

# Storytelling and its Role in Cultural Heritage

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## Introduction

In our research, we wanted to explore how storytelling connects people to cultural heritage. Specifically, we were interested in how mythology, folklore, and religion are displayed. In one case, we explored how mythology and folklore in popular fictional novels connected readers to cultural heritage. Our second focus examined how storytelling amongst immigrant communities connected them to their cultural heritage.

Before moving onto our research, it is necessary to define the following terms that are crucial for understanding our results:

- Cultural heritage: "the past created by humankind and its various tangible and intangible manifestations"
- Mythology: "a body of beliefs, fables, or legends belonging to a people, usually involving spiritual tales that reflect the philosophy of the culture"
- Folklore: "traditional beliefs and customs, narratives and sayings, and activities that are preserved among cultures"

## Methodology

Based on these terms and our specific topics, we employed a variety of research methods.

To explore storytelling from the perspective of popular fictional novels, we implemented the following:

- A survey that included questions on reading, mythology, and folklore
- An interview based on the survey questions and responses with a professor that is knowledgeable about storytelling
- Participant-observation in the "Prairie Skies" and "In My Backyard" shows at the William M. Staerkel Planetarium

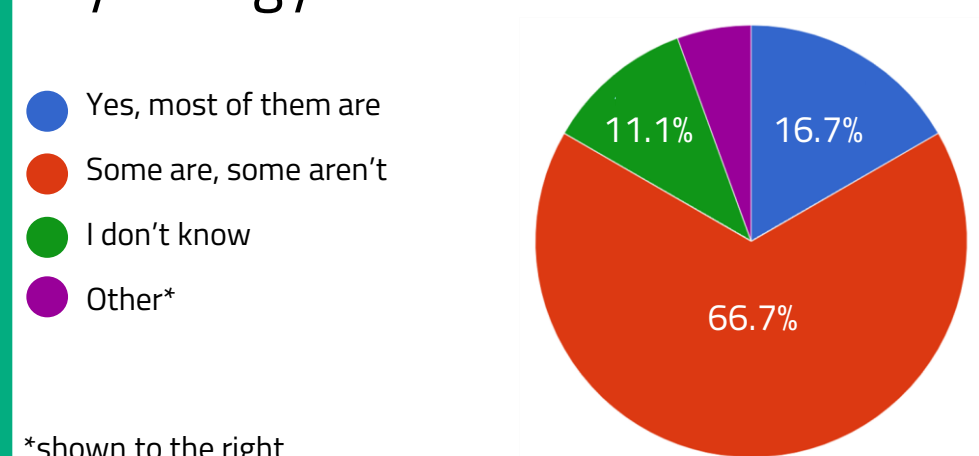
To capture the essence of cultural heritage amongst immigrants, the methods conducted were:

- Interviewing two community members that fled their home country of Laos as children due to the violence taking place.
- Participant-observation at Stone Creek Church during a Congolese congregation to understand their storytelling through songs.

## Results - Fictional Novels

The survey on mythology and folklore in reading had a total of 36 participants, 75% of which were Parkland students. Here were some of the results:

