

## Is a Creole Bacchanal

Carnival is the Carnival is the supreme expression of the interculturative and creolising processes of Trinidad-style creolisation. Creolisation has been defined by Edward Kamau Brathwaite (1974, 6) as

a cultural process which...may be divided into two aspects of itself: ac/culturation, which is the yoking (by force and example, deriving from power/prestige) of one culture to another (in this case the enslaved/African to the European); and inter/culturation, which is an unplanned, unstructured but osmotic relationship proceeding from this yoke. The creolisation which results (and it is process not a product), becomes the tentative cultural norm of the society.

Carnival is the best example of the tentative cultural norm which now defines the society of Trinidad which has long embraced the descendants of the many nations and ethnic groups who settled in the island during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In the critical 19<sup>th</sup> century by a continuous process of inter-culturation and acculturation, the European Carnival and the African **kambule**, derived from the Ko word **kambula** (Warner-Lewis 2003: 222), became creolised into the one Carnival which we celebrate annually. Several accounts in histories of the day, in travel accounts and in the *Port of Spain Gazette* (1825-1957), the bi-weekly mouthpiece of the French Creole plantocracy, testify to masquerade balls, fancy costuming, street parading on horseback; in other words a derivative of 17<sup>th</sup> century Versailles-style celebrations. In defence of the purity of this European festival the *Gazette* published several letters of protest and complaint against the kambule. One such protest is an editorial response to 'Scotchman's indignation against lower class African masquerade in the 1838 Carnival:

We will not dwell on the disgusting and indecent scenes that were enacted in our streets—we will not say how many we saw in a state so nearly approaching nudity as to outrage decency and shock modesty—we will not particularly describe the African custom of carrying a stuffed figure of a woman on a pole, which was followed by hundreds of negroes yelling out a savage Guinea song (we regret to say that nine-tenths of the people were Creoles)—we will not describe the ferocious fight between the 'Damas' and the 'Wartloos' which resulted from this mummering—but we will say at once that the custom of

keeping Carnival by allowing the lower order of society to run about the streets in wretched masquerade belongs to other days, and ought to be abolished in our own (in Pearse 1988, 22).

Clearly the author of this was describing an African festival which coopted European festive space. This African festival had its own logic and aesthetic and was definitely no wretched imitation of the European masquerade. The unidentified “hundreds of negroes” who yelled out Trinidad’s unofficial 1838 road march had their own ideas of masquerade and of music.

While there is evidence of polar opposites in pre-emancipation Carnival there is also evidence of inter/culturation. A writer whose French Creole origins can be discerned through his mask of anonymity, penned a letter to the editor of the *Port of Spain Gazette* who published it in the 26 March 1881 edition of the newspaper:

At the time carnival flourished, the elite of society was masked or disguised. The favorite costume of the ladies was the graceful and costly ‘mulatress’ of the period, while gentlemen adopted that of the garden Negro, in Creole, *negue jadin*, or black field slave. At carnival our mothers and grandmothers have even danced the *belair* to the African drum whose sounds did not offend their dainty ears, and our fathers and grandfathers danced the *bamboula*, the *ghouba* and the *calinda*... Sometimes also the *negue jadin* united in bands would proceed on evenings to the *cannes brulées*. Their splendid march with torches through the town streets imitated what actually took place on the estates when a plantation was on fire. In such cases laborers on neighboring estates were conducted there alternately, day and night, to assist in grinding the burned canes before they went sour; thus the *cannes brulées* (in Hill 1997, 11).

It is believed conventionally but inaccurately that African participation in Carnival began in imitation and mockery of Europeans among whose dances was the *cannes brûlées*. Most commentators fail to acknowledge the creolisation described in the French Creole appropriation of African dance and costume for festive purposes.

JD Elder, although endorsing the conventional spelling of *cannes brûlées*, never countenances African imitation of the carnivalised mockery of their plantation pain as suggested here; neither does he endorse African memorialisations of slavery as suggested by LM Fraser, the official whose memorandum to the Commission of Inquiry into the Canboulay riots is the source for conventional thinking about 19<sup>th</sup> century Carnival. Elder reads *cannes brûlées* as

an attempt of the Blacks not only to memorialize their emancipation in a dramatic way but to match the annual Carnival and Mummie parades of the white people with something truly African. Trouble began when the pageant was changed from August 1<sup>st</sup> and made to coincide with the Carnival Mummie celebrations of the white people” (1966, 95).

19<sup>th</sup> century newspaper accounts do not detail the actual practices of *kambule* nor of Canboulay, but Charles Day, an English visitor, provides a detailed eyewitness description of events of 1848: “I was residing in Trinidad during the Carnival, which commenced on Sunday the 7<sup>th</sup> of March at midnight. I had seen the Carnival at Florence, at Syra in Greece, and in Rome; and was now about to witness a negro masquerade, which, from its squalid splendour, was not unamusing, cheapness being the grand requisite” (1852, 313). Day’s account testifies to the reality of the interculturative and creolising processes. Day describes African masquerades, *kambule* processions deploying European motifs, European masquerades played by both Europeans and Africans. But he also records an Amerindian presence:

The best embodiments were the Indians of south America, daubed with red ochre; personified by the Spanish peons from the Main, themselves half-Indians testified by their exquisitely small feet and hands. Many of these had real Indian quivers and bows, as well as baskets; and, doubtless, were very fair representatives of the characters they assumed (316).

