

TRADITIONS:

SOUTH FLORIDA

FOLK
LIFE

HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
OF
SOUTHERN FLORIDA

One of the themes around which the Historical Museum's permanent exhibition is organized is the arrival and adaptation of people to a strange environment. When we examine the traditional arts people have brought with them to south Florida, we see that this process continues, strengthening our belief that adaptation is a central experience shared by all of us. People from all points on the globe have come to south Florida, bringing with them the arts, crafts, stories and foodways that contribute to the vitality of our region. The Historical Association of Southern Florida is extremely pleased to sponsor **Traditions: The South Florida Folklife Festival**, as well as the ongoing folklife program at the Museum. Helping south Floridians discover and experience those things unique to our community is enjoyable indeed.

Randy F. Nimnicht

Randy F. Nimnicht
Executive Director
Historical Association of Southern Florida

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Metro-Dade Cultural Center
101 West Flagler Street
Miami, Florida 33130
(305) 375-1492

Traditions: South Florida Folklife

Tina Bucuvalas

Stretching from Lake Okeechobee to Key West, south Florida encompasses a variety of tropical environments which, combined with the presence of the sea and inland waters, have influenced the character of life for its residents. The most important determinant of the south Florida experience, however, is the variety of people who have made this region their home. South Floridians have roots in the Americas, Caribbean, Africa, Europe and Asia; their folklife reflects this heritage, but their interaction with the environment has imbued it with a unique tropical cast.

Human beings are cultural as well as physical creatures — we live in a world shared with and molded by other people. Folklore is the body of traditional knowledge that people learn outside of formal institutions as a result of their participation in folk groups. These groups may be familial, ethnic, religious, regional or occupational. Folklife is the manifestation of traditional knowledge and includes such diverse categories as belief, custom, art, craft, music, foodways, dance, drama, play, occupational or technical skill, architecture and oral literature. Such expressions often acquire a distinctly local character through the influences of geography, history or talented individuals within the folk group. Folklife also ranges in form and execution from the daily, almost unnoticed aspects of life to the peak artistic expressions that have arisen from a long history of cultural achievement.

South Florida folklife consists of the entire, complex body of traditions practiced by its residents. It would be impossible to delve deeply into the scope of south Florida folklife in such a limited space. Therefore, this essay will present just a few examples in order to delineate the variety of south Florida folklife and pave the way for future investigation.

Folk Arts

Art denotes both skill in the production of objects that stimulate aesthetic experience and the products of that skill. Thus folk art includes the entire range of material folk culture. Like other realms of folk culture, folk art results from the shared traditions of a group rather than an individual artist's idiosyncratic vision. Although folk artists are free to elaborate artifacts within certain accepted parameters, the most important characteristics of folk art are the continuation of traditional forms and the expression of a group aesthetic.



Entering the cool and fragrant atmosphere of a cigar making establishment is a sensory pleasure.

Arts and Crafts



Haitian culture has generated myriad art forms that express a synthesis of African and European elements in the Caribbean context. The **fanal**, or Christmas lantern, is currently experiencing a revival among Haitians in Miami thanks to an annual contest sponsored by the Haitian American Community Association of Dade County. The Haitian people cut cardboard in intricate patterns to create churches, houses, stars, or birds. They glue tissue paper in brilliant jewel colors inside the structure, then insert a candle through a hole in the bottom of the **fanal**. At night the lanterns are placed in the windows, so that passersby may glimpse the beautiful, stained-glass effect produced by the **fanal**.

Handrolled Cuban cigars are world renowned for their excellence. With the U.S. embargo on Cuban products, many small cigar-rolling businesses opened in Miami. Most of those who own or work in these operations learned the trade in Cuba, and some come from families that have made cigars for genera-

tions. Techniques and methods remain largely the same, with a few exceptions. Miami cigars are not made exclusively of Cuban tobacco and some cigar sizes have been altered to satisfy the tastes of an American clientele.

