

»Carnival enables all the non-slave population to adopt fictitious social roles, and, indeed, in masking on the street at least, to overstep the social boundaries of colour. [...]

The slaves were excluded from Carnival, but whether in African, or in Creole and European style were universally given licence at Christmas time, for dancing, feasting at the master's expense, some freedom of movement, and elaborate costuming.«<sup>146</sup>

The events following the Emancipation in 1838 have been forging gradually what was going to become this fascinating and contradictory cultural expression of folk pride, national identity, and eventually an exportable product. According to Bridget Brereton, »the last three decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century were crucial years for the development of Trinidad Carnival«<sup>147</sup>, for it was the time when the black population took possession of the streets, and carnival turned into what Fraser called »a noisy and disorderly amusement for the lower classes« (quoted by Andrew Pearse 1988)<sup>148</sup>. Carnival was, in fact, entirely taken over by the *Jammette*- that is the *diamatres* (Brereton 1975), the »underworld« class of Port of Spain- becoming an arena »in which class antagonism were worked out«, for it was the Bakhtian model of reversal »of all the values and judgements of a respectable society«<sup>149</sup>.

The carnival of the post-emancipation period developed into an annual ritual of social protest and resistance by the African population against the hegemony of the European elite. The former slave selected to celebrate their newly won freedom in carnivalesque style, by reproducing or enacting the *cannes brules* or *Canboulay* procession (a torchlight procession which was a ceremonial re-enactment of the gang of slaves mustered late at night to put out cane fires) (Brereton 1975) on the night of August 1, the date of the emancipation; they also ran out onto the

146 Pearse, Andrew (c1988): »Carnival in 19th Century Trinidad, in Trinidad Carnival«, Caribbean Quarterly Trinidad Carnival Issue, Vol.4 No 3&4, 1956, Paria, Port of Spain, Trinidad, p. 19

147 Brereton, Bridget (1975): »The Trinidad Carnival 1870-1900«, Savacou 11-12, Sept 1975, edited by the Caribbean Artists movement, Herald Ltd, Kingston, Jamaica, p. 46

148 Pearse: op. cit., p. 9

149 Brereton (1975): op. cit, p. 46

carnival + female

streets during carnival days, masquerading with explicit sexual themes, stickfighting, drumming, dancing, making indecent gestures and singing »lewd songs«, breaking the boundaries of respectability and colonial order.

Thus, on the streets, was displayed the essence of carnival, that is, the class conflicts performed as status inversion and proletarian rebellion against elitism and hierarchy, ridiculing authority and extolling an utopia of human equality as a political alternative in a mutual morally inverse and politically subversive way. Since then, for almost all the duration of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the authorities and the middle class, that is the *superstructure* (Pearse 1988), started to withdraw the festival, making several attempts to abolish it, but to no avail. This climax reached its maximum apex of tension between 1881 and 1884, when the canboulay riots erupted against the Governor's control, consequently destroying the rapport between the police and the revellers.

During the subsequent years the Government eliminated the organized band warfare, suppressed some of the obviously obscene masks, and made canboulay illegal. Thus, while carnival continued to be celebrated (according to Milla Riggio »canboulay won out. Its Kalinda dance and its lavways established the basis for the modern Carnival«<sup>150</sup>), political pressure, in conjunction with middle- and upper-class resistance to the practice, kept it from gaining popular acceptance during the nineteenth century.

By the 1890s carnival was driven underground by a governmental »purging« policy, which led carnival becoming a festival acceptable to most sectors of society, including the upper and the middle class. Gradually the celebration became less controversial, and by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was a reasonably well-accepted Trinidadian cultural marker. By the late 1970s, a growing patriotism began to draw Trinidadians toward re-identifying and re-appropriating those practices and symbols that might assist them in creating and maintaining a distinct cultural identity. As Peter Van Koningsbruggen asserted:

150 Riggio, Cozart, Milla (1998): »Introduction, Resistance and Identity«, TDR 1988, Vol.42, No.3, Trinidad and Tobago Carnival (Autumn 1998), p. 4

»The function of carnival as a national cultural event is the result of almost two centuries of history, in which specific events which were initially confined to specific social groups gradually became the common property of society at large and were transformed into national symbols. In a nutshell: what was at first a festival belonging to the sociocultural domain of the French Creole planter elite was transferred to that of the black lower class after the abolition of slavery (1834); with the increased interest and participation of the Creole middle class from the beginning of the twentieth century, it has turned into a festival of national importance.«<sup>151</sup>

It was during the search for unity and culturalism that Carnival was seized upon and rapidly pressed into service as a central and defining symbol of belonging to a new free (independent) nation. In fact, even though the population of Trinidad and Tobago is diverse, a national identity and national self-image was taking shape. These image characteristics sponsored by Carnival included pride in cultural diversity, vestiges from the British colonial heritage, and elements of creative resistance to British colonialism. On this concern Ngūgī wa Thiong'o explains that:

»The war between the art and the state is really a struggle between the power of performance in the arts and the performance of power by the state- in short, enactment of power. The conflict in the enactment of power is sharper where the state is externally imposed, in a situation where there is a conqueror and the conquered for instance, as in colonialism.«<sup>152</sup>

Rituals of reversals such as Carnival are characterized by articulated political ideologies that protest against the social and political status quo, which in certain circumstances, could lead to a proper revolt. In his analysis of the Carnival in Romans in 1580 Le Roy Ladurie demonstrated how the seasonal festival

