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The Canboulay Riot of 1881: Influence of Free Blacks On Trinidad's Carnival

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Free blacks in Trinidad during the late nineteenth century took to the streets of Port of Spain painted in extravagant colors and dressed up in miraculous costumes. Simulating the horrors of slavery in a playful manner was a provocative symbol that the elite plantocracy and the British colonial government on the island detested. These party participants continued this practice known as Canboulay every year on the night before Carnival. This determination, despite intense opposition from the ruling classes was certainly a remarkable act and symbol of defiance.

What historians of Trinidad have neglected is to make the connection between the importance of the Canboulay Riot of 1881 and the implications the riot itself had on the future and evolution of Carnival as a larger celebration.¹ Most notably, the integration of the middle class into Carnival can be attributed to this riot. Moreover, historians have yet to explain why changes in Carnival came about through violence in Trinidad, yet occurred naturally and peacefully throughout the rest of the Anglophone Caribbean. This essay seeks to correct this oversight by analyzing the early years of Trinidad's Carnival, and to present distinct differences between Trinidad, and the other Caribbean islands that have adopted this celebration.

¹ See Bridget Brererton's, *Race Relations in Colonial Trinidad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) and *An Introduction to the History of Trinidad and Tobago* (Oxford, Heinemann, 1996); Gerard Besson and Bridget Brererton's *The Book of Trinidad* (Santa Barbara: Para, 2010); C.L.R James' *The Case for West Indian Self Government* (London: Hogarth Press, 1933); Milla Cozart Riggio's *Carnival: Culture in Action and the Trinidad Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2004); and Eric Williams' *History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago* (Port of Spain: Trinidad Publishing, 1952)

The origins of Canboulay as an annual tradition date back to 1845, when slavery was abolished in Trinidad. Immediately after which, free blacks began celebrating to ritualize, reenact, share news and experience their newfound collective power.² In many ways, it was and still is, “an act of black remembrance and a reminder to the white elite of the horrors it had inflicted on its slaves.”³ Taking to the streets of Port of Spain after midnight on the Sunday before Lent, it was free blacks who deemed their own party needed to be added to the Carnival celebration that was already a tradition of whites, who also promenaded, masqueraded and danced. The only difference was that whites kept the celebration to their own homes and property.⁴ Strategically placing this celebration the night before the white elite’s much anticipated celebration, the symbolic defiance by blacks on the island was quickly made clear. However, this unquestionably hastened foreseeable tensions between them and the ruling plantocracy as well as the British colonial occupiers.

Several elements of the Canboulay fete need to be looked at in order to identify why it was such a divisive force in Trinidad during the middle to latter part of the nineteenth century. The most obvious, striking component was the portrayal of the character known as the *jab-jab*. This character, who symbolized a slave

² John Nunley, *Playing Mas: Carnival in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago* in Barbara Mauldin (ed.) *Carnival* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004): 245.

³ Martin Munro, *Different Drummers: Rhythm and Race in the Americas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010): 53.

⁴ Susan Campbell, “Carnival, Calypso and Class Struggle in 19th century Trinidad,” *History Workshop* no. 26 (1988): 8.

master, carried a whip and typically wore satin knickers, satin shirts and was decorated with mirrors and rhinestones.⁵ The *jab-jab* was accompanied by the *Dame Lorraine* who represented a slave master's mistress. Other personalities, such as the *Negre Jardins*, the *Pizali*, and the *Moko Jumby*, who represented the garden slave, a raunchy slave, and the ghost of a slave, respectively, would follow these characters in a street parade.⁶ Additionally, the partygoers would "impersonate figures like the Governor, Chief Justice, the Attorney General, well known barristers and solicitors, socially-prominent cricketers, and other props of society. There was hardly an upper class profession that was not lampooned."⁷

Not surprisingly, a spectacle such as this caused much indignation amongst the white elite. R. G Hamilton, a colonial office representative from London, who lived in Trinidad throughout the 1870s called Canboulay a "senseless, irrational amusement, that affords a pretext for the indulgence of unbridled licentiousness on the part of the worst of the population."⁸ The *Trinidad Chronicle* called the party "a barbarous din that disgraces the entire nation."⁹ Additionally, the *Port of Spain Gazette* called for the end of what they labeled "obscene and disgusting

⁵ Daniel Crowley, "The Traditional Masques of Carnival," *Caribbean Quarterly* 4 no. 3/4 (1956): 214.

⁶ Crowley, 194-197

⁷ Donald Wood, *Trinidad in Transition: The Years After Slavery* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968): 246-7.

⁸ John Cowley, *Carnival, Canboulay and Calypso: Traditions in the Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 2.

