

Trinidad carnival



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Trinidad Carnival is a festival of colours which is transformed into costumes, calypso, steel band music, dance and different foods and Caribbean art which attracts many people from the different countries. The carnival season is usually during the two weeks before the traditional Christian fasting of Lent. This is celebrated to mark an overturning of daily life. The roots of carnival both lay in Africa and France (Liverpool: 57). Trinidad carnival is a very significant festival in the island of Trinidad and Tobago.

This festival has evolved from an elegant, exclusive affair to an all inclusive national festival of the country. Therefore in order to understand the meaning of this festival one must look at the acculturation, cultural assimilation and cultural persistence. It is also necessary historical, social, cultural and political background which gave birth to a national celebration. In 1498 Christopher Columbus had step on the soils of Trinidad and claimed the island in the name of the King and Queen of Spain. The country was ruled by Spain for about 300 hundred years and remained much undeveloped.

In the 1700s the Bourbon reforms of Charles III, which was designed to rejuvenate flagging colonial efficiency, is when the Spanish crown decided to pay attention Trinidad which at that time was thinly populated and uncultivated at that time. A Cedula issued by the Spanish crown in 1763 highlighted the island's neglected state with no European Spaniards available for emigration; it invited West Indian French Catholics who were dissatisfied by Britain's 1763 take over of their Antillean islands which were Grenada, Dominica, St.

Vincent and Tobago to settle in Trinidad. They were encouraged to buy land grants to set up agricultural units under their own and to transfer slaves in quantity to work these plantations. By 1797 approximately 14, 000 French settlers came to live in Trinidad consisting of about 2, 000 whites and 12, 000 slaves. Studies by Barry Higman and Melville Herskovits show that the majority of African slaves who were brought to Trinidad were mainly of the Mandinka, Fulbe, Kwakwa, Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo and Kongo peoples (Liverpool: 62).

Most of the native people who were the Amerindians died from forced labour and illness. Carnival was introduced to Trinidad in around 1785 as the French settlers began to arrive, they called it Carnevale. This tradition caught on quickly. Carnival of the French was held during the Lenten season starting on Boxing day to Ash Wednesday was marked by great merrymaking and feasting by both the French and the English. Carnival, as the end of the social season was also marked at the apex society by elaborate balls to which was added the custom of masking and disguising.

They wore masks to hide their faces from their friends and play sexual “games” on their wives, husbands and mistresses, the enslaved Africans were not allowed at their sex games or their dinners but in the masquerade imitated their tattered clothing thus making fun of them (Liverpool: 127). But the major part of carnival activities consisted of house to house visiting and street promenading, on foot or in carriages, witticisms, playing of music and dancing and a variety of frolics and practical jokes (Pearse, 1956: 15).

The French serenaded their fellow men with flute, violin and African drum. Already African drums and Spanish instruments had been adopted by the Frenchmen in the music making (Liverpool: 127). Until 1838 when the Africans were legally set free the majority of the English and Scots celebrated Christmas, New Years and Carnival with rowdy balls and fetes. Marital law which finally ended in 1846 was traditionally enforced by the English colonies in the Caribbean from Christmas through the first or second week of January. Liverpool: 132) These festivities along with the pomp and ceremony involved in imposing marital law (this included maneuvers by the militia), provide the slaves with ideas for some of the earliest masquerades for carnival. Trinidad's French Creole planter community used this opportunity to celebrate their memories of their ancestral home. Pre-emancipation carnival was highly stratified and segregated affair, however with the planters and the free coloured keeping to themselves.

Slaves were in theory debarred from the festivities but eye witness' evidence suggests that they will have taken advantage of the temporary anarchy to indulge in the street parades (Regis 2000: 231). Because of this segregation and the debarring of slaves from this celebration the slaves in turn would hold their own little carnivals in their backyards called the Dame Lorraine masque (Regis 2000: 231) by using their own rituals and folklore but also imitating their masters' behaviour at the masked balls. The pre-emancipation carnival saw whites costume themselves as negres de jardin (field Negro labourers) and mulatresses.

