The African Presence in the Pre-Emancipation Trinidad Carnival

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Introduction

It is generally assumed that pre-emancipation Carnival was a decorous affair in which the behavior of free Africans was regulated, and in which the enslaved played no part. This notion derives from Fraser’s memorandum to the Commission of Enquiry investigating the Canboulay riots of 1881, and is reinforced by scholars like Andrew Pearse, Errol Hill and Anthony de Verteuil. This paper argues otherwise and uses as evidence material found in the work of the afore-mentioned scholars. The larger case constructed from this re-reading of the conventional scholarship on the Carnival is that before emancipation there has been an African tradition which has persisted until today.

Origins of Trinidad Carnival

The seminal history of the origins of the Trinidad Carnival is Andrew Pearse’s essay “Carnival in Nineteenth Century Trinidad” which was first published in Trinidad Carnival, the special Carnival issue of Caribbean Quarterly 3&4, 1956. Pearse’s main sources are reports, commentaries, letters and editorials published in the print media and especially in the Port of Spain Gazette (est. 1825), the bi-weekly mouthpiece of the French Creole plantocracy. Pearse alludes to the account of the Carnivals recorded in Pierre Gustave Borde’s Historie de l’ile de la Trinidad sous le gouvernment espagnol (1876), a sympathetic account written by a French Creole who invests the pre-Emancipation Carnival with old-world charm, graciousness and decorum. Pearse also refers to Bayley’s Four Years in the West Indies (1830) and Capados’ Sixteen Years in the West Indies (1845), written independently by two military officers stationed in Trinidad for some time during the 1830s. All these sources, however, merely flesh out a thesis which is informed conceptually by the “History of the Origin of the Carnival,” a 20-page memorandum written by LM Fraser and submitted on 16 March 1881 to Governor Freeling. Fraser, Inspector General of Police up to 1877 and Inspector of Prisons in 1881, intended his memorandum to reach the eyes of RGC Hamilton, the chairman of the Commission of Enquiry sent out from England to investigate the causes of the Canboulay riots of 27 February 1881.

Errol Hill’s authoritative classic study, The Trinidad Carnival: Mandate for a National Theatre (1972, 1997), relies heavily upon Pearse’s history and supplements this with other material culled from newspapers, travel accounts and historical sources similar to Pearse’s. Anthony de Verteuil’s useful social histories The Years Before (1981) and The Years of Revolt (1984), enthusiastically embroider the conventional story with other Gazette material and with hitherto unknown documents unearthed from private collections which the French Creole owners made available to their scholarly co-ethnic.
Contribution of Africans

Our indebtedness to Fraser, Pearse, Hill, de Verteuil et al should not blind us to the fact that they collectively misrepresent the role and contribution of Africans to the 19th century masquerade. After Emancipation in 1838, so goes the conventional story, the decorous French Creole Carnival, which was established in the last decades of the 18th century, 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, and the truth of the African contribution to Carnival is still not generally appreciated, despite the work of scholars like J.D. Elder, Maureen Warner-Lewis and Hollis “Chalkdust” Liverpool. This paper seeks to understand the role of Africans in the shaping of 19th Carnival by offering a re-reading of the scholarship on the Pre-Emancipation Carnival.

Pearse deploys 1783 as the zero-point date for the introduction of Carnival into Trinidad, “on account of the insignificance of the population before 1783, and the lack of evidence of any Carnival before that date” (Pearse 1988: 4). The year 1783 marks the official start of French Creole immigration into Trinidad. Although the process began slowly in 1777 (Noel 1972: 45-58), French Creole immigration was codified into imperial Spanish policy as the Cédula of Population on 24th of November, 1783. Assuming that the Trinidad Carnival began in 1783 is a convenient romantic appropriation of an historical date, an appropriation which responds to our innate desire for order. By the early decades of the 19th century, however, when Trinidad’s social history was recorded by a range of observers and commentators, the Carnival was an important festival on the social calendar.

According to the conventional account, which derives ultimately from Fraser, the decorum of the pre-Emancipation Carnival was assured by official regulations, which probably took the form of official proclamations as is still done today. Fraser divides 19th century Trinidad society into whites, free persons of colour, slaves and Indians. Masking was the prerogative of the whites and, according to Fraser (1881:8):

“The Free Persons of Colour were subjected to very stringent Regulations and although not forbidden to mask, were yet compelled to keep to themselves and never presumed to join in the amusements of the privileged classes. The Indians kept entirely aloof, and the slaves except as onlookers, or by special favour when required to take part, had no share in the Carnival which was confined exclusively to the upper class of the community.”

