

Representation of African Heritage in Trinidad Carnival

トリニダードのカーニバルにおけるアフリカ系文化遺産の表象

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the cultural representation of African Trinidadian or African creole in Trinidad Carnival. The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago is the most ethnically and culturally diverse society in the East Caribbean. This diversity comprises of 40 percent of East Indians, 40 percent of Africans, and 20 percent of mixed race such as Chinese, Syrians, Lebanese, and Europeans. In the course of making tourism a national agenda, Carnival has gained commercial values, diversifying participants and inviting more tourists from outside the country. Yet, the representation of African Trinidadian heritage remains outstanding, owing to the development of African creole culture in colonial and postcolonial history.

Keywords: Trinidad, Post-Colonial, Carnival, African Creole, West Indies, Calypso

要旨: 本論文は、トリニダードのカーニバルにおけるアフリカ系トリニダード人（アフリカ系クレオール）の文化表象について検討する。トリニダード・トバゴ共和国は、東インド系約40%、アフリカ系約40%、混血系約20%（中国系、シリア系、レバノン系、ヨーロッパ系など）を抱える多エスニック、多文化な社会である。国家の観光への挺入れによって、カーニバルにはさまざまな人が参加するようになり、外国からの観光客も増加した結果、その商業的な価値は上がった。しかし、カーニバルにおいて、コロニアル、ポストコロニアルな歴史のなかで培われてきたアフリカ系クレオールの文化表象は、依然、顕著なままである。

キーワード: トリニダード、ポストコロニアル、カーニバル、アフリカ系クレオール、西インド系、カリプソ

1. Introduction

Trinidad is an island that constitutes the twin-island state of Trinidad and Tobago, with approximately 1.3 million people which Tobago has only 50,000 people. Located north of South America, the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago is the largest nation of the Eastern Caribbean. Christopher Columbus “found” this island on his 3rd trip to “the New World” in 1498 and then it became a Spanish colony first. Trinidad was a Spanish colony until February 1797 when a British fleet of 18 warships arrived and made Spain capitulated. Tobago, on the other hand, changed hands between the

British, French, Dutch and Courlanders. In 1802 Trinidad was ceded to Britain. It became independent in 1962 together with Tobago, and was established as the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago in 1976. The capital city is Port of Spain, located in northwest of Trinidad.

Known for production of natural gas and crude oil, the nation is characterized by a low level of inflation and unemployment of around 5 percent, along with a growing surplus in trade. Though, the oil production peaked in the late 1970s and oil prices declined during the 1980s, which caused the nation's economy downward. Now natural gas has become by far more profitable. The government started to diversify the economy, in order to avoid too much dependency on natural resources. The tourism industry was then seen to have high potentials among other plans. In recent years the tourism industry has contributed immensely to the economy of the nation and the region at large. Travel and tourism contributed approximately 10.6 percent (direct and indirect) to the GDP of Trinidad and Tobago in 2009, according to the WTTC¹. Carnival and relevant events that take places after Christmas to Lenten every year are the most popular attractions to bring in tourists from USA and Europe as well as from the Caribbean. The carnival is not to watch, but to participate.

This paper examines the relationship between Carnival in Trinidad and African Trinidadians or African creoles.

2. The Ethnicity of Trinidad

Trinidad is the most ethnically and culturally diverse society in the East Caribbean with 40 percent of East Indians², 40 percent of Africans, and 20 percent of mixed race, such as Chinese, Syrians, Lebanese, and Europeans (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2010).

The National Pledge announces

*“...I will strive
In everything I do
To work together with my fellowmen
Of every creed and race
For the greater happiness of all
And honour and glory
Of my country.”*

And the national motto states “*Together We Aspire, Together We Achieve.*” All of these highlight the multicultural and multiethnic nature of the society. We can assume that the nation is proud of its striving achievement of egalitarian pluralism, while such declaration hints the majority-minority relations in terms of socio-political power.

Looking back at its history in the early sixteenth century, after the population of Native Americans lessened, Africans came to Trinidad first as servants of the European conquistadors. Later, British forcibly brought African slaves constantly up until 1807, as well as other slaves from other Caribbean islands accompanied by their planters from neighboring colonies. Africans were mainly involved in intensive labor such as work at sugar production sites.