⁹ *Trinidad Chronicle*, March 3, 1865

buffoonery.”¹⁰ Nothing worse however could have been said of Canboulay than when the *Trinidad Sentinel* depicted it as an “orgy of every species of barbarism and crime.”¹¹ All of these descriptions of the fete were clearly attempts to demonize the celebration, and represented the strong stance that the British colonial government had on the island. In fact, several laws were passed in order to minimize the party’s impact. In 1846, the colonial government outlawed masking.¹² Additionally, the “consolidation of police laws in 1849 restricted dancing and music at specific times...in the streets and towns.”¹³ Finally, all forms of African percussion were banned in 1880.¹⁴ Though the colonial government passed these laws threatening to extinguish the party, Canboulay bands, as they were called, continued to operate and even evolve into larger, more elaborate parties where friendly, yet competitive, stick fighting between rival bands became a prominent component of the event.¹⁵ This show of defiance was a tremendous statement by the free blacks on the island, and catapulted their influence and practices into the future. However, the response of police forces to the Canboulay Fete of 1881, proved to be the greatest test for free blacks in Trinidad’s history.

¹⁰ *Port of Spain Gazette*, March 9, 1870

¹¹ *Trinidad Sentinel*, February 23, 1860

¹² Susan Campbell, “Carnival, Calypso and Class Struggle in 19th century Trinidad,” *History Workshop* no. 26 (1988): 9.

¹³ John Cowley, *Carnival, Canboulay and Calypso: Traditions in the Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 50.

¹⁴ Dudley, Shannon. *Music From Behind the Bridge: Steelband Spirit and Politics in Trinidad and Tobago* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007): 22.

¹⁵ Cowley, 66 – similar to capoeira in Brazil

Though the British colonial government and the elite plantocracy had taken many measures to put down the Canboulay celebrations, Arthur Baker, Inspector Commandant in Trinidad for the British Empire, proved to be the greatest antagonist to the fete's existence on the island. On the night of February 27, 1881, a drunken Baker made a bet with a friend, stating that he could end Canboulay once and for all.¹⁶ Early in the morning on the 28th, Baker gathered together 150 men to clash with the maskers. Organizing his police force at the upper end of Market street, a major road in Port of Spain, Baker decided not to opt for any element of surprise when confronting the bands. The Canboulay participants that evening made up one of the greatest stickbands ever assembled, and supporters of the party were armed with broken stones and empty bottles of rum that could be used as weapons against the police.¹⁷ This made for a bloody clash, and the fight between police and band members lasted just over three hours.¹⁸ The affair ended when the party participants retired, and the police had thus claimed temporary victory. The clash concluded with the death of four policemen, and thirty-eight more injured.¹⁹

The violence related to Trinidad's Carnival and the changes it thus created is a subject of little scholarly debate. This is surprising when one finds that Trinidad's clash between the festival participants and the occupying plantocracy is unique

¹⁶ Cowley, 84

¹⁷ Susan Campbell, "Carnival, Calypso and Class Struggle in 19th century Trinidad," *History Workshop* no. 26 (1988): 14.

¹⁸ John Cowley, *Carnival, Canboulay and Calypso: Traditions in the Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 85.

¹⁹ Carlton Robert Ottley, "A historical Account of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Force: From the earliest times," 1, <http://opac.nalis.gov.tt/uhtbin/cgiisirs.exe/x/LIBRARY/0/57/5>

throughout the West Indies. Though tension existed between island natives and Europeans on all the island nations, significant conflict, reaching the levels of the Canboulay riot over the festival of Carnival itself only existed in Trinidad. On other Anglophone Caribbean islands such as Carriacou, Grenada, St. Kitts, Nevis and Jamaica, Europeans, following black emancipation, "departed, and the ex slaves were able to develop their society and culture in splendid isolation." As a result, blacks were able to introduce "new racial and cultural elements...to larger possessions nearby."²⁰

A valid reason that can explain this anomaly lies in the unique urban culture that Trinidad possesses. Trinidad, during the 19th century was the "most cosmopolitan of the English-speaking West Indian islands." Uniquely, more African laborers on the island lived in Port of Spain than in rural areas."²¹ This close contact with whites on the island undoubtedly prompted tension. Also, from Trinidad's carnival origins, evident sexual, raunchy behavior was more heavily infused into the celebration when compared to other Carnival festivals throughout the Caribbean.²² Though this has certainly been an attractive factor to Europeans since the 1960s, this behavior in the 19th century was certainly seen as scurrilous. Historians in

²⁰ Milla Riggio, "Resistance and Identity: Carnival in Trinidad and Tobago," *The Drama Review* no. 3 (1998): 8.