151 Koningsbruggen Van, Peter (1997): »Trinidad Carnival A Quest for a National Identity«, Macmillan Education Ltd, London, p. 2

152 Ngūgī, wa, Thiong'o (1997): »Enactments of Power: The politics of Performance Space«, TDR 1988, Vol. 41 No.3, (Autumn 1997), The MIT Press, p. 12

Carnival + female

was strictly endowed with the Parisian socio-political substructure (or antistructure, referring to Turner's terminology) of the 16th century, by asserting that:

»The Carnival in Romans made ready use of the reynages. It was rooted in the Paris confraternity-related culture of time. The notables and other leaders, great or small, plebeian or rich, wanted to épater les bourgeois (to unsettle people). They pursued certain finalities, in some cases conservatives or radical one; they attained their goal by donating a modest sum of money or quantity of wax and becoming king for a few days during the carnival, Easter, or summer festivities.

Catholic culture under the ancient régime was an admirable blend of sacred and profane, religious and burlesque. In the reynage it had created a social tool, allowing the lower classes to express themselves, their mockery, and sometimes even their grievances. Plebeian political tendencies that were repressed during the rest of the year came to light during the festivities. A dangerous group subconscious found a temporary outward structuring in the solemn and formalized institutions of the reynage.«<sup>153</sup>

For Turner »liminality«, which is fully manifested (performed) in carnival, is the »realm of pure possibility« (Turner 1967), and may operate as a means of social control, of social protest, of social change, and of social deviance depending on the historical and social context. Thus ritual, by redressing the limitations of the social structure have a politically integrative role, which, in the industrialized societies, may be part of the process of social change. Consequently, the subversive character of Carnival might be related to what Karl Marx wrote of the proletarian revolution:

»Proletarian revolutions, on the other hand, like those of the 19th century, criticise themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin it afresh, deride with unmerciful thoroughness the inadequacies, weaknesses and paltrinesses of their first attempts, seem to throw down their adversary only in order that he may draw new strength from the

153 Le Roy, Ladurie (1981): »Carnival in Romans, a people's uprising at Romans 1579-1580«, Penguin Books, Middlesex, p. 282

earth and rise again more gigantic before them, recoil ever and anon from the indefinite prodigiousness of their own aims, until the situation has been created which makes all turning back impossible, and the conditions themselves cry out:

Hic Rhodus, hic salta!

Hier ist die Rose, hier tanze!

(here is the rhodes, leap here, here is the Rose, dance here« the words are from a fable by Aesop about a braggart who claimed he could produce witnesses to prove he had once made a remarkable leap in Rhodes, to which claim he received the reply: »Why cite witnesses, if it is true? Here is the Rhodes, leap here« that is »show us right here what you can do«. The German paraphrase of the Greek quotation (Rhodus means rose) was used by Hegel in the preface to his philosophy of Right)<sup>154</sup>

Since Carnival in Trinidad is the fruit of local and global histories, and the changing within these settings, -Spanish, British and French colonialism; the plantation system, slavery indentured servitude, the international markets for sugar, cocoa, and oil; and anticolonial agitation, decolonization, and the vicissitudes of state and nation formation after independence, it has become both the reflection and the main expression of the entire society, nation and culture.

For a better and deeper understanding of political and cultural realities of the Caribbean area, it is of primary importance to consider the British colonial practice of »divide -and -rule« as relevant in promoting class and racial divisions within the subordinate populations, and in yielding the consequences that in the post-independent Caribbean have become manifested in the region's political culture.

The race and class inequalities, that were so crucial to the stability and effectiveness of colonial rule, have mutated into the contemporary period, and although the colonizers are no longer present, the political consciousness of the wider population continues to be divided on race and class criteria. Caribbean political culture has been always (and it still does) mirror-

154 Marx, Karl: »The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte«, in Tucker, Robert, C. (1978): »The Marx-Engel Reader«, W.W Norton & Company, Princeton University, p. 597

Carnival + Journal

ing this debate over race and class, albeit under changed circumstances.

In order to achieve a whole independence, Caribbean people had to reject the colonizers' definition; whereas being »black« and African were once the symbols of mental/cultural inferiority and impotence, in the lead-up to independence, black people began to invert that understanding of themselves and to proclaim pride in and derive strength from their colour and ancestral land. Therefore, although the problem toward West Indian independence was multiracial, because of the black and brown majority of the region and the social cleavages of colonialism, the formal political independence had to be »black in complexion«.

On the other hand, one of the crucial dimensions of identity is national identity, which basically is the cultural relationship between the individual and the collectivity, understood through territoriality. In fact, territory and culture can endow people with myths and symbols of unique identity; and cultural phenomena, above all, remain the dominant social bond par excellence. As Eric Hobsbawm explains:

»[...] the state linked both formal and informal, official and unofficial, political and social inventions of tradition, at least in those countries where the need for it arose. [...]

It was thus natural that the classes within society, and in particular the working class, should tend to identify themselves through national-wide political movements or organizations ('parties'), and equally natural that, de facto these should operate essentially within the confines of the nation. Nor it is surprising that movements seeking to represent an entire society or 'people' should envisage its existence essentially in terms of that of an independent or at least an autonomous state. State, nation and society converged.«<sup>155</sup>

Thus, according to Ernest Gellner, »the cultural shreds and patches used by nationalism are often arbitrary historical inven-

155 Hobsbawm, Eric: »The Nation an Invention of Tradition«, in Hutchinson John/ Smith, Anthony, D., (edited by) (1994): »Nationalism«, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, pp. 76-