Carnival: Fighting Oppression with Celebration

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Carnival: Fighting Oppression With Celebration

Karolee Stevens

Carnival is the glorification of things that occur from the waist down, in opposition to the repressive and hierarchical world of the bourgeoisie, where the soul has a hypocritical primacy...In Carnival, in its typical space, an instant overcomes time and the event becomes more than the system that classifies it and gives it a normative meaning.

Roberto Da Matta

The massive enslavement of African peoples in the West Indies for a period of over two hundred years created a population with a culture unique to the islands. This culture evolved from the brutal conditions forced upon slaves on high-production oriented sugar plantations; while struggling to maintain elements of their past ways of life, the Afro-Caribbean masses were subjected to arduous labour and torturous treatment by the white European planters. Daily destitution and fierce oppression burdened the generations of slave families, forcing individuals to protest by whatever means possible. Revolution came in the form of subtle demonstrations against the conditions, such as maintenance of traditional African customs, as well as direct action, such as the massive slave uprisings. These massive uprisings led to the disintegration of the slave trade and eventually the freeing of slaves in the Caribbean islands. Emancipation produced a drastic metamorphosis in the nature of West Indian society. Carnival, the contemporary annual explosion of celebration in the Caribbean, particularly in Trinidad, derives precisely from emancipation. It epitomizes, in its every respect, a direct revolt by the Afro-Caribbean people, against oppression, both in history and in present day.

The history of the term used in contemporary Caribbean carnival stems back further than the time of emancipation. It derives from the Latin phrase, carnival which literally means "to take away the meat" (Da Matta, 1984:237), in reference to the pre-Lenten festivities practiced by the Roman Catholic religion in Europe and Latin-America. Lent comprised of a period of meat fasting and other forms of dietary restriction representing self-purification. In Trinidad, the West Indian island most commonly associated with carnival, Catholic Francophone élite dominated the annual carnival masquerades. Plantation owners denied their slaves the right to participate in the celebration. Although slave communities carried out private and secretive dancing fêtes during the Christmas period (Burton, 1985:182), the restriction on celebratory participation represented yet another form of subjugation and oppression by the European élite.

European participation in Trinidadian carnival, as elsewhere in French Caribbean, experienced a massive metamorphosis in 1834, with emancipation, as noted earlier. The competition slipped through the hands of the 'bourgeoisie' and into those of the newly 'liberated' plantation workers. It exploded as a representation of the freedom gained and the oppressors' loss of absolute control. The Afro-Caribbean people usurped the streets and gained control of the previously white-exclusive activities, modifying them and adding new dimensions loyal to the African and Slave cultures (Hebdige, 1987:35). In doing so, the Afro-Caribbean people overtly revolted against the hundreds of years of unimaginable degradation and oppression.

Through this expression of revolution and celebration of freedom, the Caribbean Carnival became almost solely an Afro-Caribbean tradition. Although elements of ancestral European roots persisted, such as the pre-Lenten time period and the masquerading in elaborate garments, Carnival developed a flavour uniquely Creole. Rituals played out, such as 'Canboulay' from the French 'cannes brulé, meaning "burning canes" (Stewart, 1986:302), in direct reference to the end of enforced sugar cane production. It entailed a procession at midnight on the Sunday of carnival celebrating in a veiled, symbolic form the deliverance of the black population from the yoke of slavery" (Burton, 1985:183). It visually and physically expressed the moment of liberation from the grasp of the European colonists. Even components of the Carnival which appeared to be appropriated from the European traditions, acquired more than a hint of Creole spirit. The ritual adornment of lavish costumes depicting various characters carried a rather satiric tone, mocking the white upper class and their materialistic ideals. Perhaps it is for this reason, as well as an unsubstantiated fear of violent outbreaks, that the elite community attempted to suppress the celebration.

