

Carnival and Community: Conflict and Fusion

D. Elliott Parris

Trinidad is the home of Carnival in the Caribbean. While Carnival is found elsewhere — St. Lucia, Grenada, Antigua, Nevis, the Virgin Islands, and Haiti — Trinidad's fete is considered the Caribbean's greatest, its most spectacular, its trendsetter. The Carnival in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, plays this preeminent role in Latin America.

The modern Trinidadian Carnival is a product of the conflict between two great cultures — European and African. After 1498 they met, one as master, the other as slave; one sought dominance, the other liberation.

Discovered by Columbus in 1498, Trinidad was part of the Spanish Empire until 1797, when it was captured by the British, in whose hands it remained until its political independence in 1962. From 1498-1783 the island remained undeveloped and underpopulated. Spain then opened her colonies to migrants from other Roman Catholic countries, leading to an influx of French planters from neighboring West Indian territories into Trinidad. These French Creoles became the dominant economic and ethnic group in Trinidad, and their influence on the island's culture remained strong even after the island was seized by the British.

The French Catholic elite introduced traditional Carnival to Trinidad. "Carnival," of Latin derivation, means "put away the meat," or "farewell to the flesh," an allusion to the Christian custom of entering a state of abstinence and spirituality during Lent. Carnivals

had been celebrated in Roman Catholic countries for hundreds of years. Their historical origin is obscure, but they probably derived from a pre-Christian rite honoring the new year and the coming of spring. That would explain the original length from Epiphany (January 6) to Ash Wednesday (the first day of Lent). In 19th-century Trinidad, the Carnival extended from Christmas to Ash Wednesday. The festivities were characterized by elaborate masked balls and street processions, mainly in carriages. Some white revelers donned black masks and played the role of black slaves. Free persons of color, although not forbidden to mask, were forced to keep to themselves; the black slaves had no share in Carnivals unless required to take part for the amusement of the white elite.

Immediately after the emancipation of the slaves in 1833, a tradition was begun among them that had great impact on carnival. The ex-slaves chose to commemorate the anniversary of their freedom by holding a festivity each year on August 1. In 1834 they paraded in a costumed "Artillery Band" meant to satirize the militia of the ruling forces. Quite clearly the practice of having some blacks act as field slaves — their former subservient role — was introduced. They blackened their faces, put chains on their bodies and were symbolically whipped through the streets. Others carried lighted torches, symbolic of the sugarcane fires often set by slaves to protest against their oppressors. This African celebration came to be known as Cannes Brule (Festival of the Burnt Canes), or Jamet Carnival (from the French *diametre*, meaning "the other half").

The Africans soon introduced their Cannes Brule into the Carni-



Carnival Preparation — Wirebender and Decorator at work. Photograph courtesy of Trinidad & Tobago Embassy, Washington, D.C.

val season, arguing that since it was a public holiday, Cannes Brule could take place and initiate Carnival. But the whites resented this intrusion into what had been exclusively an upper-class fete. Laws and proclamations repeatedly sought to stifle or eliminate Cannes Brule. This conflict culminated in the Cannes Brule riots of 1881. Subsequent suppression only drove Cannes Brule underground, where it thrived, promoting ritual combat (personified in stick fighting) and social satire in song (first called "kalinda-singing," then "ca-i-so," and today "calypso"). The Cannes Brule was born as a memorial to the sufferings of slavery and stubbornly persisted as a ritual celebration of the African community's survival. When the elite found that they could not stamp out the Cannes Brule, they incorporated it into their Carnival.

The 20th century has seen the fusion of these two traditions, the European festival of Carnival and the African festival of Cannes Brule, into what is known today as Carnival. The European practice of wearing masks (at the "masked balls") was easily adopted by the Africans whose own traditional culture and religion employed masks extensively. Africans brought the music of the drum, whose infectious rhythm trans-

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Jumping-up in a Carnival band.
Photograph courtesy of Trinidad & Tobago Embassy, Washington, D.C.

formed the parade of costumed, elite individuals content to ride in carriages into a roadmarch of dancing, jumping revelers. During World War II, musicians created an original musical instrument out of discarded oil drums, replacing the skin drum with the new steel drum. Thus steel-band music was born. And so the Trinidad Carnival, whose particular character had been forged in a history of community conflict and fusion, continued to develop its own distinctly "new world" musical sound.

Community conflicts exist today: costume bands still reflect societal cleavages based on wealth, status, and color. And the Carnival Queen Competition was dropped recently because of black resentment that white and light-skinned entrants usually won. Yet the majority of Trinidadians, rich and poor, willingly "play mas," many at great economic expense and personal sacrifice, and many travel great distances each year to get home for Carnival. Carnival has seemingly imbedded itself in the very soul of the Trinidadian people.

Carnival is an intrinsic part of community life in many other Caribbean countries and it continues to flourish and to adapt to changing circumstances. Not wanting to be overshadowed by Trinidad's celebration, many other islands have shifted their Carnival

dates from the traditional pre-Lenten season to other times when their own attention, and that of the tourists who have become increasingly important to their economies, can be focused specifically on their own festival. In North America, Caribbean communities organize their Carnivals to take advantage of summer weather and to avoid conflicting with any neighboring community's carnival.

Caribbean peoples continue to engage in the rites of Carnival. For in the world of Carnival everyday social realities recede, at least for the duration of the rite, as each participant connects with another reality — a collective inner world of community from which each returns with a new strength.

Suggested Reading

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Caribbean Carnivals in North America

Katherine Williams

Migrating West Indians have brought their traditions and culture to North America. There is a rich culture compounded of elements from Africa, the Middle East, China and the Far East, North and South America, and Europe.

One expression of West Indian culture — Carnival — is practiced from Brooklyn and other eastern seaboard cities, to the Canadian cities of Montreal and Toronto, and across the continent to Los Angeles. The largest and oldest Carnival in North America began in Harlem in the mid-1940s. The Festival was later moved to Brooklyn in 1967 and is run by the West Indian-American Day Carnival Association, Inc.

Carnival has become a commonly shared and much-anticipated activity among West Indians who live in North America. It is a time for coming together, a time to greet old friends with a "What's happenin', man?," accompanied by much hugging, kissing, and back slapping. People travel to all parts of the United States, Canada, and the Caribbean; the flow of people is continuous. Carnival is a reason to enjoy oneself in the traditional ways, a reason to be with friends and family.

Carnival has many names: it is "Mas" in Brooklyn, "Caribana" in Toronto, and Carnival in Montreal. It is enjoyed by native-born North Americans, by immigrants other than West Indians, by recent

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