

Carnival, Memory and Identity

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Abstract: The carnival of Trinidad and Tobago is a performative ritual of cultural resistance and awakening, claiming a space and celebrating freedom from any kind of oppression. The history of this ritual is strictly connected to the process of cultural decolonization and political independence of the Caribbean country from the mother(is)land; it is in carnival and for carnival that Trinbagonians have successfully fought colonialism to gain their freedom. Imported in the Caribbean by French planters, as a ritual of amusement and temporary freedom, through the encounter with other rituals such as African masquerade and canboulay, Trinidad Carnival became, for the first time in the world, the instrument to earn an actual and non-temporary freedom, and the space for the celebration of a new interethnic national identity, obtained through the ritual itself.

The present of carnival is divided between the memory of this past, and a reality of “bikini and beads” costumes, ironically very close to the “pretty mas” that was imported from colonizers, and to the better-selling Brazilian carnival. The ritual that more than anything else shaped the national memory and the identity of this country, is now pulled by two ends. Past, present and future have to be discussed together for a real understanding of the relationship between carnival, memory and identity in Trinidad and Tobago.

Keywords: carnival, Trinidad and Tobago, cultural resistance, postcolonial identity, carnivalesque

I. INTRODUCTION

To be able to look forward, you always need to look back. When I interviewed Pat Bishop, probably the most complete carnival artist of Trinidad and Tobago, before telling me what carnival was for her, she wanted to know where I came from, who were my parents, and why I was there. “Errol Hill says to ‘forget about origins’”, she told me. “This disturbs me. If you do not know why it started, and how it started, you cannot say what it is. Only if you know origins you know why it happens and what it is” (Bishop in Sofo 2009 : 225). That is why to study the present and the future of carnival in Trinidad and Tobago, we need to look at the past of this ritual, at its origins, and at the past of the nation which gave birth to this unique kind of carnival.

II. FROM COLUMBUS TO THE CALLALOO

Before the country's independence on 31 August 1962, Trinidad and Tobago lived a history of cones-

cutive European colonizations, which were to change the history of these islands forever. Christopher Columbus arrived on the island of Trinidad “on the morning of 31 July 1498”, choosing this name “after sighting a ‘trinity’ of hills on the island’s south-east coast” (Yelvington 1993 : 4), to substitute the Arawak name *Irie*, “the land of the hummingbird”.

For a long time, however, the colony was almost ignored by the Spanish Empire, which was not able to exploit its potential. For these reasons, “responding in the eighteenth century to an increasingly aggressive British imperialism and realising that Trinidad, lacking a productive base, had a stagnant economy, the Spanish attempted to transform Trinidad into a profitable agricultural slave colony by opening up the island to Catholic foreigners from friendly nations” (Yelvington 1993 : 4). The Spanish released the *Cédula de Problación* in 1783, which granted land to the planters who decided to move to Trinidad, in relation to the number of slaves they brought with them. Another *Cédula* had been released before, in 1776, but had not proved as successful as the second one, which opened the way to the arrival especially of French planters from the neighbouring Caribbean islands, who were to form the French Creole aristocracy of the island, but not only.

The “callalloization” of Trinidad began in fact here; as Claude Hollis has written, “each immigrant sought to bring with him, or to import, as many slaves as possible on account of the additional land which he could thereby acquire, and slaves who were deported from other places were welcome in Trinidad” (Hollis 1941 : 82). This brought to many slaves who came not directly from Africa, but from the French-Caribbean islands, and from 1845 on from India and China as well, something which is still well reflected by the ethnic

diversity of the islands, with the major groups of African-heritage and East Indian-heritage amounting to about 40% each, and an incredibly diverse group of minorities, including people whose ancestors have come from as far as Madeira, Syria, Lebanon and China.

The outlining of the multiethnic society of Trinidad and Tobago is well described as a “callabo”, a traditional West Indian recipe. While in the “melting pot” all the flavours melt and lose their own shape to give birth to a new flavour, which often maintains the predominant taste of the main ingredient, and in the “salad bowl” all the ingredients are there together, but without actually mixing, the callabo is a heterogeneous sauce, in which the ingredients are not melted but swizzled, and they all maintain their own identity and flavour. Trinidad and Tobago’s carnival is engendered by the same mix of flavours that gave birth to callaloo and to Trinbagonian culture.