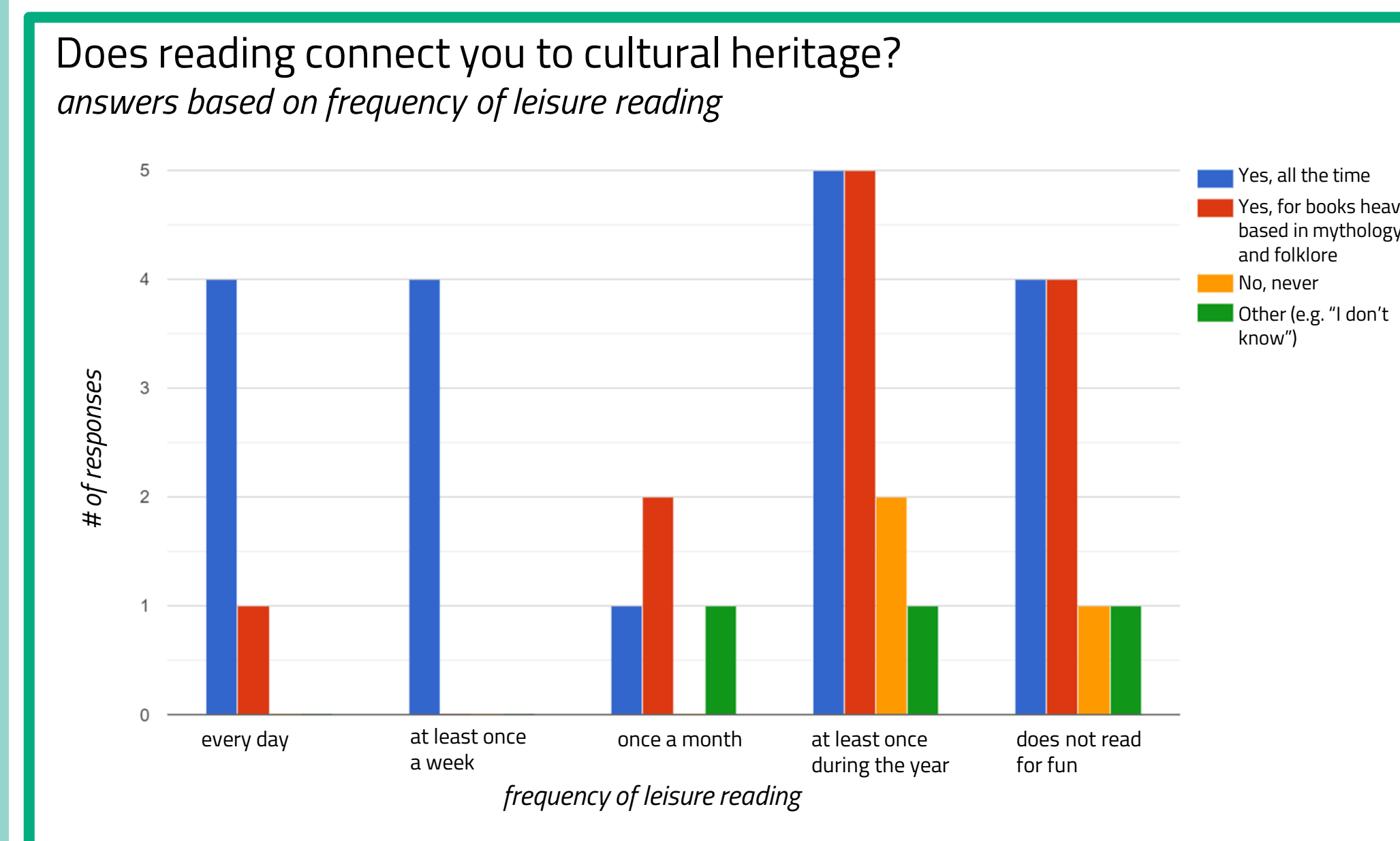
Do you think popular books are based on or are heavily influenced by mythology and folklore?



\*Other responses:

- "If you consider things like the relationships between good and evil, the power dynamics between family members or characters, or when a kind underlying achieves great things then yes"
- "most popular adult books are not obviously influenced by mythology and folklore BUT it is hard to write any book that will connect to a reader without touching on familiar cultural themes - many of which are not-so-obviously influenced by myth"

\*shown to the right



Based on these survey results, we conducted an interview. The interviewee, a professor knowledgeable about storytelling, explained that "there are no stories that are outside of being created by and influenced by and impacted by the stories that came from the past." A specific example they used was the Hero's Journey, a structure commonly found and used in stories. When asked if reading connects readers to cultural heritage, they went on to say: "Yes, absolutely...culture is our heritage and our history and our present and our future...we don't exist in something that isn't culture...if you're reading, you are connecting to some form of culture just by processing what you're reading."