Fraser also declares:

“After the Emancipation of the Slaves [in 1838] things were materially altered, the ancient lines of demarcation between the classes were obliterated and as a consequence the carnival degenerated into a noisy and disorderly amusement for the lower classes” (9). With these two statements Fraser discolours the roles of blacks and whites in 19th century Carnival and, worse, tints the lens through which subsequent generations have gazed at the historical origins of the festival in Trinidad.”
Pearse (1956: 20) assumes that Fraser’s declarations are absolute truths and this assumption leads him into unlikely error in his reconstruction of the 19th century Carnival. The section of his essay entitled Post-Emancipation Carnival, a section which opens with Fraser’s affirmation of the post-Emancipation degeneration of the Carnival, cites the following incident which was reported in January 22, 1833 edition of the *Gazette*:

“...an attempt was made by Mr. Peake (Assistant to the Chief of Police) to check the shameful violation of the Sabbath by the lower order of the population, who are accustomed about this time of year to mask themselves and create disturbances on a Sunday. He arrested two persons who were in masks and lodged them in the Cage. On his return from performing this necessary duty, his house was assaulted by a large concourse of rabble, who broke all the windows, and attacking Mr. Peake, pelted, beat and otherwise ill treated this officer.”

Without warning and without explanation, Pearse makes public the fact that disorder existed in pre-Emancipation paradise. The revealing phrase “who are accustomed about this time of year to mask themselves and create disturbance on a Sunday” indicates that disorder had become part of Carnival behaviour sometime before 1833, a full five years before Emancipation.

What is even more intriguing is the ease with which other commentators have accepted the phrase “the lower order of the population” as a politically correct 19th century euphemism for Africans. Hill, following Pearse too closely, registers the Peake incident as the reaction to one of the series of attempts made after Emancipation to prohibit masking on Sunday (Hill 1997: 21). Kim Johnson (1997: xiv) wonders briefly if the perpetrators of the assault were slaves but contents himself with the thought that:

“They may well have been part of the floating population of impoverished free negroes.”

Liverpool (2001:170-71) who is of the view that all classes and ethnic groups in Trinidad participated in the pre-emancipation Carnival, is sure that the two arrested by Peake were Africans, and that the hostile crowd reaction was evidence that

“...the enslaved were already serving notice that no one was to interfere with their masked tradition.”

It is quite probable, however, that this “large concourse of rabble” formed part of a lawless interracial fraternity which included the free men described as “rogues and debtors”, and “slaves who departed from other places” (Hill 1997: 8), but such is the power of social and historical conditioning that Hill, Johnson and Liverpool have assumed almost instinctively that the rabble was constituted by Africans.

**Africans Caricatured**

Almost predictably, the other stereotype of the Africans, that is a human caricature delighting in imitating his betters, manifested in the 19th Carnival. In 1834 an editorial writer of *Port of Spain Gazette* reports that in his search for persons in [Carnival]
character the find most “deserving [of] notice”, was “a party of negroes intended to represent the Artillery” (Pearse 1956: 20). Hill (1997: 13-14) credits this masquerade as the secular start for the working class participation in Carnival. In so doing, he subsumes the Gazette’s clear racial identification into class identification and erases Africans from this positive contribution to 19th century masquerade. Hill (1983: 11) did admit in a paper presented to the 1983 ISER seminar on Carnival that the masqueraders were black.

Pearse (1956: 22) cites a Gazette editorial response to a letter written by a citizen employing the pen-name Scotchman. From the editorial response, it is clear that Scotchman was opposed to lower class African masquerade in the 1838 Carnival and the editor in turn targets Africans as the source of the disorder in 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.”

Donald Wood (1968: 39) identifies the Damas as being descendants of an eastern Nigritic tribe originating in the Cameroons, and records that a group of Damas resident in Port of Spain “presented a thanksgiving petition to the Governor in 1838, on the ending of apprenticeship”. I have not been able to identify the Wartloos.

Liverpool (2001: 4) essays an explanation of the masquerade, citing as a source, Mr. “Tarzan” Walla, “a deceased stickfighter and grandson of one of the enslaved Africans who were celebrating then.” Liverpool explains that the stuffed figure of a woman on a pole masquerade was “the enslaved peoples’ way of paying tribute to Queen Victoria.” Some pages further on, however, Liverpool (2001: 172). speculates:

“The Africans were either holding her up as one to be either praised or ridiculed for furthering or hindering the abolition process.”

While we cannot pause to reflect upon the contradiction in Liverpool’s account, we note that the editorial writer of the Gazette, who had sufficient knowledge of his society to differentiate Damas from Wartloos, was describing an African festival which appropriated European festive space before Emancipation. While he denigrates this African presence as “wretched masquerade”, he does not disparage it as a wretched imitation of any European masquerade. Clearly, the unidentified “hundreds of negroes” who yelled out Trinidad’s unofficial 1838 road march had their own ideas of what they were celebrating.