III. TRINIDADIAN CARNIVAL AND CARNIVALESQUE

As Bishop told me: “every culture came to Trinidad with some part of carnivalesque. Arima and Santa Rosa de Lima’s festival, catholic carnival, Amerindian celebrations. All of these played a role in building what we now call Trinidad Carnival. The reason our carnival is still alive, the reason it became so important, is that this is a festive country. We are full of celebrations. We have (...) many festivals and celebrations that have somehow contributed to carnival. All our festivals are part of the carnivalesque. Every festival feeds the others and feeds off of the others. Carnival is the central one, and this is also because it is not too strictly tied to a specific religion or ethnicity, but the reason for its survival is that there are several other carnivalesque

events around it. Without them, Carnival may not have survived as it did until now” (Bishop in Sofo 2009 : 226).

The European ritual of carnival was in fact imported in Trinidad by the French planters arrived thanks to the *Cédula* of 1783, but what we now call Trinidad Carnival is much more than a Caribbean version of European carnival; the African masquerade, which “is not a mere secular parade of masks but a sacred procession of maskers, musicians and participating audiences” (Liverpool 2001 : 58), has had at least the same amount of influence on Trinidad Carnival that the European ritual has. Not only because of the name of the ritual in Trinidad, “mas”, directly derived from it, but especially because of the role and identity of the masquerader. As in this African ritual, the social role of a person is strictly connected to his or her identity as a masquerader, in Trinidad as well, the borders dividing the identity of the masquerader from his or her mask tend to disappear, as Earl Lovelace’s wonderful novel *The Dragon Can’t Dance* has shown us. That is why I have said that “just like masquerade, Trinidad Carnival is a process of unmasking, rather than masking” (Sofo 2013 : 24-25).

We need at least a third ritual to outline all the origins of Trinidadian Carnival, and that is “canboulay”. Coming from the French “*cannes brulées*”, “burnt canes”, the name designates a reenactment ritual with extremely strong resistance connotations, from its birth, to the celebration of emancipation in 1834 and 1838. It is often said that canboulay has taken over carnival, but the truth is that the two rituals lived at the same time in the same space, and Trinbagonian mas is in fact born from the merge of three rituals: European carnival, African masquerade, and canboulay. Louis Regis has gone a long way in proving the presence of African-

influenced rituals way before emancipation, a fact usually ignored by most carnival historians: “after Emancipation in 1838, so goes the conventional story, the decorous French Creole Carnival (...) was overwhelmed by indecent African bacchanals. While there is some truth to this, the evolution of the Trinidad Carnival—as much else in Trinidad—was neither so simple nor so tidy. Closer examination of the historical accounts and commentaries reveals not only an African presence in Carnival before 1838 but also the public celebration of African rituals. This African presence has been the victim of systematic erasure, elision and misrepresentation” (Regis 2010 : 2).

Regis’s words also help us to look back at what carnival was when it landed in Trinidad. “The decorous French Creole Carnival” he speaks about, is most often called “pretty mas”, where “before Ash Wednesday, French planters and Creoles drowned their mundane cares in alcohol, partied and house-to-house visits” (Liverpool 2001 : 82). Hill tells us that “reports in the *Trinidad Gazette* on the 1822 carnival and those in the *Port-of-Spain Gazette* on the carnivals of 1829, 1830, 1831, and 1832 speak of the uncommonly attractive fascinations, the variety of dresses, the gay throngs of ballrooms, and the brilliant costumes of the polite saloons, but except for one short account there is nothing to suggest the disguises used nor is there mention of a dramatic performance in these occasions” (Hill 1997: 10), and from an account of a British visitor to the island, in the first half of the 19th century, we read that “Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* were nothing compared to the changes that took place in the persons of the Catholics of Trinidad. High and low, rich and poor, learned and unlearned, all found masking suits for the Carnival” (Bayley 1833 : 214). “High and low, rich and

poor” must be of course analyzed in the light of the preceding sentence which clearly speaks of “the Catholics of Trinidad”, not of the indigenous population. Liverpool also speaks of the pretty mas, saying that “the festival was noted for 'gambling, bullfights, weddings, masquerade parties, and dances (...) in every town and village” (Liverpool 1998 : 27), and we also know that two of the most commonly used carnival costumes were the “*mulatresse*” and the “*négre jardin*”. A plantation owner, in an article on the Port of Spain Gazette, dating 19 March 1881, wrote that the European women had even danced the *belé* at the sound of the African drums, and the men the *bamboula* and the *kalinda*, the dance and fight rituals connected to the birth and the evolution of canboulay. By doing this, the European colonizers were not only mimicking the Africans on the island, but appropriating themselves of their own identity, of their space, and proclaiming their power at the same time.