Slavery in Trinidad has three characteristics. One is the shorter slavery period of about fifty years from the 1780s to the 1830s, with a peak from 1797 to 1806. Second is the small number of slaves. The enslaved population in Trinidad counted about 20,000 in 1802, which was approximately the same amount of people emancipated by 1838³. Since the time when the British captured the island, Trinidad has remained with higher percentage of free black people and smaller percentage of white among other Caribbean islands. Due to the time of entering the later part of the plantation colony, the African population remained comparatively small in the island. Also the ratio of slaves to free people was smaller, compared to other surrounding islands that held African slaves in plantation. Thirdly, a large number of slaves were brought up with their French owners from other French West Indies, Grenada and France roughly from the 1770s to the early 1800s. Then many were Catholic creoles, speaking *Patois* or French-based creole language. This historical background agrees that Trinidad has a lot of influences from African French creole culture.

Trinidad had one of the largest free-Colored populations in the Caribbean – in 1825 they numbered 14,983, constituting 35.4 percent of a total population of 42,250 (Campbell 1992: 58).

Lots of slave-owners in Trinidad owned only small or medium-sized land, growing coffee, cotton and cocoa. So, the enslaved population lived smaller-scaled. Probably, this smaller size of plantation community allowed dynamic cultural exposure of European to African population and vice versa. Carnival in Trinidad is one of the best examples of strong cultural hybridity between Africans and Europeans.

After the abolition of slave trade in 1807, followed by emancipation in 1834, the British met severe shortage of labor force. They started importing Chinese, West Africans, Portuguese from the island of Madeira, but still more labor was needed. Soon after, some 143,000 Indian peasants were put to work for them. East Indian indentured laborers first arrived in 1845 to Trinidad. Indians in minimum wage became an important source of labor. The majority of Indians who came to Trinidad belonged to the “coolies” class whose origin lies in Bihar and the North West Provinces. They have been heavily discriminated against by all other groups. East Indian indentures soon took over the cane plantations where freed slaves used to work by 1846. Now their descendants are one of the major groups in Trinidad. Indians in Trinidad had been excluded from the state political decision-making process for a long time. The major political power has been kept in the hands of African-creole in the nation, while the majority of Indian descendants has stayed in the agricultural sector (Mahabir 1996:286).

3. Trinidadian Music

Trinidad and Tobago is the birth place of rich musical and bodily expressions such as calypso, soca, reggae soca, the limbo dance, and the steel band. Here are brief explanations of calypso and steel drum which highlight the carnival. Both expressions developed out of African creole communities.

3.1 Calypso

Calypso is an African-Caribbean music originated in Trinidad and Tobago. Possibly with some European, maybe French musical influence in the Medieval Ages, it clearly shows African influence in the form of permitting criticism of the authority and the elite in particular times. Calypso appears to have been introduced into Trinidad by French West Indian origins who came to the Spanish colony after 1783. According to Burton (1997), the word “calypso,” which first attested in its modern form in 1900, is usually derived from *kaiso* (=bravo in Hausa) or *cariso* (< *carieto* = joyous song in Carib), or from a conflation of both. Both *kaiso* and *cariso* were widely used in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to denote the song form in question and are still encountered today.

Calypso songs are delivered in English with lots of local words and accents strongly implicating creole culture. “This local nonstandard English is an important aspect of

the Creole culture which helps to bind together people of diverse origins (Crowley 1957: 820)". The popularity of Calypso let upper-class people know about the creole language and culture.

Except the time under the British censorship, lyrics of calypso songs inform social concerns commonly shared among the oppressed with bitterness in humorous ways. They pick up specific social topics, comment on them in the song and evoke vox populi.

Here is a famous song, composed and sung by a Trinidadian calypsonian named Lord Invader in the early 1940s.

"Rum and Cola Cola⁴"

*And when de Yankeys first went to Trinidad,
Some ah de young girls were more than glad,
Deh said that de Yankeys treat dem Nice
and deh give dem the better Price.
Deh buy rum and coca-cola,
went Down Point Cumana,
Both mothers and daughters,
workin Fuh deh yankey dollar.*

*[Rum and coco-cola, go down Point
Cumana,
Both mother and daughter, workin
Fuh the yankey dollar.]*

*And look, I had ah little chick
De odda day,
But her mother came and took her
Away,
Ah self and her mother and her sisters
Went tuh make out with some soldiers.*

*Deh bought rum and coca-cola, went
Down Point Cumana,
Both mothers and daughters, workin
Fuh deh yankey dollar.*

Lord Invador is one of the most respected calypsonians. He clearly stated, “Calypso is the folklore of Trinidad, a style of poetry, telling about current events in song.” The above song came out from his experience that GIs in Trinidad challenged the local mores. Specifically, for him, women seemed seriously influenced by GI men which he had seen Trinidadian women “unfaithful.” The specific incidents sung in the song implicate the political and economic subjugation of Trinidad to the USA.

