



Internationaler Archivkongress 2004
23.-29. August - Wien - Österreich

Archive, Gedächtnis und Wissen



Networking – Shared Memory (1)

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Inquiry from the Periphery: Documenting the Masquerading Arts of the Eastern Caribbean - A Case Study

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The UNESCO project for the revitalization of the Masquerade and performing arts, which was completed this year, had two main features. It sought to address the documentation of the shared experience of street performances that are so much a part of the Caribbean cultural identity. It also attempted to provide ways and means of generating income for practitioners of the performances. The project was funded by the Italian Government and became part of a broader UNESCO project geared towards safeguarding and promoting the intangible cultural heritage.

The original project proposal was written and submitted by the Folk Research Centre (FRC) of St. Lucia in an effort to resuscitate the tradition that had all but disappeared on that island. The project was later to include two other island nations, Dominica and St. Kitts & Nevis. Immediately effort was launched to document the art form. In St. Kitts-Nevis the collection of papers on the Masquerading tradition started almost with the appearance of the Nevis Historical and Conservation Society and the St. Christopher Heritage Society in the 1980s and served as an inspiration to the project workers in Dominica and St. Lucia.

The masquerading tradition in the three countries had different origins. In the case of St. Kitts-Nevis, the custom is part of the Christmas sports - an English tradition linked to the saturnalia of the winter solstice. Similar performances are to be found in Montserrat, Antigua, and the Virgin Islands. In St. Lucia and Dominica the festivities were once linked to the French Catholic tradition of Carnival as celebrated in Martinique and Guadeloupe, but as the islands changed hands in the 18th century, British influences made their way into the performances. A uniting thread, however, is the strong African influence, unwittingly imported with the enslaved. The blending of all these traditions and their subservience to the requirements of the plantation system is what makes the custom a Caribbean experience.

The performers of the Christmas sports have no written records. They are numbered among those about whom Ian Wilson asks "What of those who do not, or cannot, or choose not to write? What of those whose biographies are inscribed in their creative output - their art, their negatives, their performances, their compositions? ... How do archives acquire and select the "record" of their existence; indeed, what is the nature of the documentary evidence of their participation in, and contribution to, society?" (*Comma*, 2002-1/2) With a Euro-centric education becoming the vehicle for upward mobility in the 19th and 20th century, the performers, most of whom had limited schooling, were marginalised. They shone during the Christmas season but were often forgotten during the rest of the year. In many cases, they had no safety net to fall back on in hard times and often survived in difficult circumstances or migrated to places where they could find work taking the tradition with them.

Searches on the internet revealed that the Christmas Sport was much more widespread than was presumed on St. Kitts and Nevis. Web sites offered exciting information about the links with the mumming tradition that originated in the villages of England and still survives there and in Newfoundland and Philadelphia. Even more surprising was the similarity of costumes covered in ribbons, of the blackening of the faces and of the house to house performances. In the Caribbean, where loss and destruction can be seasonal realities, the virtual world in which this documentation exists is a place where information can become irretrievable.

UNESCO's efforts to provide guidelines for the preservation of digital heritage may hold solutions for the archiving and preservation of websites and other digital forms. For the small islands of the Caribbean and elsewhere, however it comes down to cost and technology. The minimal resources placed at the disposal of Archival institutions barely meet the need of a paper world; coping with the virtual one is not a simple task. Nor is it easy to find an IT professional who is willing to understand the functions and needs of Archival Institutions, to recognise the difference between records and documents or even information.

Returning to the Christmas Sport, the second half of 20th century saw a growing movement towards independence within the Caribbean and a strengthening Black Power movement in the US. As a result, several historians, anthropologists, ethnologists, etc., sought to understand the movement by taking a closer look at the African-

America and African-Caribbean experience. The publications resulting from these studies formed the basis of the secondary sources of information on the Masquerading tradition in the Caribbean. Catalogued by subject matter, they are relatively easy to access. But what of the field notes and recordings made by Abrahams, Dirks, Lomax and others? Collected at a time when survival was the only thing on the mind of most Caribbean people, it remains out of sight perhaps in university collections, no record of it having ever been placed in the country of origin. Notable exception in recent years were Baker and Pederson both involved in the study of Creole Linguistics, and Fayer and McMurray who were researching the Sport.