What is interesting, is that carnival proved to be the only space where all Europeans could encounter. In fact, “Carnival seemed to be one of the few institutions that served to bring all the Whites together. (...) It would seem that although there was great mistrust between them politically, and though they were divided by nationality, language and religion, the French and English were united in their manner of observing Carnival. They both indulged in balls and dinners where, in masquerading, they portrayed and mimicked the enslaved in the oppressed state, and simultaneously adopted African dances and music” (Liverpool 2001 : 135-136). Interestingly enough, not only carnival became a space where Europeans could meet, but it was also the space in which they first met African rituals and dances. Even though they were seen as “divertis-

sements”, in fact, and even though they were performed with a complete ignorance of their cultural and sacred aspects, this does not change the fact that they became the first influence of African culture on the Caribbean-based European colonizers, and the opposite is also true, as we know that “as both Europeans and Africans (...) inevitably assimilated materials and traits from one another. It has already been shown that Europeans participated in African dances. On the other hand, the creolized Africans tended to assimilate patterns of the Whites more quickly than the natives of Africa” (Liverpool 2001 : 169).

As we have said, pretty mas was gradually replaced through the influence of canboulay and African masquerade. If we mark 1783 as the year of birth of the European-imported carnival in Trinidad, 1834 could be indicated as the year in which the African rituals started gaining more and more influence on the celebrations, as proven by the fact that “the majority of Whites refused to participate in the street carnivals or in most forms of carnival activity” (Liverpool 2001 : IX). Bridget Brereton has said that “the late nineteenth century was crucial for the development of the Trinidad Carnival. The period opened with carnival taken over almost entirely by the *jamenttes*, the underclass of Port of Spain. The attitude of the upper and middle classes was one of disgust, fear and hostility, with some exceptions” (Brereton in Riggio 2004 : 53). The “*jamenttes*”, whose name derives from the French word “*diametre*”, because they were considered to be living under the line (or diameter) of respectability, had gradually taken over the festival, and they had “created in the backyards of Port of Spain their own subculture. Here the urban lower class lived in long barrack ranges situated behind the city blocks, centering on a yard

which formed a common living space. At about this time, yard 'bands' were formed: groups of men and women, boys and girls, who went around together for singing, fighting and dancing. Such bands existed all year round, but were especially active in the weeks before carnival, when they rehearsed their songs, dances, and stickfighting" (Brereton in Riggio 2004 : 54).

This was the new reality of carnival, and when the British decided not to accept the new situation, and to censor carnival, carnival music and rituals, especially canboulay, the clash among the Europeans and the Africans opened the way to the "canboulay riots" of 1881 to 1884, in which Trinbagonians showed that they "were actually ready to die to defend these traditions" (Gibbons in Sofo 2009 : 200). And when, in 1881, "the canboulay revellers swept the ground with the police" (Pierre in Elder 1998 : 41) who had tried to suppress canboulay once and for all, armed with sticks, torches and drums only, Trinidad Carnival had finally become what it was always meant to be: a performative ritual of cultural resistance.

If we look back at this brief history of Trinidad Carnival, we can easily understand how far it has come from a European-imported ritual of temporary freedom to a performative ritual through which a real and non-temporary freedom has been achieved, and is still celebrated, helping the country to achieve its cultural and political independence. This forces us also to give a completely new definition of the carnivalesque, which has to finally break free from the literary implications that it has gained in European academic discourse. "All the theories that have emerged on Carnival so far, try to deal with it in the middle of its evolution. And when they have to find words to describe it, metaphors to use, they go to literature. This is not the right way to

approach this issue. Carnival is very human. It is related to fear, to hunger, not to literature. Not at all. The sophistication of the linguistic metaphor does not make it true. You have to go back. (...) Carnival and the carnivalesque are a coping mechanism related to survival" (Bishop in Sofo 2009 : 225). These words help us in leaving literary metaphors behind us and in trying to find a new solution for a definition of carnival and the carnivalesque which is strictly related to Trinidad Carnival, and finally sees this uniquely Trinidadian ritual as a performative ritual of cultural resistance and awakening, claiming a space and celebrating freedom from any kind of oppression.

IV. FROM PRETTY MAS TO PRETTIER MAS

Now that we have looked at the history of Trinidad Carnival, we can finally look at the present, to try outlining possibilities for its future. Today's Trinidad and Tobago is often defined as a "festive country", because celebrations mark the rhythm of time and seasons. Before the carnival season, we have in fact the Christmas season (during which calypso and soca are for example often substituted by the Spanish-influenced music style of "parang", and the mas camps at times produce Christmas products), and the Divali season (where the Indian goddess of light Lakshmi is celebrated at least in part by all ethnic groups).