Entering the cool and fragrant atmosphere of a cigar making establishment is a sensory pleasure. Each worker sits at a table equipped with an array of tools necessary to the craft: blade, press, cutter, fixative, and rolling board. From bags containing different varieties of dampened tobacco leaves, the cigarmaker selects a blend of heavy and light tobaccos from the U.S., Central America, the Caribbean and Africa — each blend suited to a particular type of cigar. The cigarmaker pulls the hard spine from the leaves, cuts the leaves to the appropriate size, and rolls them firmly into shape. Next, the cigar is put into a wooden mold and pressed for forty minutes to give it a consistent size and shape. When the cigars are removed from the mold, the cigarmaker carefully rolls a wrapper, or outer leaf, of superior tobacco around the cigar. A small curved metal blade is used to trim the ends. Finally, the finished cigars are aged in a cool, humidified storage room which improves flavor and ensures freshness.



The shotgun house is a distinctive structure built by members of south Florida's Black community.

Architecture

In folk architecture, there are no blueprints or pre-fabricated buildings; instead, the builder relies upon traditional styles and techniques that are part of his cultural heritage. Folk architecture addresses the specific needs of an environment through the use of available resources and application of the builders' traditional knowledge.



The **chickee** used by the Seminole and Miccosukee Indians is a traditional structure unique to Florida. The **chickee** was developed in the nineteenth century, when the Seminole Wars and the migration to south Florida made it impractical for the Indians to build more permanent dwellings. Families traditionally built several **chickees** in a cluster, with each unit intended for a different purpose — sleeping, dining, cooking, or working.

The basic **chickee** design is rectangular. Four posts set into the ground support a rafter system that is covered with palm thatch. Many **chickee** roofs have an overhang on three sides that increases the covered area. The **chickee** is usually open-sided, allowing for maximum exposure to cooling breezes, but in some instances they may be enclosed to create a more protected space. The **chickee** is constructed of local materials, cypress for posts and rafters and cabbage palm fronds for thatch.

The Miami area attracted substantial immigration from the Bahamas in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. These immigrants added a special character to the area and were particularly noted for their building skills. The early Bahamian settlers constructed houses modeled on those of the Bahamas and Key West. The buildings were elevated off the ground on stone piers or wooden posts to allow air circulation and prevent wood rot. They had wooden balloon frames, low gabled roofs, exterior staircases, louvered door and window shutters and were constructed of local materials such as oolitic limestone or the moisture-resistant pine. These features enabled the structures to withstand the area's violent tropical storms. The houses were also designed with two-story porches equipped with balustrades across the front or around two or three sides. The porches shielded the house from the direct rays of the burning sun.

The shotgun house is a distinctive structure built by members of south Florida's Black community in the early twentieth century. This house type originated in West Africa and is common throughout the Caribbean and the American South. Shotgun houses are wooden frame structures one room wide and three rooms deep, with doors at the gable ends. Their name derives from the saying that you could fire a shotgun through the front door and the bullet would go out the back door without touching any other part of the building.



During hot afternoons, street vendors ply their wares from brightly painted hand- or bicycle-driven carts, the backs of trucks, or small stationary stands.

Foodways

The preparation and function of traditional foods is an important part of the folklife of any ethnic group. Through this fundamental aspect of life, group members retain strong ties to their folk heritage. Hispanics have transported many foods and food events to Miami, thereby establishing an unmistakable Latin ambience in many sections of the city.

Little Havana and other predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods in Miami are dotted with open-air fruit and vegetable stands. These businesses mirror the markets of Latin America and the Caribbean where people shop daily for fresh produce. Tropical fruits and vegetables such as mamey, mangoes, guayabana, malanga, yucca, plantains, and calabasas are available. In addition, small local grocery stores stock staples such as black beans, rice and Cuban coffee.

During hot afternoons, street vendors ply their wares from brightly painted hand- or bicycle-driven carts, the backs of trucks, or small stationary stands. Their products are those common throughout Latin America and the Caribbean: peeled oranges, pineapples, or melons; **granizados**, or snowcones, with exotic flavors such as tamarind, coconut, and mamey; **churros**, or long, crisp fried dough strips dipped in sugar; traditional pumpkin or coconut candies; and roasted peanuts in paper sacks. Some of these itinerant vendors announce their presence with traditional cries.

