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Molasses Devil of Grenada – Traditional Mas, Icon of Resilience



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My artistic approach to religio-cultural study examines New World Africanisms in traditional masquerade (mas) character portrayals, in the context of Grenada as a centre for Yorùbá cultural masking practices in the mid-1800s, from which portrayals like the *Jab Molassi* evolved. Through my derivative and original artworks, I explore the human masquerader's function as mobile repository of historical memory, as well as the origins and sociocultural and aesthetic values of these portrayals. I observe and reinterpret threads of an amalgam of religious and cultural traditions of disparate peoples separated from their ancestral homelands and exiled to this island environment. The impact of these traditions on present day descendants participating in the annual August carnival is also addressed, given the importance of this aspect of Grenadian culture.

The Molasses Devil, *le diable de mélasse* or *Jab Molassi*, is synonymous with *j'ouvert*, daybreak on the first day of carnival. First mentioned in the early 1900s, this portrayal bears an unfortunate resemblance to artistic depictions of the Devil of the European Middle Ages. However, in spite of the Carnival Regulation Act which fines violators playing 'the masque known as jab jab', players from all walks of life - residents, visitors, adults and children - become 'horned embodiments of power', an inclusive addressing of a creolised aspect of Yorùbá culture, in which horned figures wearing little,

are blackened with body paint of stale molasses, oil and grease. Sporting horned helmets and “bling” of heavy chain, rope and various reptiles, they symbolise the power and strength of the ancestor spirits. This devil-come-to-life, dragging a makeshift coffin - associated with the brutality of the slave trade and plantation life - is utterly frightening to the uninitiated, and leads to hurried payment of loose change, theoretically to return the devils to hell, in reality, to avoid spectators being daubed.



Figure 1. *Artist As Jab*, 2013

Molasses, acrylic and tempera paint, acrylic paint, oil pastels, brown paper, wire, cord, construction hats.

Jab Molassi were perhaps among the first Grenadian portrayals to articulate defiance against plantation life. Post-Independence, that defiance was still evident in 1975 when approximately 5000 marched to protect their Freedoms of Association and Expression threatened by the then Prime Minister. Since that time, they annually assume a shared collective identity through chanting, stomping, drumming and mass body paint – a practice similar to battle preparation rituals across world cultures.

Referencing Grenada’s days as a sugar island, I use molasses as part of the painting process to visualise the *Jab Molassi*. In the process, I pay tribute to, and acknowledge the impact of physical and psychological factors inherent to sugar cultivation and molasses production on the enslaved, and their use of molasses body paint as freedom symbol. Once the liquid component of the molasses evaporates, a fine fragrant dust imprints colour to the paper surface, reminiscent of the stain of the *Jabs’* sticky daub.



Figure 2. *Mad Like We*, 2013

Acrylic paint, oil pastels, brown paper, wire, cord, construction hats.



Figure 3.

Jab Doh Tief, 2013



Figure 4. Emerge Into J'ouvert, 2013
(Molasses, acrylic paint, oil pastels, brown paper.)