In the colonial period, British banned the opposing discourse such as the Marxist or the Jamaican black-nationalist, Marcus Garvey literature. The calypso was subjected to the censorship, which reached its peak during the 1930s. Then, Calypsonians had to submit their lyrics to the censorship authorities before singing in the public. Acted inappropriately, they were to be punished.

3.2 Steel Band

The music uses steel drums or *pans* that were initially discarded oil containers. Also, metal pipes and other kinds of abandoned metals were utilized for the musical devices and performances. The origin of steel drums dates back to the late 1930s. It is the creation by the urban poor in the east of Port of Spain. The British authorities tried to ban the steel bands, as violence between rival groups in their neighborhood frequently occurred.

By the mid-forties, a decision was made to try to wean the bands from violence by accommodating and legitimizing them. Steel bands started incorporating in Carnival and toured in England (Manuel 1995: 206).

Because the birth place and the people involved were predominantly working-class African creoles, the music and *pannists* had been stigmatized⁵. But in later years, *pannists* and the music socially moved the status upward. Interestingly, steel drum bands and the fans also started functioning as self-appointed guardians in the often crime stricken neighborhood.

By the 1950s, though steel bands had spread widely throughout the island, involving middle-class and non-African, the image had been kept as very black and crime-prone movement. Later, the music was adopted in the independent movement. Then, through the process, steel bands aptly made use of the music for resistance and defiance in various different channels in commerce.

4. Globalized Carnival and Racialization of African Trinidadians

4.1 Tourism

Trinidad and Tobago is a strong political leader in the Caribbean, remembering the West Indian Federation from 1958 to 1962. Trinidad economy owes much to natural gas and oil revenues. Since 1970s, the devaluation of international market prices of sugar and lessened sugar production had become severe in this nation which used to have the biggest production rate once in the Lesser Antilles. The nation tries to promote more the tourism industry in recent years.

The number of tourists counted 434,000 in 2013, which seems approximate average since 2009⁶. Trinidad attracts lots of tourists who want to enjoy “the paradise on the earth.” This is a common notion for the Caribbean islands among North Americans and Europeans. Yet, Trinidad has the Carnival. Carnival is one of the strongest pull to bring people from outside and the nation enjoys a significant economic kick during the Carnival season.

The calypso, the steel bands, masquerades, and *Moko Jumbies* or stilts walkers all come into full bloom in the carnival. From colorful embellished costume with glittering sequins of carnival scenes accompanied the thrusting dance to the blasting music, the apparent exoticism has attracted tens of thousands of tourists from all over the world. In many other areas in the country as well, parades and events are held in the season, with an estimated number of 300,000 people participating. The events attract about 50,000 to 60,000 foreign visitors to Trinidad annually, nearly half of them from the United States. The market data of Trinidad and Tobago showed the largest percentage growth (20.7 percent) of American tourists among their 26 destinations.

Tourism and the related industries hire many transmigrants from other Caribbean islands as well as locals. According to Caribbean Tourism Organization Latest Monthly Statistics⁷, the estimated revenue from Carnival varies widely, from just over \$27 million to hundreds of millions. Criticism has been made for the lack of contrivances to further develop the profits. Now the authorities plan to create *Mas* (here, local name for Carnival) academy and create a business arena to focus on Carnival trades.

4.2 Carnival

Carnival is an annual pre-Lenten festival throughout the Caribbean, not only in Trinidad and Tobago. However, Carnival in Trinidad is the biggest and most commercialized

festivity in the Caribbean. Carnival celebrations start from Christmas until Ash Wednesday. They come to a peak in the three days before the Lenten season starts.

Carnival or *mas* has been through changes in history. Carnival is enrooted in the cultural practices of enslaved Africans under the influence of the culture of French, Spanish, and English. Today's *mas* mostly owes to the one by freed slaves after the emancipation, celebrating their freedom. The origin is not clear but probably it was introduced to Trinidad as early as 1783 when the Spanish who governed the land promulgated the *Cedula de Poblacion* which was to bring Catholic settlers to the island with the promise of offering land and other benefits regarding tax, trade, and import. Newly migrated white settlers passed on their tradition to slaves and creoles in Trinidad.