The concept of time, though, needs to be analyzed in further detail: "Trini Time", described by Riggio as "a concept of time more fluid and organic but no less 'real' than that measured by the regularity of a clock (...)" is "in itself a concept of time, with its own value, not the absence of time or suspension of time, but another way of measuring time - the time scheme if you will, of

carnival's world elsewhere. As such, it is 'measured', if at all, not by the clock but by the sun and the moon, the tides, the seasons in a culture that still marks the seasons in festival terms, moving from one festival to another, often cross-celebrated by peoples of diverse religions and races", and this Trini Time, Riggio adds, is nothing else than "carnival time" (Riggio 2004 : 22).

Not a "'time out of time', i.e. suspending what is regarded as 'normal' time (...) thought to temporarily release its revelers from all that *really* matters in the world" (Riggio 2004 : 15), as it would be intended in the Bakhtinian perception of carnival and the carnivalesque, but simply a different concept of time, which rises from carnival itself. Not "time out of time", then, but carnival *as* time. A country *in* the carnival, and not the country *of* carnival, as Jorge Amado had written about his Brazil. This concept of time and of carnival as being a same whole, is responsible for the unmasking rather than masking characteristic of Trinidad Carnival, which turns this festival into a mirror, rather than into a distortion of reality.

If carnival is a mirror, after shaping Trinbagonian identity, it can also tell us what Trinbagonian society has become today. Everybody agrees that Trinidad Carnival has changed (from scholars to masqueraders, from carnival businessmen to performers). In the last ten to fifteen years in particular, the "bikini and beads" mas has taken over the more traditional kinds of mas, turning carnival, for some, into an exhibition of beautiful bodies scarcely covered by bright and shining bikinis, often of non-excellent quality and mostly without any artistic or cultural intention. The irony of this situation is that carnival has changed itself by going back to its very early origins, to the pretty mas of the French Creole.

This "prettier mas" of the 2000's, with its all-inclusive bands and its colorful bikinis, is in fact not that far from the "uncommonly attractive fascinations, the variety of dresses (...) and the brilliant costumes" we had spoken of for the carnival of more than two centuries ago. It feels as if the European-imported carnival was able to recover from its own memory the reasons of its birth in 1783, undoing all the process of evolution that this ritual had undergone in the Caribbean in the last two centuries.

V. JOUVAY OF A CULTURE

After having conquered the colonizers' carnival in Trinidad, and after having exported it in the colonizers' own land, where carnival is now celebrated in "Trinidad style", as in Nothing Hill, Trinbagonians have reshaped carnival once again to remake it what it was, possibly imposing on themselves a new colonialism of the body and of the carnival space, through the influence of Brazilian carnival and of the business world. But as we have said, carnival is a mirror, and if this is carnival today in Trinidad, then it is so because the society has changed as well, and because the role of carnival in the fights for the cultural and political independence may have been at least in part forgotten, or taken over by the celebration aspect and by the economical possibilities of this festival. And as we have seen until now, true carnival can do nothing else than adapting its own characteristics to the changes in the society.

On the other side, the critics of today's carnival often fail to see that the "bikini and beads" mas is paralleled by an improving attempt of turning "jouvay", another ritual connected to carnival and opening the celebrations on the night between Sunday and Monday (from

the French “*le jour est ouvert*”), into the space where the cultural and the artistic aspect of carnival can still live and prosper. Jouvay, in which all the people lose their identity to ask their community to shape it for them, by throwing mud and colours on their body, is certainly the best manifestation in today's carnival space of the freedom aspect that is central to Trinidad Carnival. “While we construct discourses about truth”, says Foote, “Carnival annually provides us with evidence of truth in motion, the truth of, about and for a people, the truth that constitutes our beingness in praxis – past, present, and future. According to Hans-Georg Gadamer there is a dialectical tension between time and art and it continues to 'play itself out' in our Carnival” (Foote 2005 : 3-4). Carnival has shaped, more than anything else, the memory and the identity of the people and the culture of Trinidad and Tobago. And even if now, ironically enough, the memory and identity of the ritual itself, born as a pretty mas of simple and carefree celebration, seems to reshape itself to bring back a similar carefree culture and identity, this “dialectical tension between time and art”, which plays itself out in Trinidad Carnival, will allow its protagonists to reshape its borders, and to construct and reflect at the same time the continuously-changing identity of Trinidad and Tobago and of its people.

If the spirit and the freedom of Trinidad Carnival are to be respected, the only change can happen from within the core of the celebrations, and cannot be imposed on the masqueraders by the mas-makers, the artists, or by anybody else. Their role is to rather be inside the carnival, and from there to propose new directions, new routes which could bring carnival to a new identity, for itself and for everybody else. This only could bring to the awakening of a new country, and a

new carnival, which will once again represent the life and the essence of these islands, by adding to its callaloo, the mud and the colours that inhabit the night of jouvay, to awake in a new morning for mas, the final “jouvay of a culture”.

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