Attempts by the European colonists to halt Carnival arose in other forms, as well. The traditional sound of the drumbeat, a protégé of African tribal customs, was silenced by government legislation. The practice of 'Calinda' or stick-fighting (Juneja, 1988:89) met with disapproval by white officials, as were the calypso and wining dances, noted from the days of slavery and with allusions to religious experience (Miller, 1991:333). Despite these attempts at suppressing the Afro-Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean people the celebration persisted in new and more creative forms. Steel-bands arose as an alternative to drumming bands. As Renu Juneja, an author on the subject, explains, "The steel band is an orchestra consisting of instruments forged from old oil drums (pans), tempered and tuned by hammering sections to carry a true tone when hit." (1988:91) Individuals simply used whatever steel medium they could find to produce a beat. The practice of steel bands soon evolved, whereby the 'crude' instruments were being used to execute classical pieces by Mozart and Bach, illustrating the skill and creativity of the orchestra members. By actively fortifying a new form of drum beating "the steel band embodie[d] the resilience and startling creativity of an economically deprived people, it also retained those elements of protest and resistance which have always been the hallmark of the Trinidad carnival" (Juneja, 1988:91). Ironically, the suppressing forces, in their attempt at destroying an element of Afro-Caribbean culture, forced the creation of a stronger, more imaginative form.

Similarly, attempts at suppressing 'Calinda' the art which Renu Juneja claims derives from "elements of slave folk
culture", and involves "a stick dance, to which scholars attribute African origin" (1988:89), failed. The practice of stick dancing had become a regular feature of the early carnival. It encompassed a complex of real and mock battles, as well as intricate dance-like movements, all used as tools for proving strength and skill. Competition stood at the heart of 'Calinda' and was not to be given up readily. Carnival followers retained the contest of strength and skill under the guise of musical instruments used in the tambour-bamboo bands. As recent literature explains,

These bands were made up of musicians carrying lengths of bamboo cut to various sizes (up to three feet long for the bass notes). The bamboo sticks were either banged together or thumped on the ground to provide percussion for the Carnival songs (Hebdige, 1987:36). Again colonial laws were subtly and ingeniously thwarted. By continuing the practice of 'Calinda' in a new form, the Afro-Caribbean people defied suppression and non-violently protested against the colonial population.

While the tambour-bamboo bands expressed a fairly subtle protest against the colonial laws, calypso and wining practices boldly state the feelings entrenched within the islands' majorities. Juneja notes, "social protest and commentary still remain important ingredients of the calypso as does the praise song celebrating chosen aspects of local culture and life ... There can be no carnival without the calypso and no calypso without the carnival" (Juneja, 1988:89). Calypso songs, which derive partly from the call and response pattern of the African tradition (Hebdige, 1987:35), make strong political or social comments relating to an individual's powerlessness in the face of government or white oppression. They emphasize themes such as poverty, lack of power, limitations on voicing opinion and allusions to the days of slavery. One calypso reads in part,

They want to license my mouth
They don't want me to talk
But if is blood, sweat and misery
We mean to fight till we get our liberty
(Hebdige, 1987:35)

Another example comes from what has been termed "the best known historical calypso, 'Rum and Coca-Cola', whose chorus - 'mother and daughter both working for the Yankee dollar' - related back to older themes of women cohabiting with the slave masters" (Miller, 1991:333). Many of the songs follow the same basic premise, that is the desire to gain absolute freedom. Referring to the brutal days of slavery, the calypso song is a fierce representation of the individuals' rightful bitterness as well as the resilience of a race of people overcoming subjection with emancipation. The words embedded in the calypso songs, which criticize social conditions, parallel great literary works and other forms of artistic protest deriving from the islands. The songs are, in a sense, short political articles set to music. Daniel Miller writes, "The calypsos of David Rudder (famous calypsonian) celebrate the continued exuberance of male fighting with more direct linkages to the political context of emancipation" (Miller, 1991:336). The verses serve as a link between the days of slavery overcome and contemporary times, sparking protest against oppression in both, while simultaneously maintaining elements of the African culture that the white colonists had tried so desperately to suppress.

