The Haitian Carnival & Rara: Avenues for Political & Religious Assertion by Haiti's Poor

Mahavish Mahmood

Celebrations and festivals have a wide-ranging participation from, and impact on, the general Haitian populace and its politics and culture. Haitian festivals such as the *Rara* function as a space for assertion and as a means of self-identification by the poor in a nation overwhelmingly controlled by political and religious elites. These carnivals are sites of traditional and popular aspects of Haitian culture (such as Vodou) and are inserted and celebrated as both festivity and as a proclamation of personal, popular politics. Vodou is then placed into the national discourse where it is employed to combat the entrenched power structure of the Roman Catholic Church. Through transgressive costumes and musical lyrics, the lower-class attempts to reclaim some of its lost power from traditional Haitian power-brokers; these brokers can be the oppressive government of the day or the Roman Catholic Church. Haitian festivals and carnivals therefore serve two primary oppositional functions, firstly as a subversive political force, and secondly as a counter-cultural religious force that resists the norms and mores heavily endorsed by the Roman Catholic Church.

The Haitian Carnival with its wide reach and unstoppable momentum provides a meaningful political voice in a nation where the ability to be heard is often solely controlled by elites. Averill states that the "Haitian carnival is thoroughly permeated with political meanings" and that it has a "seemingly powerful role in Haitian history."[1] He declares that the carnival with its parades, music, and costumes, is infused at every turn with both tacit and explicit political messages. Thus the carnival serves as an ideal medium for political expression. This is in part due to the fact that it is a widely attended event with a large number of eager participants - therefore political messages have a perfect opportunity to be heard throughout the country.[2] The carnival is a unique celebration where participants are "swept up in collective enthusiasm" with the

[1] Gage Averill, "Anraje to Angaje: Carnival Politics and Music in Haiti," *Ethnomusicology* 38, no. 2 (Spring-Summer, 1994): 217.
[2] Ibid.

excitement, the anonymity, and the pressures of the crowd often becoming a very serious force.[3] Numerous Haitian governments have understood the power of Haitian carnivals and festivals and have sought to stealthily insert themselves within this space. In 1964, the carnival was actually themed "*Papa Doc for Life*," referring to the vote on extending Jean-Claude Duvalier's reign until the end of his life. The Haitian Carnival was used as a political stage with the playing of "campaign theme songs" to sway the vote for the "President-for-Life" campaign.[4] Time and time again the political elite have tried to intrude into the Haitian Carnival's political and cultural sphere. In 1995, at a roots music festival, Averill notes how a concert avenue became the scene of a photo-op for Aristide.[5] Aristide's government entered this realm through what in other nations would be a fairly innocent act, via the sponsorship of the festival by the Ministry of Education and Culture.[6] By firmly entrenching themselves in this subversive space, the government attempted to extend its reach and control on the Haitian public in one of the few avenues available for political and cultural freedom. The introduction of leading politicians in popular carnivals points to the significance that such carnivals can have in garnering political influence and legitimacy.

Music is a central aspect in Haitian Carnival; there are musicians on every street playing to receptive ears, providing an excellent means through which to transmit diverse political thoughts and ideas. Averill states that "[t]he powerful appeal of music – its engagement with human emotions – is the reason it serves effectively as an instrument of politics and a medium of power."[7] He goes on to say that music both "creates" and "evokes" memories and that with political lyrics accompanying the music, the emotions attached to the message are sure to remain in mind.[8] The powerful associations that music creates in hearts and minds greatly contribute to its function as a source for amplifying political thinking and sentiment. As Averill argues, it has to have the "potential … to

[3] Averill, "Anraje to Angaje: Carnival Politics and Music in Haiti," 219.
[4] Averill, "Anraje to Angaje: Carnival Politics and Music in Haiti," 229.
[5] Gage Averill, *A Day For the Hunter, a Day For the Prey: Popular Music and Power in Haiti* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 208-209.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Averill, *A Day For the Hunter, a Day For the Prey: Popular Music and Power in Haiti*, 19.
[8] Ibid.

set human emotions in motion."[9] With music playing at every corner and enthusiastic listeners abounding, countless political connections and memories are made.