An effort was made to source the original descriptions of the islands in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries and they included writings of Hans Sloane, Du Tertre, Janet Shaw, Thomas Coke, etc who had travelled through the islands and made note of items they considered to be of interest or felt strongly about. Recent inexpensive re-prints of some of this material has meant that libraries and documentation centres in the Caribbean can, from time to time, afford to purchase a copy. At other times access is sought through libraries abroad. In some instances automatically generated responses form barriers between the researcher in the islands and the holding institution in the metropol. Once these have been surmounted, researchers also found that such libraries are inaccessible because of cost - the search, the reproduction and postage can add up to considerable outlays for students and even institutions on very limited budgets.

Next came the research in Archives. Local holdings are limited having been decimated by both natural and man-made disasters. In the St. Kitts Archives reference to the sport was often of a negative nature. It consists mostly of reports of arrests and prosecutions, police warnings and the comments of newspaper editors when the season was over. The performers themselves remained faceless, their often libellous presentations unrecorded.

The World Wide Web is a convenience to those of us who live so far away from European archives which hold so much of our recorded history. On line research in these Archives was hampered by broad descriptions of records which often made narrowing down a task very difficult. For distance researchers, the PRO in England, now the National Archives, provides valuable assistance once the subject matter is within a certain range but a broad topic with no specific references such as the Masquerading traditions would have meant daily searches through pages and pages of documents. The prospect of travel to England or France or of paying search fees were too much for this project's limited funds and would have to wait for more favourable times. Assistance in accessing information in European Archives is a matter of grave concern to most of those countries that were once colonies. It cannot be solved via interlibrary loans but some level of cooperation between archives needs to be established as was the case between St. Vincent and Martinique/France.

Finally, the project attempted to explore the memory of living practitioners. Finding these people who are diminishing in number was not a problem, neither was carrying out the interviews. The field officers found that older people, in particular, were glad to have a chance to tell them what they remembered, and did so with pride, often lamenting the fact that so few young people were interested in carrying on the art form. This was particularly so of the performances that involved long recitations - the most endangered of the Christmas sport. The Masquerade itself has been showing signs of change over the years and the project managers were interested in capturing it on video/digital tape.

A number of issues arose out of this phase of the project many of which still have to be resolved. First came the matter of copyright and intellectual property. The practitioners themselves were not aware of these rights but the officers felt concern that, if the matter of videotaping performances was not dealt with justly, it could have repercussions in the future.

The question of dealing with a subject that was so fluid as a street performance was another issue. These performances make up a substantial part of the Caribbean's oral tradition and as such are subject to change. The purists in the group wanted to videotape the performances in order to stop their "corruption" by modern influences. They did not realise that, by fixing the performance on tape, they were moving out of the realm of orality which of itself is subject to constant change. The National Advisory Committee for the project looked forward to having a physical record of the performances as they stand today; but the idea that a record should become the standard seemed like unnecessary interference.

Closely linked with the matter of videotaping was the issue of preservation and access of audio-visual material. No appropriate storage facility exists on St. Kitts-Nevis and meetings with the project officers of Dominica and St. Lucia indicated that similar situations exist there. Plans for a purposely built Archive in St. Kitts include a facility for the proper storage of audio visual material. Archival institutions in the Caribbean are aware of the value of these records and of the attention that is required for their maintenance.

One last remark on the project content itself. American, English and Canadian anthropologists have connected the performances to rituals of various African ethnicities but we are now at the stage of examining ourselves. We have looked closely at our European roots and would now like to know the sources of the African influences perhaps by comparing our performances with tapes of West and Central African dances and rituals held in audio-visual archives there and elsewhere. Again searches for images on the WWW have shown a great deal of similarity which needs to be further explored. Collaboration of this sort, with African institutions, would be a new process for most of us in the Caribbean where various cultural traditions that originate on that continent are still in search of the source that defines them.

The research into the Masquerading art form has created a greater appreciation of that which survives. For the three states involved in the project, and for the wider Caribbean it has raised a number of issues that require serious consideration. The smallness and vulnerability of island states like St. Kitts-Nevis, Dominica and St. Lucia means that resources, both human and material, are limited and that we can only do so much. However we have come to realise that our knowledge of ourselves has value for us, for our children and for our visitors. It is with this in mind that we would like to explore the possibility of assistance and cooperation between the archives of the hub and our own small institutions on the periphery.