Reviving the African culture in a celebration of song and dance characterizes the Caribbean carnival in Trinidad. One author notes, "Instead of surrendering to sullen despair or violent retribution, they turn to the escapism of music and roam the streets, the gay troubadours of a race who traditionally in the face of adversity have found relief in dancing and song" (Juneja 1988:93). While one might argue the validity of the notion of escapism, the gist of Juneja's statement rings true. Afro-Caribbean peoples used music and dance as a strong and non-violent means of commenting on the poor social conditions to which they have been subjected by the elite classes. While this form of social commentary might be obvious in the practice of calypso writing, it is somewhat less blatant in the art of dance. Many might fail to see the protest value of a dance such as wining, common in relation to Trinidadian carnival as well as elsewhere. Wining is a form of dance that expresses free movement of the arms and legs as well as a rhythmic gyrating of the waist. The style, or at least a parallel form of it, dates back to the period of slavery. An account from 1806 in Barbados reads in part, "Making the head and limbs fixed points, they writhe and turn the body on its own axis, slowly advancing towards each other or RETREATING to the outer parts of the ring" (Miller, 1991:325). The focus and intention of the dance is to allow uninhibited movement. Partnerships forged for the purpose of wining do not necessarily represent a relationship; no expectation of commitment is involved. Every aspect of wining boldly asserts a notion of absolute freedom, even though only temporary. Daniel Miller relates in a fairly recent article, "The dance (wining) is a form of Absolute Freedom comparable to philosophical projects found elsewhere in the world and throughout history" (1991:322). Some have claimed that wining carries with it a very sexual and provocative element (Miller, 1991). Nevertheless, while some of the movements and the close physicality of the dance partners may appear to be sexually oriented, this does not define the dance. Any sexual overtones which do exist simply reflect rebellion against restriction, an absolute freedom to express oneself without limitation. Most often, however, wining has very or nothing to do with sexuality. Dance partners may consist of two female friends, or two family members, whose intentions are simply to dance. They are simply enjoying movement in combination with the music. Perhaps a distinction does exist between males and females, since two male friends would not dance together unless a female separated the two. This distinction was noted by Miller who states,

Female mas (Masquerade/ Carnival) is a sea of identical designer, and increasingly minimal, costume, where the individual draws on the anonymity of the crowd, in which one has nothing in common except one's presence as a member of the group. By contrast to male dance, female wining is generally regarded as apolitical and more personal in its orientation (1991:336).

So while the female dancers' interests may lie more in enjoying the act of dancing, the male fêtes may have more political ties and a more active supplication for freedom.
The cry for freedom rings strongly in all Carnival events. Juneja notes this while simultaneously refuting the notion of dance and music as merely escapist. She contends,

The carnival spirit contains a strong element of pleasure in freedom from social constraints ... Indeed, as the history of the Trinidadian carnival reveals, the carnival has never been merely escapist. The carnival for the freed slaves was not merely a moment of freedom but also an expression of that freedom (Juneja 1988:98).

All social restrictions are considered, not simply those imposed by the upper class populations (although these create a great deal of the protests). In a sense, all rules governing the people in any way are inverted creating a charade of role-playing where individuals can act out positions to which they have been denied membership in the past.

"Carnival", as Richard D. E. Burton maintains, "is 'the world turned upside down', a make-believe counter-society over which the pauper or madman is king and the servant-girl queen" (1985:185). All structures inherent or enforced in society are dissolved and all values or systems of hierarchy transposed. Not only social roles, but roles of all forms disintegrate or reverse. Structured kinship roles, formal obligations, responsibilities due to employment positions, and institution-based roles seem to disappear entirely or boldly change form (Miller, 1991:327). This process of inversion or negation of norms and roles is demonstrated in the practice of Jouvet, which occurs on the Sunday preceding Carnival Monday. "(The Jouvet Parade) is a time of freedom, camaraderie, and spontaneous joy, an exemplary expression of the spirit...The parade is a kaleidoscope of the creative imagination" (Manning 1978:194). Individuals dress in sullied, torn clothing and enshroud themselves in mud. A procession down the street to display their attire follows the adorning 'ceremony'. The morning of the next day, however, observers witness a transformance. The masses shed their old clothes and don portions of their parade costumes. Again, this change of clothing is followed by a procession down the street. The final stage of the transfiguration arrives in the form of final touches being added to the elaborate costumes and the performers heading to the streets in full flair for a third procession. Within a short expanse of time the participants of the carnival transform themselves from what could be a representation of destitution and poverty (referring to the days of slavery as well as contemporary conditions) to a 'imitation' of the lives of the upper class. The imitation is not direct in this case, and certainly not 'the sincerest form of flattery'; as Frank E. Manning notes,

Confronted with the wealth and power of metropolitan countries, colonized peoples have often responded by reasserting their cultural traditions in guises drawn from the metropolitan way of life. While on the surface this passes as an imitation of the metropolitan way of life, on the deeper level it can be read as a symbolic statement that metropolitan goods and glamour (the cargo) will pass into native hands (1978:200).

