Th?nk

Diversity within the Carnival Space
Diversity and the Carnival Space

(Let me first say what an honour it is, as a cultural practitioner and a student, to be part of this event, alongside such luminaries of T&T culture.)

This panel seeks to answer the question: Can T&T's Carnival be used as a point of departure in creating a national policy on diversity and multiculturalism?

The short answer is yes. Carnival, as this country's largest cultural festival, must be part of any basic framework for cultural policy. It is notable that T&T has never had an official policy for Carnival, as, without a proper map, a real sense of origin, direction, and destination, our Carnival can only drift—and could fall prey to developments that see the few prospering at the expense of the national interest.

Multiculturalism, as an approach to policy, seeks to ensure representation of diverse groups, so that resources and space are shared.

Participation in Carnival is inherently a staking out of space. Big bands or small, groups and individuals say, 'Look me!' It is the validation of self and community on the national stage. The local Catholic Church's decision to bring out a Carnival band this year gives evidence of the importance of the Carnival space, to declare presence, to create relevance and cement a sense of community.

Carnival is often held to be a democratic space, where all are free to make their statement. Even the decision not to participate is a statement. But is Carnival truly democratic, with equal opportunity for all? Or is it, rather, that Carnival is a battleground: those that have political control, status, power and money, versus those that do not?

A historical perspective shows that the issue of space has always been with us:

- **Mardi Gras vs Canboulay** – i.e. Carnival as spectacle, celebrating pomp and colour, as opposed to masquerade as a declaration of revolution and a fight for freedom
- **Ruling classes vs 'Jammette culture'** – Colonial masters enjoyed their Carnival while the poorer classes, those living on the fringes, created their own forms of expression
- **Big vs small bands** –Bands with thousands of members take centre stage while others are relegated to the periphery and have to work around them, competing for 'prime time' onstage
- **Paying masqueraders vs street revellers** – Bands and elite sections are roped off and bouncers hired to keep non-members out.
- **Marginialisation of traditional characters** – Old time mas is receding to occupy smaller and smaller space, as more of the spotlight falls on big bands
- **Music trucks vs pan** – Steel band, the national instrument, finds itself squeezed out as most bands employ DJ music on trucks
- **Pan as people's expression or as high-priced party draw for elites?** Panorama organisers plan the event with the intention to make money, while many in the communities that have birthed pan culture suffer the consequence of not being able to afford access to the festival
- **All-inclusive culture** – As the focus on the Carnival dollar leads to increased expectation of added services, all-inclusive parties have become more desirable. "VIP, VVIP, ultra-super-mega all inclusive" is now a norm. Cheaper public fetes are seen as dangerous and carry less status.

- **Town vs country** – Resources are generally centred in Port-of-Spain and celebrations in smaller communities have been languishing, with decreased participation, fear of crime and lack of patronage for prizes, etc.

Carnival has traditionally presented a space for the voice of the underdog in society to be heard. Earl Lovelace describes a 1960s Carnival scenario in his new book, Is Just a Movie:

"(They) would find their way into Tokyo steelband, all of them… the streets of the city their own for this one time of the year, so they have no fear of nothing, nobody could touch them."

Lord Kitchener relayed the same sentiment in his calypso, The Road Make to Walk on Carnival Day, while David Rudder captures a similar sense of emancipation in his Carnival Woman, who throws off the 'shackles' of her life to become the "freest of women in all the world".

Inside the Carnival arena, behaviour that is normally frowned upon—like heavy drinking, lewd dancing, cross-dressing and near-nudity—is socially sanctioned. Segments of society labelled as 'deviant', or 'criminal' can play themselves. The J'Ouvert space, especially, is an inversion, a celebration of what is normally kept in the dark, a turning the status quo on its head. At Carnival, we say, it doesn't matter who you are, what group you're from or your social status: "Everybody Could Dingolay" (Mighty Shadow).

But while this culture of freedom to identify and express self, of inclusion and of letting difference be, has been one of the most enriching aspects of T&T Carnival, it may be under threat.

The price of Carnival costumes keeps climbing, and major events are geared toward those who can afford to attend.

In recent years, Mas on television looks more and more like a celebration of big bands, beads and bikinis. Coverage often does not show the diversity of the portrayals on the streets.

Last year's contest over rights to televise mas begs the question: Who owns Carnival? Is it owned by those with money: the massive bands, the upper classes, the big trucks?

Or does Carnival belong to everybody? How can a national Carnival policy ensure that the interests of diverse groups are represented?

Multiculturalism typically seeks to ensure representation for various ethnic and other groups. But, as an approach, it does not address T&T's unique cultural mixing and blending. Our culture is characterised more by cultural merging than by separateness, and so an approach that attempts to satisfy ethnic interests or to allocate resources based on separation is ill-suited to our needs. A more cohesive approach that takes into account the ever evolving whole is what is called for.

Yet, how can we ensure that different voices, from different levels of society, can be heard?

The People's Band idea, put forward by Minister of Arts and Multiculturalism Winston "Gypsy Peters", represents an attempt to democratise the mas, to make participation more accessible to the masses of people who are shut out by the exorbitant prices of conventional bands.

Yet The People's Band has met with a largely negative or mixed response, and Culture Ministry staffers seem to have little or no information on plans for the band.

Bandleaders fear loss of business. This should not be a problem for large, high-priced bands, as a free band would necessarily cater to a segment of society outside their client base. But for small bands, the impact could be significant. Still, band loyalty may be a significant factor.

Perhaps the idea of the band has been too politicised.

Some people anticipate a free for all; some have voiced fears over crime, 'unsavoury elements' etc.

But perhaps the People's Band can indeed help to address the problem of more democratic access to mas. It presents opportunities to promote and preserve aspects of the national Carnival culture that have been endangered by the focus on making money from mas.

The Ministry can pre-register organised groups of masqueraders, and provide logistical support, music and information. It can encourage participation with prizes for the best portrayals. Pan sides, rhythm sections, drummers, etc from different communities, as well as traditional mas characters like Moko Jumbies, Jab Jabs, Fancy Sailors, Bats, Devils and Indians could be encouraged, with incentives, to form part of the band, thereby helping to preserve historical mas forms.

Conclusion

As the main national festival, Carnival does indeed provide a context for addressing cultural diversity in T&T. It provides perhaps the best opportunity to do so. But while Carnival may be addressed as *part* of an official policy, it cannot be the only area of emphasis or focus. Issues of religion, gender, ethnicity, etc need more attention outside of the Carnival space.

What is desirable, perhaps, is a specific Carnival policy, to address issue of the preservation of national cultural heritage, and to ensure that the various interests and stakeholders are given the support they need, and all can benefit within the Carnival space.

—Gillian Moore
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