This also reenacted the Cannes Brulees (French for burning canes): the practice of rounding up slaves to put out fires in the cane fields. " In the days

of slavery whenever fire broke out upon an estate immediately mustered and marched to the spot, horns and shells were blown to collect them and the gangs were followed by the drivers cracking their whips and urging them with cries and blows to their work. "(Pearse 1956: 18). The liberty that the Africans were given was demonstrated by them on the streets of Port of Spain of August 1 1838 the date enslavement legally ended. They celebrated in Cannes Brulees fashion (Liverpool). After emancipation of the slaves the things were materially altered, the ancient lines of demarcation between the classes were obliterated and as a natural consequence the carnival degenerated into a noisy and disorderly amusement for the lower classes (Pearse 1956: 20). 19th century historian L. M Fraser described this behaviour " After Emancipation the negroes began to represent this scene(blowing of horns , shells , cracking whips)as a commemoration of the change in their condition and the procession of Cannes Brulees used to take place on the night of 1st of August the date of their emancipation.

After a time of day was changed and for many years past the Carnival days have been inaugurated by the Cannes Brulees". This brought concerns for the whites. The British entrenching themselves as the new colonial power in the west. The French had lost their dominance in society. All the whites caught up in the problems of labour, low productivity and financial structures. Therefore the opportunity was provided for the Africans to take over Carnival and embrace it as an expression of their new found freedom (Pearse 1956).

The newly emancipated Africans celebrated their new condition festival of Canboulay which featured torch light processions, loud music , drumming ,

reinterpretations of traditional African masking as well as representations of their treatment during the period of plantation slavery (Regis 2000: 232).

Since the whites and coloureds refused to have anything to do with them but were taken up in the end of African enslavement, the Africans had the streets to themselves (Liverpool: 222).

According to Liverpool “previous studies on carnival suggest that the whites stopped all carnival activities after 1838 and their fancy balls were no longer connected to the carnival itself.” The newspapers started to describe the carnival as *Jamette Carnival*. This was a term used by the French to describe the Carnival celebrations of the African population during the period 1860 to 1896. The term comes from the French meaning the underworld. It is used to describe a certain class in the community which was the very poor blacks.

The upper class ceased their participation in the street festival but continued their house to house visiting. Martial law was no longer enforced and consequently there were no military type activities. Because the upper class were disturbed by the fact that the Africans taking over their festival, they pressured them to give up their carnival festival, therefore hostility brewed between the black underclass and the white upper class culminating the Canboulay Riots of 1881 a two day rampage by the retaliating lower class that resulted in deaths and mass destruction of poverty.

Subsequently the Canboulay festival was abolished in 1884 replaced by a more restricted festival that began at dawn on Carnival Monday which is now known as *Jouvert*. Although the “sanitized” Carnival was now becoming acceptable to most classes the practice of the outlawed *Cannes Brulees*

continued though not as openly as before(Liverpool). By the 1890s, Carnival started to fade away from the wildness of the Jamette society to the more competition oriented middle class festival. Merchants realized that with the improvement of carnival would lead to economic benefits.

Carnival in Trinidad produced many traditional characters that were depicted by the Africans. Some of the more popular one was Dame Lorraine which was imitative of mas played by the French planters who would dress up in elegant costumes of the French privileged class and parade at homes on carnival Sunday night. The liberated slaves recreated these costumes by stuffing their bosoms and padding their buttocks, in their own fashion and imitative jewellery, this provided some type of comedy for the slaves and Sailor mas which they depicted when the French, British and American naval ships came to Trinidad.

Calypsonians were also introduced during Carnival with their picong (ridiculing of the upper , middle or lower classes or anyone who stepped out of line. Calypsonians with nicknames such as Atilla the Hun, Invader , Destroyer came in the scene in the 930 and their music was very humorous (Cowely, 1996). The first Calypso King contest was held in 1939 , Growling Tiger was crowned the first Calypso king , he sang a song entitled The Labour Situation in Trinidad(Anthony: 144).

Steel pan which replaced the tamboo bamboo in the 1940s was introduced by Winston “ Spree” Simon of the Laventille community the steel pan was single ping pongs hung around the neck playing just a few notes. Carnival of the 19th century was process of which two different festivals which was the

traditional mas African Camboulay) and Pretty mas (European Carnival) that occupied the same space which was merged into one now know as the Trinidadian Carnival.

Carnival is very useful when it comes to multi-culturalism. It was originally a celebration for the French immigrants then it became for the freed Africans which was a memory of slavery and emancipation as well as the remembrance of the ancestral celebrations and rituals of empowerment. Finally this celebration has become a ceremony of celebration of life and of sexuality and an extension of its traditional role.