Political leaders have always been aware of the potential of music to have a disruptive influence and power amongst the general public. During the Haitian Carnival of 1990 for example, the ruling Haitian military was at first unsure if the popular group Boukman Eksperyan's songs, "Ke-M Pa Sote," "My Heart Doesn't Leap" or "I am Not Afraid," was supporting or condemning their regime. When the song became a rallying cry for opponents of the military's reign however, the group's political allegiance and the effect of its influence became quite clear and thus dangerous.[10] The Haitian military rulers of the 1990s were surely not the first who were aware of the political power of music. During the presidency of François Duvalier, in order to mark the occasion of his first Haitian Carnival in power, he had song writers draft lyrics to popular music which spoke of the supposed esteem that Haiti's poor held him in.[11] The government of Haiti even created its own types of "mini-carnivals" in the form of *koudyays* (from the French "*coup de jaille*" or a "gushing/surging event"). In these *koudyays*, government-sponsored singers sang about the greatness of the political figure of the day, hoping to both inspire civil society and to scare away opponents of the leader.[12] The music of the carnival has been, and continues to be, a powerful force that the political elite of Haiti are eager to control and co-opt for their own ends - either by inserting themselves into carnivals or by creating their own versions of revelry which disseminate state-approved political messages.

The carnival also serves as a backdrop for other forms of artistic expression which are often more overt in their political content. From murals, to costumes, to plays, the carnival with its cultivation of the subversive and provocative is the ideal space for disseminating unflattering thoughts about the political elite. During the *Rara* festival (which takes place around the same time as Easter)

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[9] Averill, *A Day For the Hunter, a Day For the Prey: Popular Music and Power in Haiti*, 20.
[10] Michael D. Largey, "Politics on the Pavement: Haitian Rara as a Traditionalizing Process," *The Journal of American Folklore* 113, no. 449 (Summer, 2000): 242.
[11] Largey, 246.
[12] Largey, 247.

ochans, or "militaristic musical salutes" that often refer to military leaders, are also used as political performance pieces.[13] According to McAlister *ochan* is not merely a festive exhibition but a "traditionally sanctioned negotiation of power and status between classes," a type of "ritualized moment of political patronage…through a performance of loyalty and homage … a monetary demand [too]."[14] In this example, this particular festival performance has clear political implications at the local level, with the exchange of money for political support featuring prominently. Costumes from the *Rara* festival are seemingly based upon French courtly styles from the 18th century, parodying in earnestness and mocking the historical politics of their island nation.[15]

The most prominent counter-cultural force during carnival is Vodou; with its foundation in African spirituality it presents a serious threat to the hegemony of the Catholic Church in Haiti. Vodou is mostly practiced by the rural-poor and festivals such as *Rara* allow their religious beliefs to enter into the mainstream.[16] As previously mentioned, political leaders such as Papa Doc Duvalier commissioned lyrics to popular songs in order to appeal to the lower classes. One of the ways this was done was by having Vodou-inspired imagery and themes within the lyrics, showing the government's strategic understanding of the importance of Vodou to the general Haitian population.[17] The Roman Catholic Church has repeatedly attempted to erase Vodou from Haiti. In the 1930s the Roman Catholic Church had an ongoing mission "to combat fetishism and superstition," and was fully backed by the Elie Lescott, then the president of Haiti, along with the government of the United States.[18] The presence of religious syncretism which itself was a result of the cultural mixing in the Atlantic world, was a way for Haitian slaves to retain a connection to their African roots.[19] Where class hierarchies

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[13] Elizabeth A. McAlister, *Rara!: Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and Its Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 51.
[14] McAlister, 52.
[15] Susan Elizabeth Tselos, "Threads of Reflection: Costumes of Haitian Rara," *African Arts (USA)* 29, no. 2 (Spring, 1996): 61.
[16] Michael D. Largey, *Vodou Nation: Haitian Art Music and Cultural Nationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 194.
[17] Michael D. Largey, "Politics On the Pavement: Haitian Rara as a Traditionalizing Process," 246.
[18] Kate Ramsey, "Without One Ritual Note: Folklore Performance and the Haitian State, 1935-1946," *Radical History Review* 84 (Fall 2002): 23-24.
[19] Largey, *Vodou Nation: Haitian Art Music and Cultural Nationalism*, 76.

are correlative with racial structures the ideal that is strived for is Europeaness. Vodou's roots in Africa and its embrace by lower classes is then an acceptance of their "Africaness," serving as an affront to those in power. The Roman Catholic Church as a European religious institution positions itself as the savior of the masses, however, these masses continue to choose to hold on to *their own* spiritualties.