The final method used for our first focus was the participant-observation at the William M. Staerkel Planetarium. At the "Prairie Skies" show, we were able to see how cultural variations in how the stars were presented engaged the audience, with audience members laughing and shouting out guesses. Even though we were looking at the same stars for the entire show, there were many ways they could be interpreted (e.g. Scorpius vs. Maui fish hook).

The second show had more of a storytelling element, though there were only a few others in the audience. It was an interactive show, designed for the audience to sing, snap, or sit quietly at different parts of the show. One part of the show went into the story of Callisto and Arcus, otherwise known as Ursa Major and Ursa Minor. Their mythological story provided explanations as to why they, along with Leo the Lion, became a part of the stars as well as why animals' tails are a certain length (e.g. why mice have long tails, why rabbits have short ones). The story was an immersive experience as it was shown in the planetarium.



William M. Staerkel Planetarium (Photo by Katrina Powers)



Stone Creek Church (Photo by Jacob Barker)

## Results - Immigrant Communities

The interview conducted amongst the two immigrant community members had a total of twelve questions discussing their perspectives on identity and storytelling.

These individuals both grew up during the Vietnam war in Laos, a neighboring country. They both grew up in rural areas alongside the Mekong River. Their towns, unfortunately, became battlefields and they had to escape with their families for their own safety. After this, they were placed in refugee camps in which they set out to apply for sponsors all around the world (Argentina, Australia, United States, etc.)



Access image at <https://archive.internationalivers.org/node/10852>



Photo by Terry Sunderland/CIFOR

Both of their families found that telling stories was very important. One interviewee says her mother enjoys telling stories about their time in Laos. She continues by saying, "sharing the stories helps future generations know about their experiences." Similarly, they also believe it is important to carry on the traditions of their ancestors on very important occasions. For example, during times of death and grief, one participant practices Buddhist rituals that were very prominent back in their home country. Following the death of a loved one, certain traditions are followed. In this particular case, to help the dead pass on correctly, they must become pure by dressing in white, shaving their head, and symbolically becoming a monk. Then to finally help the person get to the correct place in eternity, they must walk with a string to guide them.

Next, to understand the differences between certain methods of storytelling and religion, I attended a Saturday church service at Stone Creek Church. This particular service is special because it is a church service attended by Congolese people and is also mostly given in French.

The service began with music that was performed in French. It had contagious energy. After the music, the preaching began. There were responses during the church service to affirm the preacher. These stories seemed to truly connect everyone involved with their faith and culture all in one religious congregation as they truly embrace themselves and one another.

## Discussion

Key findings for mythology and folklore in popular fictional novels:

- Most survey responses confirmed reading connects people to cultural heritage, with 50% saying reading connects them to cultural heritage "all the time" and 33% "for books that are heavily based in mythology and folklore."
- Responses from both our survey and our interviewee suggest that our modern-day stories are built off previous stories.
- As stories use common themes and structures, such as the Hero's Journey, readers are inherently connected to cultural heritage, even if they are not as aware of it as they might be in stories that explicitly use mythology.
- The planetarium demonstrated how mythological stories provide explanations for how the world came to be how it is

Key findings for storytelling and cultural heritage amongst immigrants:

- Different cultures and even different individuals in their own respective cultures practice storytelling differently.
- There are several different ways to intangibly show cultural heritage
  - Storytelling, music, dance
- Understanding culture takes direct interaction

Areas for future research:

- A more extensive survey expanding on these findings would be useful since we only had 36 participants total
- Further research could examine some fictional novels and identify some of the components of stories that come from mythology and folklore
- We also recommend that future research on fictional novels conduct participant-observation in a setting like a storytelling event or a book club, which we had trouble finding at the time of our research
- Interview more people to understand more differences across different cultures.
- Interview church leaders to see perspectives on use of intangible versus tangible cultural heritage
- Create a small survey to see differences between immigrants and non-immigrants

We were able to gain insight into how mythology and folklore in popular fictional novels and storytelling in immigrant communities connect people to cultural heritage through multiple methods. The results from our research can serve as a starting point for future research to expand upon and to explore these topics in greater detail.

## References

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