In homes and restaurants, Cubans continue to cook traditional dishes. Roast pork, chicken, seafood, rice and beans form the basis of their diet. These foods are prepared in diverse and delectable ways, often with plantains and tubers such as malanga and yucca as side dishes. Nevertheless, many claim that sweets

are the best part of Cuban cuisine. A particular specialty is the traditional **merengue** cake, created for weddings, **quinces**, and other festive occasions. The **merengue**, or egg-white frosting, is so stiff that it will hold the most fanciful shapes. Whether an expression of a particular theme, or merely baroque decoration, **merengues** are true works of art.

European ethnic groups have also brought their culinary skills to south Florida. Miami's Greek community dates back to the early twentieth century, when many families sought refuge from persecution in Asia Minor. Greeks and Greek Americans have since settled in south Florida in a slow but steady stream, so that today there are four Greek Orthodox churches in the Miami area alone.

Many everyday and secular holiday foods are made available to the public through bake sales, church festivals, or restaurants, but Greek regional and sacred foodways remain unknown to outsiders. **Prosforo** is the bread used in Greek Orthodox services. Like bread in earlier times, it is made with only the very basic ingredients: flour, yeast, water, and salt. Each loaf is stamped with a **sfragida**, a wooden seal carved with a design that contains a cross, symbols of the nine orders of heaven, the Virgin Mary, and Greek letters signifying "Jesus Christ Conquers."

Several women in the Miami area bake **prosforo** weekly and contribute it as an offering to the church. With the **prosforo**, they also bring wine, oil, and lists of those for whom they wish to have prayers said. The priest divides the **prosforo**, reserves the part stamped with the seal for communion, and distributes the remaining portion to the other parishioners.



Oral Tradition

Folktales are one of many types of oral folk literature. In times past, they served to entertain after the day's work had been done and to educate the young about the group's history and values. The combination of today's hectic pace, the fragmentation of families and communities, and the entertainment supplied by the mass media have dimin-

ished the importance of folktales in the lives of most Americans. Among the Jewish people, however, storytelling has been maintained as an intrinsic part of the faith.

Folktales have been a vehicle of Judaic religious instruction since the earliest times. The Old Testament contains moral tales, parables, and proverbs based on stories; the **Talmud** (legal code) records many legends concerning wise men; in postbiblical times, the **Midrash** (a compilation of legalist commentary and interpretation of the Old Testament) recounted oral traditions, or **Hagada**, about the wisdom of Abraham, David, Solomon and other spiritual heroes. Since the sect was founded in eighteenth century Eastern Europe, the **Hasidim** have fostered the transmission of legends celebrating the miraculous gifts of holy men.

Jewish folktales often share the same plots as tales told in other cultures, but they differ in the elaboration of details such as time, place, characters or message. For instance, the tales may reflect important points in the Jewish yearly cycle, such as the Sabbath or holy festivals, or recount the philosophy and adventures of famous rabbis. In most cases, Jewish tales illustrate a moral lesson.

Today it is apparent that written Jewish literature and rabbinical teachings have encouraged rather than destroyed the culture's oral traditions. For instance, many folktales derive from sermons delivered in the synagogue. Storytelling also has a well-established place in their religious or festive activities. Folktales are used in Hebrew schools to educate youngsters about Jewish history and tradition. In addition, certain stories are traditionally told at appointed times, such as during mourning, marriage celebrations or Sabbath meals. Less serious tales may be told in the informal context of family gatherings.

Religious Beliefs and Customs

Religion is an area particularly rich in traditional belief and custom. All formal religions include rituals, material culture, celebrations, and beliefs that are maintained and communicated outside official church

doctrine. Moreover, some religions are based wholly upon beliefs and customs learned orally or through example from other members of the faith. Both categories of traditional religious belief and practice are considered folk religion.