Africans as Active Participants

The phrase “belongs to other days”, which echoes a similar statement in the account cited by Pearse above, indicates that Africans, described by the editorial writer as “the
lower order of society,” were active participants in pre-Emancipation Carnival, and not merely functionaries in servile roles as Fraser would have us believe. Their active presence is attested to in the disinterested eye-witness testimony of Friedrich Urich, a young German who had come to Trinidad to work as a merchant’s clerk in his uncle’s establishment during the 1830s (de Verteuil 1981: 34). Brief entries in Urich’s diary (Urich 1984: 57) illuminate the areas of darkness ignored by conventional historians including de Verteuil, who is too devoutly committed to the ur-myth of European purity and African perversion to appreciate the significance of Urich’s words, even while quoting them:

“Sunday 13 Feb [1831]: After dinner we went to see the negroes dance. Monday 14 Feb:….We follow various masked bands. The dances are usually African dances and the enthusiasm of the negroes and negresses amuse us very much for the dances are stupendous…Tuesday March 6th [1832]: I went to see the masks. Nearly all were coloured people and a crowd of our acquaintances and our negroes (slaves) had organised a funeral procession to mark the end of the carnival.”

Both Urich and the Gazette editorial writer independently identify an African presence in the Carnivals of the early 1830s. Unfortunately, we may never know for sure the identity of blacks who brought their music, movement and masquerade—and bacchanals—to Carnival festivities. Nineteenth century Port of Spain was home to a heterogeneous aggregation which included freed Africans of many nations, self-emancipated Africans, runaways from slavery and from domestic servitude, and a bewildering array of free men of colour. Trinidad was never a classic slave society, and among its several idiosyncrasies, was the highly individualistic behaviour of some of the enslaved. To those of the enslaved who did pretty much as they pleased, the Carnival streets were a logical stage for pleasurable adventures of all kinds.

Urich sees nothing unusual in bands of masked Africans dancing in the Carnival streets. He also accepts, as natural, the coming together of his white acquaintances and “our negroes” to organise a funeral procession to mark the end of Carnival. Liverpool (2001: 152) affirms that “all over West Africa, not only are masquerades held at funerals, but in many cases, funeral processions are held at the end of the masquerade so that the ancestral spirits who have paraded with the living can return to their places of rest.” Frazer records that some harvest festivals in pre-industrial Europe ended with a ritual burying of the spirit of the harvest, a ritual called “Carrying out the Death”. This practice derives from the universal impulse which conceptualized and created anthropomorphic gods of nature and of the harvest. It is interesting that the last ritual act of the Shiite festival of Muharram or Hosay ends with an immersion of the tadjahs, a practice which borrowing from Frazer, I read as a rain charm. Although Urich mentions this practice, I have not found other evidence of it, and I do not know if it was a general practice with a long tradition or a ritual undertaken by a few people in a particular locality.

One implicit misconception of African participation in 19th Carnival is that it was spontaneous and disorderly. Urich does not register disorderly behaviour on the part of the masquerading Africans he witnessed and followed through the streets. Quite to the contrary, he sees them as organized and peaceful. This is a dramatic contrast to the Damas-Wartloo battle recorded six years after his journal entry. It is significant that although the editorial writer and later many of the Gazette commentators stressed the violence of the African Canboulay, they did not apprehend
any threat to their persons. I imagine that they were in no danger because they formed no part of the ritualistic violence that was enacted on the Carnival streets; this violence was directed against fellow initiates, not against observers who did not belong. Some local whites, knowing that the violence was not directed against them, never abandoned the streets.

One masquerade deserves attention at this stage. A report in the *Port of Spain Gazette* of February 14, 1834 deplored the carnivalesque reduction of Artillery, played by a group of Africans (Pearse 1956: 20). This simple masquerade is normally read as the start of military masquerade in Carnival. The mockery of the militia can be read as the imitation of the whites which is popularly assumed to be the start of African participation in Carnival but it also testifies to that parodic subversive spirit which manifests unpredictably in social life in Trinidad and Tobago. More to the point of this paper, the masquerade does testify to the organizational talents of the anonymous Africans and their claims for a space for themselves in pre-Emancipation Carnival.

After August 1, 1838, the newly emancipated and the heterogeneous masses generically referred to as Africans moved from the margins of society to the centre of the Carnival streets. This movement to centrestage signals the coming of age of the African procession or *kambule*, a word derived from the Ko word *kambula* (Warner-Lewis 2003: 222), the character and meaning of which have been mystified in conventional scholarship on the Trinidad Carnival. Abrahams and Swzed (1983: 28-29) observe that processions, carnivals and the like played “a central role in Afro-American communities throughout the New World” They continue:

> “Although these events have been dismissed by puritanical members of Euro-American societies as mob scenes or simple bacchanals, they are in fact highly structured performances tied in to a firmly established base of cults and clubs, many of which have a strong sense of continuity and histories of more than three hundred years.”

**Conclusion**

The history of the Trinidad Carnival in the 19th century is a continuous process of transgression by which two separate and distinct festivals occupying the same festive space became creolised into the one Carnival which we celebrate annually. And yet as the Trinidad Carnival has increasingly become a product of the global economy. The dogged refusal of traditional mas (African kambule) to yield to pretty mas (European Carnival) reminds us that somewhere in the collective consciousness there is this determined spirit of resistance to the (theory of) amnesia which is the inheritance and legacy of the Africans in the New World.

**References Cited**