This offense by the poor, namely to enthusiastically accept Vodou into their lives, and even worse, to merge it with Christian symbols, serves as a way to undermine the Roman Catholic Church's power within the country. By actively deciding for themselves their faith and how they choose to practice it, the poor of Haiti challenge traditionally powerful forces in their country. A festival such as *Rara* which incorporates two different religions undermines the singular hold that the Roman Catholic Church has on the Haitian people. *Rara* is "explicitly religious" as people patronize African deities, perform rituals, and pay homage to the dead.[20] Nevertheless, according to McAlister, the outright religious purpose of *Rara* is not revealed for fear of antagonizing those in power.[21] McAlister also claims that is through the bright colours and loud sounds of the festival that Rara's religious core is kept hidden.[22] A 1995 mural of Aristide, a former priest, shows him between "the rooster of Ogou and a beckoning Jesus," reflecting the religious dichotomy of the Haitian people.[23] As "Afro-Creole religious imagination is enveloped inside a Roman Catholic one," the lower classes of Haiti assert certain aspects of their cultural identity in secret.[24] By combining Vodou with Christian imagery and symbols, the poor insulate themselves from outright condemnation and instead they *themselves* function as cultural agents by shaping religion in Haiti.

The springtime festival of *Rara* in particular is a festive celebration by and for the people, with both the rural and the urban poor joining together to perform rituals and pilgrimages to sacred places amidst a relative freedom from usually oppressive

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[20] McAlister, 7.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Karen McCarthy Brown, "Art and Resistance: Haiti's Political Murals, October 1994," *African Arts* 29, no. 2 (Spring, 1996): 57.
[24] McAlister, 11.

conditions.[25] According to McAlister, the *Rara* celebration is one of the rare times when the lower classes of Haiti are free to congregate and travel in relative safety; *Rara* is then an actual physically safe place, or rather a safe time, for the poor.[26] The revelry in the countryside combined with hidden Vodou religious undertones allow for a certain amount of freedom of speech and assembly.[27] *Rara* is genuinely a cultural expression of the poor with the elite often hiding away, especially at night during loud celebrations; this unwittingly gives *Rara* celebrants an open avenue for expression.[28] The actual activities of *Rara* such as the parades are an authentic declaration of cultural identity by the lower classes, with local bands festively competing against one another in drive-by performances throughout the countryside.[29] In sum, festivals such as *Rara* allow for a time of relative physical and cultural freedom for Haiti's poor.

Carnivals and festivals, while not traditionally thought to be powerful spaces for assertion by the oppressed, nevertheless play an important role in nations such as Haiti. When traditional places to voice one's politics and culture are controlled by the wealthy elite and the well-connected, people are forced to look for other mediums of expression. Music, artwork, and performance pieces in Haitian Carnival provide a small avenue for political speech. Amongst loud music and the revelers, political thoughts are slyly expressed. However, the governments of the day are well aware of the power of this politicized space, and have done their best to instill their own political values in this arena.

Politics is not the only sphere being challenged in such festivals however. Powerful cultural players such as the Roman Catholic Church are also confronted through the insertion of Vodou rituals and imagery in festivals such as *Rara*. *Rara* masks its central religious beliefs with widespread music and revelry and by incorporating Christian symbols into the festival. Though the Roman Catholic Church has attempted to eliminate Vodou from the hearts and minds of the Haitian people, Haitians have done their utmost to protect this part of their cultural identity by combining it with Christian themes as a way to insulate their persecuted beliefs.

[25] McAlister, 3.
[26] McAlister, 4.
[27] McAlister, 7.
[28] Ibid.
[29] McAlister, 5.

Carnivals and festivals are a crucial means of declaring political and cultural thoughts and ideas by Haiti's poor. They serve as a relatively safe place where they can state and celebrate their own beliefs, always of course, under the watchful gaze of elites.

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