²¹ *Ibid.*,

²² Gordon Rohlehr, "We Getting the Kaiso That We Deserve: Calypso and the World Music Market," *The Drama Review* no. 3 (1998): 86.

particular have not linked these two factors to violence in Trinidad, however they are clear underlying social constructs that would cause tension to erupt.

As stated prior, historians to this point have neglected to link the effects of the riot to the evolution of Carnival. However, a visible sign of change on the island occurred during the following years Canboulay celebration. Due to the great amount of anxiety on the island about future riots, a proclamation was issued by the Governor to authorize Canboulay in early 1882.²³ The year before was a disaster in the press, and so to create a better illusion of control, the Governor General decided to no longer outlaw a party that could not be stopped anyhow. Although the press in Trinidad certainly thought Canboulay was lewd, they “resented high-handed attempts by an alien executive power to put down the festival...which belonged to the people.”²⁴ This immediate relinquishment of control is such that it becomes surprising that so little has been devoted to the Canboulay Riot of 1881 and how it had such a great impact on the evolution of Carnival in Trinidad.

A major part of this evolution took place because of the participants themselves. Though realizing that the Canboulay fete could carry on legally, more responsibility was taken by band leaders to make sure that the party did not aggravate the press or police force on the island. Several band leaders approached the *Port of Spain Gazette* and asked them to create a poster that could be

²³ Bridget Brererton, *Race Relations in Colonial Trinidad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979): 172.

²⁴ Bridget Brererton, *Race Relations in Colonial Trinidad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979): 175.

distributed, which highlighted certain rules for the upcoming party. The *Gazette* obliged, and on February 22, 1882 released a paper with the headline, "Advice for the Coming Carnival."²⁵ These rules also included the guidelines for Canboulay, which was Carnival's opening act.

Ever since the Canboulay fete was amalgamated into the larger Carnival celebration, slowly but surely, a greater number of middle class citizens, including other free blacks of higher social status, Indo-Trinidadians, and even whites, began to participate in Carnival. Noticing the amount of festivity being had by the band members during Canboulay, the middle class "clearly took vicarious satisfaction in the flair, wit and devil-may-care attitude displayed".²⁶ One must also examine that participating in such events symbolized resistance to the British Empire, for the actual riot of 1881 became a rallying cry for Trinidadian nationalism. As a result of the occupying government and white elite disapproving of the fetes, every year after 1881 more and more middle class citizens participated in the parties and by 1890, "high numbers" of middle class participants were reported in the celebrations.²⁷

The droves of middle class citizens participating in the fetes undoubtedly revolutionized how Carnival was to be celebrated. The new groups produced a variety of new activities into the celebration, including string bands and country

²⁵ Milla Riggio, *Carnival: Culture in Action: The Trinidad Experience* (New York: Rutledge, 2005), 59.

²⁶ Susan Campbell, "Carnival, Calypso and Class Struggle in 19th century Trinidad," *History Workshop* no. 26 (1988): 12.

²⁷ *Port of Spain Gazette* March 4, 1890

orchestras.²⁸ Not only are these musical arrangements included in Carnival celebrations today, but they are now staples when accompanying calypso singer performances. By the 1920s, the middle class who had previously held their Carnival celebrations, dances, and grand balls in masquerade from within the confinements of their own home, began to host outdoor stage spectacles.²⁹ The Carnival Queen show and the Dimanche Gras musical competition were created at this time and continue to be popular Carnival events to this day. Finally, the middle classes were responsible for integrating the tambour-bamboo bands in 1901, which eventually evolved into steel by the mid 1930s.³⁰ The steel pan, originating from this evolution in Trinidad, is the only new acoustic musical instrument to be invented in the twentieth century.³¹ All around the world, it is now recognized as one of Trinidad's national symbols as well as a key component of "Soca" (soul calypso) music.³²

The dedication of free blacks to party on the streets of Port of Spain in the late nineteenth century despite heavy opposition by the island's plantocracy and colonial government was remarkable. The flair, defiance, determination, and devotion displayed by these Afro-Trinidadians during the island's infamous Canboulay Riot of 1881 in particular can no longer be ignored when talking about

²⁸ Errol Hill, *The Trinidad Carnival: Mandate for a National Theatre* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972): 45.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 100

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 47

³¹ Eric Manweiler, "Pan History," *Indiana Steel Pan Association*
<http://www.indianasteelpan.org/pan-history/>

³² William R. Aho, "Steel Band Music in Trinidad and Tobago: The Creation of a People's Music," *Latin American Music Review* no.1 (1987): 29.

how Carnival has evolved. Their actions and provocative style of celebration unquestionably encouraged the middle class to participate in the event, which created many unique changes that are now integral components of Carnival today.