Slaves could not participate in carnivals until after the emancipation. During the nineteenth century, free blacks participated wearing masks otherwise. As always, masquerades had obscured the lines between different peoples during the course of events, while they had met claims. Even though masquerade shows a strong influence of French, the blacks in those days appropriated the events to meet their needs. One of their formats is *camboulay* meaning "burning sugar canes fields" symbolizing their resistance and appealing of their freedom from the plantation period. The fire drill is accompanied by drumming in *camboulay* that is held in pre-Lenten Carnival (Manuel 1995). African creoles put on costumes and masks portraying African folkloric characters. In theatrical style, they play as white planters or aristocracy in the colonial period. Such subversive gesture in performance connotes traditional African style.

Now the carnival season highlights tourism in Trinidad. Streets of Port of Spain are filled with non-stop music of steel bands, soca, and calypso at the carnival time. People with colorful costumes walk down the street. Competitions and prizes for various performances are given. "*Mas*" or masquerade was introduced by French planters but it is considered an event mainly for lower class dark-skinned creoles.

Though Trinidad was under the influence of Marcus Garvey in the 1930s, it did not grow phenomenal until the uprising of the Black Power movement during the 1970s. Carnival began to show clear connections with the US black movements. Galvanizing the black urban poor in the nation, the black political party, the People's National Movement, led by Eric Williams, an eminent black charismatic political leader as well as an intellectual, came in power and then flourished. This civil right movement in Trinidad became active.

Simultaneously since the 1970s, Carnival became a national agenda. The government promotes "multiethnic and multiracial" nation as it is put in the slogan.

In Trinidad as well as other parts of the Caribbean, West African cultural activities are reported such as “*gumbe, jonkonu or kambula*, the carnivalesque activities of dances, drumming, singing and masking which were derived from West African religious culture and secret societies (Warner-Lewis 1991: 180).” These had been condemned under the British governance. Besides the music and dance, today’s Carnival continues to show African traditions in their costuming and masquerades with the rebellious nature, especially in *j’ouvert* which is a kind of masquerades performed in the early morning in the opening day of Carnival. Revelers in old clothes covered with mud, paint, or oil walk down the streets, beating tins or performing their own music. *J’ouvert* originates from the celebration of Emancipation.

Witnessing these powerful performances, tourists as well as local participants grow their awareness of African heritage. Even though their knowledge of African cultural styles is limited, Carnival offers a lot more of common African styles shared in calypso, soca, *mas*, steel bands, and *Moko Jumbies*, for example.

Moko Jumbie is a traditional Carnival character. “*Jumbie*” refers African spirit, then *Moko Jumbie* means the spirit of *Moko*, the *Orisha* (god) of fate and retribution. This tall walker is a symbol of endurance referring to the slavery period.

Though masquerade originates from the European tradition, all the music and dance and cultural expressions came out of the economically depressed black neighborhoods reflecting the experiences of the slaves, their descendants and creoles.

4.3 Racialized African Trinidadians in Globalization

During World War I, the sugar boom prospered the economy of the British Caribbean. More than 15,000 West Indies joined the British army led by the white. The experience of joining the war during World War I and World War II, the West Indies soldiers met severe discriminations from white soldiers not only of the British army but also of American GIs. The growing anti-sentiment developed stronger after coming back to the Caribbean and after they met the teachings of Marcus Garvey. In 1914, the Universal Negro Improvement Association was established in Jamaica. Two years later, they became active in New York and opened branches in the British Caribbean islands. Former soldiers and male migrants who used to live in the UK and US supported the political movements (Richardson 1992).

The US military bases in the Caribbean during World War II employed a lot of British Caribbeans. In the US Forces in Trinidad as well as Antigua, St. Thomas, and the British Virgin Islands, the islanders worked doing laundry, cooking, delivering,

construction, coastal guarding and so on. They took jobs that the British and Americans did not want to do. Many left for the US and UK, becoming “Jamaicans.”

In fact, the unemployment rate became stark in the UK and facilitated to migrate to other islands. Stronger identity as African Caribbean developed when more people emigrated. As a result of impoverishment in the UK, more Caribbeans began to migrate to the USA. When they came to realize more diversified living conditions, new perspectives were gained to view themselves in the global context.