This indicates quite clearly that as early as 1848 if not before Carnival emerged as a Creole space which allowed all those so minded to pour their creative energies.

In later years descendants of Asiatic immigrants represented their memorialisations of ancestral cultures and masquerades on the Carnival streets but Creole masqueraders were also inspired by the artistry of Hosay, the dance of the Chinese dragons and so on. Art provided an early meeting ground for diverse peoples of Trinidad. The Calypso, for example, originally the organic product of cross-fertilisations of West African musics, attracted several outstanding non-African composers and performers. Mitto Sampson’s semi-mythological account of the development of the Calypso (1988) identifies Surisima the Carib, Hannibal the Mulatto and the white Cedric Le Blanc, among the top *chantuelles* of the latter decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Three of the dominant calypsonians of the early and middle 20<sup>th</sup> century are Executor, the non pareil, who could have passed as white, and Atilla and Lion who can boast of Hispanic or part Hispanic ancestry. Two of their

contemporaries were Moonsie Dailey, described as a full-blooded East Indian, and the legendary and colourful Chinesee Patrick, son of a Chinese immigrant and a mulatto woman.

Jones' contribution to Carnival has been outlined in Johnson's essay "Kiss of the Dragon: Chinese Culture in Trinidad" (2006) which also discusses the involvement of Louis J Williams in the management of the embryonic calypso tent industry; the contribution of mas-playing Chinese such as the Christophers, Manzai Lai, Elsie and Stephen Lee Heung and Bobby Ammon; and the involvement of young Chinese males in steelbands of the 1950s and 1960s such as Starland, Zone Stars, Melody Makers, Dixieland and Silver Stars.

Indian participation in Carnival is another feature of Trini-style creolisation. Masquerades like the burrokeet, the djab djab (jab jab), and Fancy Indians appealed to Indian masqueraders but there is evidence to indicate that they were stickfighters, attracted to that sport because of a similarity to their traditional *gitka* played stick; also there is mention of urban Indian individuals in early steelbands and so on. During the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Couva, a largely Indo-Trinidadian town in Central Trinidad and one which witnessed anti-prohibition riots in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (de VERteuil, was home to traditional mas which has now migrated to a permanent home in Carapaichima, also in Central Trinidad. Indian involvement in Calypso and in the steelband movement is also significant. In recent years Indian participation in Carnival, beginning with the Chutney Soca monarch inaugurated in 1996 and now including chutney Brass and Chutney Mardi Gras, has become so pronounced that some speak of a chutneyval which offers a parallel experience of Carnival.

In conclusion, then, the post Independence period witnessed the movement away from the monoculturalism endorsed by Dr Eric Williams, Father/founder of the nation, to competing ideas of nationalism, citizenship, power-sharing and multiculturalism. My doctoral dissertation "Ethnicity and Nationalism in the Post 197 Calypso of Trinidad and Tobago" (2002) charts in part the movement away from the post-Independence mode of constructing national identity in the image of Williams's Creole culturism, characterised by a privileging of the African trinity of Calypso/Steelband/Carnival, towards sharing public space with other cultural expressions and in particular those deriving from the Indian experiences.

Carnival is the most useful place to begin a sincere project of multiculturalism. Carnival was originally a celebration of nostalgia for the French Creole immigrants, then it became for the freed Africans a memorialisation of slavery and of emancipation as well as of remembered ancestral celebrations and rituals of empowerment. Following this, it became a street theatre and forum/gallery for artistic endeavour; it was street theatre at its best. Finally it has become a secular ceremony of celebration of life and of sexuality, a logical extension of its traditional role as a mass/ive act of catharsis. It has been held up as a demonstration of progressive creolisation given the involvement and interest shown by members of different ethnic groups. Despite patriotic boasts of “all ah we is one” mouthed too often by calypsonians, the truth is “Every creed and race, equal wineing space” as SuperBlue reveals in “Ah Feeling to Wine on Something” (1992). Equal, true, but in many cases separate because the Carnival has never integrated its participants as fully as many of us choose to believe. Race/ethnic-class divisions are still evident in the organisation of the masquerade bands: masqueraders revel to the same music in the same spaces but in different bands and in some cases different sections in the same bands. The steelband movement provides equal evidence of race/ethnicity-class divisions. Here still remains diversity in unity.

And yet I affirm that Carnival is the best place to begin engagement with multiculturalism because of the voluntary involvement of many elements of the national community and because of the ceaseless transgression, negotiation and compromise which have always defined the festival. I do not believe that it is meant to be a leveling experience, as some fondly imagine, but it provides the space for sharing at one level or another a common experience of festivity. I do not make too much of the class, geography and other binaries that are features of the festival. Rustic observances, for example, cannot and do not want to rival those in the cities but they offer the sense of participation that is sufficient for revelers. Carnival provides the stage for the performance and enactment of the several discourses on multiculturalism. It is now a matter for the policy makers and administrators to understand the significances of the living traditions we have inherited and perpetuate.

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