact that we are a country under development. So many technological advances are happening that people do not find our oral heritage interesting anymore. "I believe that much happened due to the overvaluation of foreign cultures. The younger ones prefer "imported" things, including folklore.[...]"¹⁴ A more sharp definition says that "Brazil behaves as a compulsive shopper, we want more and more from the outside, we want things we don't even need, and all of a sudden we have this pile of things, like comic cons, taking the place that used to be reserved for the folklore and cultural expressions."¹⁵ There could be no more accurate definition than the previous statement.

¹⁴ Taiana Silva, interview by Amanda Augusto Castanho, 14 April 2017, Paris, online survey through Survey Monkey. Translated from "Acredito que muito disso aconteceu devido à supervalorização das culturas estrangeiras. Os mais jovens preferem as coisas "importadas", incluindo o folclore. [...]".

¹⁵ Josué da Silva Castanho, interview by Amanda Augusto Castanho, 4 April 2017, Paris, phone call.

If you stop to question yourself why Disney movies, that were also based on hundreds of years old tales, thrive in Brazil but our own folklore does not? Why do we see children dressing up as foreign characters and not as national ones?. Maybe there is an established preference between the people of today saying the exterior world shines brighter, showing it as more inviting, or perhaps this new generation has never been introduced to the folklore.

Although a vast majority of people do not realise the importance of it, the extinction of Brazilian folklore is a devastating phenomenon. It means losing part of our past, it means putting away all the history made since the 1500's by our ancestors who literally suffered and were forbidden to keep their traditions. To forget the folklore is to throw their persistence and struggle away, it is to reject our only heritage. To make a more clear statement and comparison, what is happening now is relatable to the idea that people will stop speaking Portuguese and start to use English as our mother tongue.

I do not condemn the intercultural relations between different cultures, but what Brazilian citizens have not understood yet is that you must stay true to yourself and your origins, that you must honour it and represent, that you must not be ashamed of it just because it is unusual or the foreigner seems to be better. I believe the technological advancements and the fact that Brazil is becoming more internationally open is not the the reason why folklore is disappearing. On the contrary, it is because we do not use these tools in our favour. We shall see technology as a mechanism to revive folklore among Brazilians, and not as one that drives us away from "home".

From all my interviewees I noticed that there was a huge gap between them and "the others", what I mean is that when I asked them "How can we fight against the fact that the folklore is disappearing?" the answers were all valid, it was suggested from school initiative to literature and Netflix series, which I believe can change the viewers reception of the Brazilian folklore. However, there was a lack in what they could do as citizens in their own fields, it was all about what the

government and corporations could do, which I recognise that they play an important role in society, but still does not concern the local atmosphere.

As much as I hoped the interviewees would come up with their own approach to revive the folklore, I was aware I could not rely on that. The presence of Myths and Folktales in a society is crucial to create a balanced environment within its people. However I must also acknowledge that we live in a world far more different from the one when the stories were made. Folklore itself is subject to constant changes. By reducing the scope to Brazil you will notice that the country has been growing a lot in different fields such as: technological and economical, and due to these changes we cannot ignore the fact that the we, the people, have also changed. We must take into consideration that we live in a more globalised world, where we can hold the world in the palm of our hands, these small technological devices are far more attractive than sitting around our grandparents listening to Folktales we already know its a “Make Believe” story or something we can easily find in Google.

When thinking of current society, we shall think too that our lives might become part of the Folklore one day, that the present generation will unconsciously rewrite the tales, bringing into forgetfulness what we now consider historical.

We should also recognise that the “old” folklore, the one experienced by children from the 60’s, 70’s and 80’s is already not the same anymore. Perhaps in a couple years, or even now, we could cross paths with children that will not even know what the word “folklore” means, children that might believe it is useless. Eventually, once a whole group of people assume its unnecessary and they spread this thought, folklore could easily disappear.

“The folklore stems from the collective memory, indistinct and continuous. It should always remain popular and be part of the culture’s survival. The popular modern, carnival song, parrot anecdote with satirical intention, a new step in a known dance, will become folkloric when they lose

the tonalities of the time of its creation.”¹⁶ The culture and life style we are living will also become a tradition, it will become a way to mark this period on time, and since folklore is the reflection a society at a certain period we might as well transform the entire folklore. I restricted myself to this idea that Folklore is only in a distant past, when in reality at some point what we know now will become part of the past.

From all the data I collected throughout this research project I have understood and concluded that the decline of the Brazilian folklore is actually happening and it is not only my own perception, but also from a group of sixteen people from varying ages that all agree with it. This research allowed me to visualise the real scope of this problem generated by the lack of interest from people. However, as most of the answers to this lack of concern are related to the media and technology we must understand that these powerful tools are meant to be used in our favour. To change the misconception that we do not need myths and folktales in a society we must use mediums to develop a wide range of contents such as books, movies and video games that can become as successful and compelling as the world abroad, making us proud of our culture as we used to be.

¹⁶ Luís Da Câmara Cascudo, *Oral Literature in Brazil* (Rio de Janeiro: Ediouro, 1969), 14 -15. Translated from: “O folclórico decorre da memória coletiva, indistinta e continua. Deverá ser sempre o popular e mais uma sobrevivência. O popular moderno, canção de carnaval, anedota de papagaio com intenção satírica, novo passo numa dana conhecida, tornar-se-ao folclóricos quando perderem as tonalidades da época de sua criação.”.

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