4.4 The Shared Experiences and Identity of West Indies

The constant flow of peoples in the Caribbean is one of the characteristics since the colonial period. In English-speaking Caribbean islands, especially among smaller-sized islands, kin members are spread over a several different islands. Installation of more flight services between islands in the West Indies contributed to share the collective identities such as West Indian, for example, remembering the history of the West Indies.

People in Trinidad frequently visit their family members or relatives in Grenada, New York City, Toronto or London. In the course of this back and forth traveling, cultural symbols become inevitably fortified and what is shared throughout their social experiences gets solidified.

Leung (2009) points out that frequent trips to visit family and friends revitalize their cultural heritage. The shared history from the colonial period and pan-West Indianism has become a reference point to understand their current social situation.

Carnivals as well facilitate “transnational economic flows”, with the trafficking of Caribbean diaspora as well as international tourists, especially Americans and Europeans (Nurse 2004). The Caribbean diaspora in the North Atlantic after World War II in response to the demand for cheap labor promoted the globalization of Trinidad carnival (Nurse 1999). The musicians, pannists or steel pan drummers, dancers, craftsmen, carnival designers are now important exports, creating stronger ties with outside West Indies communities in USA, Europe, or the Caribbean. This trafficking of national culture has stimulated the original carnival in turn.

5. Conclusion

“Carnival” commoditized in tourism and also made a national symbol by the government is only one aspect. The commercialization of Carnival, soca, calypso, steel pan and dynamic migration brought multiple identities to the people such as

African Caribbean, West Indies, Native Americans, and Indian Trinidadian. Carnival reinforces ethnic roots and a sense of belonging stronger.

Participants in *mas* sharing the identity of Native Americans and of (Asian) Indian Trinidadians tend to focus more to the unity of Trinidadians. They in their *mas* appeal Carnival as a national symbol of multicultural and multiracial society. Another aspect is that Carnival exemplifies Africanness, uniting people who share African Trinidadian and African Caribbean identities together. Together with the flourishing carnivals of Trinidadian diasporas as well as West Indians in a several locations outside Trinidad, Carnival in Trinidad actually keeps offering an opportunity to practice African Trinidadian culture and identity. Carnival festivities set a stage to share and negotiate identities. What Carnival keeps producing corresponds to African cultural heritage such as recent *reggae soca*, a hybrid music and dance genre borrowing the style of Jamaican reggae. This clearly signals the collective identity of African Caribbean.

Bennett points out that “hybridity” called Homi Bhabha has been referred in the discussion of race and culture in the Caribbean and used by local elites for the promotion to bring foreign tourists into the area and thus the Caribbean has entered in the global market of tourism (Bennett and Gebhardt 2005:17-18). Yet, paying closer attention to cultural events, the West Indies sets out to attract tourists, interested in carnivals, music and dance performances. This is in a bid to identify with African traditions and cultural heritages connected with the colonial and postcolonial history even though European, Native American and (Asian) Indian cultural elements were intertwined in the cultural displays.

Moko Jumbie performers as previously mentioned, with fancy dress dance on the stilts and compete each other.

“In Trinidad and Tobago, if you should ask a Moko Jumbie where he/she comes from, he/she would say: “I have walked across the Atlantic Ocean, far far away from Africa. Even though I have endured centuries of brutalities...I have remained high, high, high against the Caribbean sky (Alleyne-Dettmers 2002:264).”

While more (Asian) Indian Trinidadian women participate in *mas* and the Carnival committee promotes the image of multiracial and multicultural society, still Africanism in Carnival festivity outstands, with emerging African-centrist groups. As it has been,

Carnival provides a contested arena that people negotiate their social and cultural needs in local and global contexts.

Notes

¹ http://www.ema.co.tt/new/images/policies/tourism_policy.pdf (As of November 21, 2015)

² The word of “Indians” hereafter refers the people whose ancestral roots lie in India.

³ http://www.trinidadexpress.com/commentaries/Was_slavery_different_in_Trinidad_-129242193.html (As of December 31, 2015)

⁴ Morey Amsterdam, an American entertainer later claimed this song as his. This song was copyrighted in the USA and became a big hit.

⁵ The British banned the use of drums in Carnival in the 1880s.

⁶ <http://search.worldbank.org/data?qterm=tourism+in+Caribbean+2015> (As of October 10, 2015)

⁷ <http://www.onecaribbean.org/wp-content/uploads/SummaryLatestSept-2015.pdf> (As of November 2, 2015)

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