Santería, a folk religion brought from Cuba, is growing in popularity in south Florida. Derived primarily from the West African Yoruba religion brought to Cuba by slaves, many aspects of **Santería** are similar to those existing in Africa today. However, long contact with Catholicism produced a blending of numerous elements. For instance, each deity, or **orisha**, is identified with a particular Catholic saint on the basis of similar characteristics: African **Changó** with Santa Barbara, **Babalú-Ayé** with San Lázaro, **Obatalá** with Our Lady of Mercy, and so on.

Practitioners of **Santería**, or **santeros**, believe that the world exists on two planes — an earthly human plane and a spiritual one where the **orishas** reside. Human beings are expected to conduct a moral life by living in harmony with people, the **orishas** and the natural environment. A hierarchy of priests teaches the **santeros** the tenets of the religion and reveals the wisdom of the **orishas** through several types of divination. The most important divination system is **lfá**, in which a priest throws a chain of eight seed pods, called an **opele**. Each of the pods may land on the up or down side, resulting in 256 possible combinations, each of which is associated with verses, stories, and prescriptions for behavior.



The bata ensemble is composed of three musicians each playing a double headed, hour glass shaped drum.

Music and dance are essential features of **Santería**. Religious parties called **bembés** are held to honor a deity, celebrate the initiation of a practitioner, or mark the birthday of a believer into the faith. At the **bembé**, one of three types of musical ensembles performs music and songs to praise the **orishas**. The **batá** ensemble, composed of three musicians each playing a double-headed, hourglass-shaped drum, performs the most sacred type of music.

Many objects are important to devotional activities, and **santeros** learn to make, use, and understand them during their initiation. Each **santero** specializes in certain aspects of the religion and acquires a profound understanding of the arts associated with that specialty. For instance, beadwork is a common decorative element on many artifacts used in **Santería**, such as the **collares**, or necklaces bestowed upon initiates. Each **collar** contains the protective power of the **orisha** it represents and is beaded in the pattern symbolic of that **orisha**. A necklace dedicated to **Changó** may consist of repetitions of six alternate red and white beads.



South Florida's music runs the gamut from the twangy sounds of bluegrass to the mournful tone of the blues to the sensuous rhythms of salsa.

Music

Although continuity is perhaps the central characteristic of culture, both internal and external forces may effect change. Clearly, the pace of change in the formal, technological, and distributional systems of folk arts has accelerated with the increased movement of peoples and ideas made possible by mass transportation and the media. However, change does not necessarily render a tradition non-folk: repetition, informal context of transmission and group acceptance are the essential criteria of folklife.

Folk music in south Florida presents us with a diversity of musical traditions that flourish side by side, often influencing and enriching each other. Folk music is any music, whether written or oral in origin, which is passed on orally in small group situations. Here it runs the gamut from the twangy sounds of bluegrass to the mournful tone of the blues to the sensuous rhythms of salsa.

The influx of peoples from the Caribbean and Latin American has made their music a dominant force in south Florida's musical culture. Conversely, many Latin and Caribbean musical styles have been altered through contact with American traditions. The types of music featured in south Florida's Caribbean and Latin American clubs, radio, restaurants, religious events, community festivals and family gatherings include Jamaican reggae, Puerto Rican plena, salsa and jibaro, Cuban guajiro and charanga, Haitian compa, Trinidadian calypso and soca, Mexican musica norteña and mariachi. Music is an important ingredient in the

lives of members of these communities. It serves as a buffer to a strange environment, a source of entertainment, a reason to socialize, a part of religious observances, and a symbol of cultural identity.

During the early twentieth century, Cuba was the seminal force in Latin American popular music. Musical forms such as the merengue, bolero, guaracha, mambo, arieto, rumba, or chacha can be traced to Cuba. Most of these have roots in folk traditions that derive from a synthesis of European and African musical models. Cuban folk music survives in south Florida in forms ranging from the predominantly Hispanic punto de guajiro (improvisational verses accompanied by guitar, lute, guiro and clave), to salsa-like charanga and the essentially African songs and rhythms of Santería's guiro, bembé and batá ensembles.