In these guises, everyone suddenly becomes the same class, confusing all rules of hierarchy. However temporary or false, a sense of equality is engendered. It is a world where everybody takes part, where "the crowds that follow bands and masquerades are, in their way, just as much performers as the performers themselves so that, at its climax, carnival becomes an immense, all-embracing festival acted out by the people for the people" (Burton, 1985:181). The carnival belongs to the populace, the Afro-Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean peoples; nobody can deprive them of the celebration and they know it. This knowledge, as well the very elements of carnival themselves, offer this notion of Absolute Freedom. Freedom, the cultural imperative, is made tangible. It is not an escapist ideal, but rather a hope for better things; it is also a knowledge that they can achieve and fight the oppression of white elite.

The empowerment notion so evident in Trinidadian carnival reveals itself in celebrations on other islands, as well. The notion, itself, that the carnival crosses colonial boundaries indicates its strength as a unifying force. Antigua, a member of the Leeward Islands, attracts attention competitive of its Trinidadian counterpart. The Antiguan Carnival, although similar to Trinidad's in many ways, claims various permutations that strongly differentiate it. Unlike elsewhere, during the period of carnival in Antigua, "Dance troupes mime such aspects of the Afro-Caribbean experience as the tortures of the middle passage and public floggings on plantations" (Manning, 1978:193). There tends to be more of an emphasis placed on the horror of the past and the brutality of slavery, making the atmosphere more obviously bitter. It may be argued that Antigua's annual uproarious celebration has closer ties to the event of emancipation, since the festivities begin on the first Monday of August and continue until Wednesday of the same week. Carnival in Antigua, which was initiated in 1957, commemorates the actual day of emancipation from slavery on the 1st of August, 1834 (Manning 1978:192).

Since approximately ninety percent of the island's population descend from the plantation slaves brought over from African coasts, this event carries special meaning for Antiguans (Manning 1978:192). Of course, this does not demean in any way the amount of meaning Trinidadians place on their carnival or celebrators of the sort elsewhere. It simply demonstrates the diversity in expression of freedom in the various islands.

This diversity of expression led to the formation of carnivals, derived from the Caribbean islands, in places such as the United States and Canada. In Toronto, Ontario, the first week in August is devoted to the commemoration of emancipation, similar to the Antiguan celebration. Entitled Caribana, the festival of the streets conglomerates carnivals throughout the Caribbean. Parades of exotically clad performers storm through the roadways, proudly displaying Caribbean culture. Thousands crowd the area to witness or take part in the event, making Caribana one of the largest affairs of the year. Although the social commentary and the political protest might be slightly less blatant, they can certainly still be seen by the informed eye. Alluding back to the Caribbean homeland, the celebration of the street makes viewers aware of the vivacity and creativity of Caribbean peoples. It asks the spectators to view West Indian people not as products of an era of slavery but as they truly are: a strong and vital nation.

Certainly the vitality inherent in both Caribbean culture and Caribbean carnival derives from the masala of Creole creativity and strength and African traditional song and dance. The festivities illustrate the ways in which people maintained an identification with the African homeland, while creating
new traditions in order to foster a sense of ethnicity and cultural identity. Renu Juneja makes a similar comment by stating, "It (Carnival) retained both elements of celebration and protest, and it also became an expression of a distinctively black culture by drawing on cultural forms brought over from Africa" (1988:88). Reinforcing one's culture in the face of an oppressing people is, perhaps, one of the strongest and most intelligent protest against subjugation. The Afro-Caribbean people asserted this power by turning the factors of domination into the elaboration of revitalization (Manning, 1978:202). Carnival emphasizes the strength of the population as a nation of people with an ability to survive the horror of enslavement while still asserting their cultural traditions. "The spirit of the carnival, as authorities in the past correctly surmised, was the spirit of rebellion, not easily curbed" (Juneja, 1988:90).

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