In south Dade county, the presence of Mexican migrant workers and permanent residents sustains several local bands. Most bands play the conjunto or norteño music favored by Mexicans and Mexican Americans from the Texas-Mexican border area. Conjunto bands, consisting of guitars, drums, vocalists, button accordions or keyboard, perform mainly rancheras — cowboy songs with a polka beat from northern Mexico. In addition, their repertoires usually include corridos (ballads), cumbias, boleros, and huapangos. mariachi bands that play the lively regional music from the states of Jalisco and Michoacán are also crowd-pleasers.



Nestled on the Miami River, near downtown, is the Arrellano brothers' sponge packing warehouse.

Maritime Skills and Occupations

South Florida is rich in traditional skills and occupations rooted in the natural environment. They range from cowboying in Davie to boatbuilding in Miami, frogging in the Everglades, and farming in Homestead. All such occupations include techniques, gestures, narratives, and customs shared by workers during their daily activities. People who engage in these traditional occupations sometimes attain such a high level of competence in the execution of a process or in the form and decoration of a product that they are truly artists.

The inland and coastal waters of south Florida teem with tropical aquatic life, so Floridians have developed many skills and occupations in order to reap the rich marine harvest. For instance, Florida's coastal waters are the only habitat in the United States where sponges grow. Sponge gathering and processing is not new to the Miami area: by the 1890s, hundreds of sponge boats operated by Americans, Conchs, and Bahamians were active from Miami south through the Keys. In the early twentieth century, Key West competed with Tarpon Springs for the greater share of the sponge market. With the sponge blight from 1938 to 1952, however sponging throughout Florida diminished considerably.

Nestled on the Miami River, near downtown, is the Arrellano brothers' sponge packing warehouse. Here sponge fishermen from Biscayne Bay and the Keys bring the different types of sponges they harvest — wool, yellow, grass and glove — to be processed, packed and shipped. It was largely through the efforts of the Arrellano brothers that the sponge industry was revitalized in the early 1960s. Today, Miami is the commercial sponge center of Florida and most east coast sponge fishermen are Cuban.

Sponges are collected by one of two methods. In shallow waters fishermen hook sponges with a four-pronged rake attached to a pole measuring up to 40 feet in length. In deeper waters, divers using an airhose and diving suit cut the sponges from the beds. After they harvest the sponges, the fishermen dump them into crawls, or wooden enclosures at the water's edge. Two or three days later, they beat the sponges with a piece of wood in order to remove the black outer skins, then dry them so the sponges will keep until sold to the processor.

At the warehouse the sponges are dampened, then cut into sizes between five and ten inches in diameter. Next, the sponges are trimmed to a round, even shape, sorted into one of five grades, and dried



The Everglade skiff's flat bottom and long narrow shape enable it to glide long distances

in the sun. Sponges meant for cosmetic or decorative purposes are cleaned chemically to lighten their natural orange-tan color. Finally, the sponges are counted into lots, stuffed into burlap sacks, and pressed into bails for shipping.

Not far inland from the coast, the Everglades encompasses millions of acres of wetlands. The people who settled in the Glades have developed unique types of transportation to navigate the wilderness in search of fish and game. The glades skiff (also called a pole boat) is a long, narrow canoe-like boat that was commonly used through the early twentieth century. Traditional skiffs are about one foot high, up to 16 feet long, but only about two feet wide in the mid-section. They are slightly tapered and lift slightly in the stern so as to reduce drag in the shallow water. The skiff's flat bottom and long, narrow shape enable it to glide long distances when the navigator stands in the center and pushes it along with a pole.

The few south Florida residents who still make the skiffs now use different materials than in the past. Formerly, cypress was preferred because of its moisture-resistant qualities. In the last 50 years, cypress has become increasingly rare and skiffs are now constructed of plywood, redwood or fiberglass.

Conclusion

Folklife surrounds us in our daily lives — we live beside it and practice it, yet it is so much a part of our habits and environment that we rarely notice it. By learning more about folklife, both ours and others, perhaps we can better understand where we came from, who we are, and where we are going.



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