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Everybody Jumping on the Savannah Grass: How Carnival Became a Symbol of Trinidad and Tobago's National Culture

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Brittney Bahadoor is in her fourth and final year of her undergraduate degree, pursuing a Bachelor of Arts with a Specialist in History and Minor in Caribbean Studies at the University of Toronto. Her Indo-Caribbean heritage has spurred her love for Caribbean history and instilled a desire to shed lights on the histories of the West Indies that are so often overlooked, specifically Guyana and Trinidad post-emancipation. All of those interests culminated in her Senior Thesis for the Department of History in which she researches the history of racial relations between Afro and Indo Caribbeans in their migration to Toronto. She has continuously been involved with the Caribbean community on campus and is the incumbent President of the West Indian Students' Association (WISA).

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the history of Carnival in Trinidad and Tobago and how the country moulded the event to become a staple of nationalism following independence in the 20th century. It explores the historical beginnings of Carnival, from slavery to indentured servitude to modern-day Trinidad. It looks at how becoming a mascot of Trinidadian culture was achieved in two ways—the representation and rhetoric of the event and how it became a commodity that politicians could use to prove a robust national culture to the world. It takes on central themes of unification, regardless of race, class, or culture, and how the event tells the history of this island, even with the costumes and enthralling music. It touches on how Carnival reflects cultural and political movements throughout the country's history, how it became significant for social changes after independence, and how it could withstand the infiltration of global capitalism and still present a story about Trinidad's culture and resilience. It is built around the argument that after independence in 1962, Trinidad needed a way to present itself as a nationalist country now that it did not have a metropole. This was achieved by propping up Carnival and allowing it to reflect various movements of the past. The goal is to add to the conversation that Carnival is not just a boisterous party on the island but also reflects the colonial history and diverse peoples and how it was able to modernize itself while sticking to these core values.

While the Caribbean region itself is very diverse, one could say Trinidad and Tobago is the island that is one of the significant melting pots. Harbouring so many people and cultures, one may wonder how they form a steadfast, national culture. There is an answer to that: Carnival. A major attraction in the modern-day that welcomes all is known for colourful costumes, enthralling music, and a party that seemingly never stops. Yet, it is so much more than that. Following the achievement of independence from Britain in 1962, the desire for a national representation that came from that separation started to portray Carnival as the centre of national culture in Trinidad and Tobago. This was done in two specific ways—representation and rhetoric of the event and a commodity that politicians could use to prove a 'strong' national culture. As a result, this would allow for the country's economic development. This paper analyzes how this was done in-depth and how Carnival became a mascot for Trinidadian culture.

In terms of history, Trinidad[1] and Tobago share a similar narrative to the rest of the Caribbean islands. More than any other island, Trinidad was in the hands of various European metropoles, eventually going from the Spaniards, French, Dutch, and eventually British. In 1797, Trinidad became a crown colony of the British Empire and began to hold a large population of enslaved Africans, becoming one of Britain's most significant sugar colonies. After emancipation until 1917, about 143,000 Indian immigrants came to Trinidad. In terms of relevance for this paper, more detail is not needed. The base ethnic composition of the island post-emancipation is as follows: formerly enslaved Africans and soon-to-arrive Indian indentured workers were the main large groups. Until this point, Trinidad had encountered three major European powers, but the one that introduced Carnival to the island was the French in the 18th century.

The original version of Carnival was primarily for the white French plantocracy, with the ruling class dressing in exquisite clothing and others in masquerade, mocking the social realities of the French slave system.[2] Emancipation allowed emancipated Africans to join the Carnival, and in doing so, they began to change the event. The narrative was then flipped to costumes that mocked the European ruling class. From the arrival of French planters in the 18th century to independence from Britain in 1962, Carnival began to change and reflect societal issues, cultures, and events in the emergence of modern carnival.[3] This can be seen with the emergence of other satirical costumes such as the Sailor costumes, which mocked the British sailors on the island in the 19th century, and the Moko Jumbies, which derive from African culture brought over by the enslaved peoples in the years prior. These costumes were essential in what Carnival represented, as they represented the interests and feelings of the Afro-Trinidadians. Participating in the costuming at the Carnival is often referred to as playing mas. Mas has become one of the three significant aspects of the Trinidad carnival. The modern carnival as seen today is a two-day festival held on the Monday and Tuesday before Ash Wednesday, or the start of the period of Lent for the Christian and Catholic religions. It begins with J'ouvert very early on Monday morning, which has more traditional costumes and is then followed by pretty-mas later during the day on the Monday and then on the Tuesday.

Music brought over from the plantations, such as African drumming, Kaisos, and canaboulay music, began to appear at the festivals, which eventually created the Trinidadian Carnival staple of calypso music.[4] There were many instances by the upper-class whites in the late 19th and early 20th century to try and 'reclaim' Carnival, such as banning African drumming in 1884.[5]

[1] While the island is Trinidad and Tobago, it will be referred to as Trinidad to keep conciseness and clarity. As well, Carnival occurs on the mainland of Trinidad, not Tobago.
[2] Ernest D. Brown, "Carnival, Calypso, and Steelband in Trinidad," *The Black Perspective in Music* 18, no. 1/2 (1990): p. 81, https://doi.org/10.2307/1214859, 4.
[3] Philip W. Scher, "Copyright Heritage: Preservation, Carnival and the State in Trinidad," *Anthropological Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (2002): pp. 453-484, https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2002.0054, 469.
[4] Ernest D. Brown, "Carnival, Calypso, and Steelband in Trinidad," *The Black Perspective in Music* 18, no. 1/2 (1990): p. 81, https://doi.org/10.2307/1214859, 9
[5] Ernest D. Brown, "Carnival, Calypso, and Steelband in Trinidad," *The Black Perspective in Music* 18, no. 1/2 (1990): p. 81, https://doi.org/10.2307/1214859, 8.

This only resulted in creating another Carnival staple—the steel pan. Created in the 1930s, "musicians began a process of conscious experimentation, heating and pounding out the metal containers to create notes… oil drums were used because their larger surfaces accommodate more notes…" [6] From this, the steel pan as we know it emerged. Calypso and steel bands (also known as pan) form this festival's other central aspects.

As seen up to this point, it is clear that the original celebration was now established as an Afro-appropriated emancipation festival.[7] However, Trinidad also houses one of the largest populations of East Indian migrants. Until then, Carnival primarily took classic costumes and music from African culture. However, it also had to incorporate Indian cultural ideals as well. Carnival is no exception to the ideal of racial differences that have plagued Trinidad and Tobago from colonial times.[8] However, it cannot simply ignore the fact that Trinidad is highly diverse and Indian involvement soon had to be incorporated for this to represent national culture.

Soca music, created in 1941, started to gain prominence in Trinidad and, subsequently, Carnival. Soca is described as a mix of calypso music and traditional Indian rhythms, which can be seen as a fusion of the music of the two major ethnic groups in the country. When Eric Williams' Peoples National Movement party came into power in 1956, it saw increasing Indian involvement in Carnival.[9] One of the most prominent East Indian developments under this era of government leading up to independence was the emergence of chutney soca—incorporating secular music from East Indian plantation communities with calypso, suggesting further the integration of Indians into the world of calypso and Carnival.[10] The introduction of the largest ethnic group in modern Trinidad—Indo-Trinidadians—into the Carnival scene sets the stage for establishing Carnival as the centrefold of Trinidadian culture.

As mentioned above, Trinidad Carnival often reflects the movements in the island's history, making it a suitable candidate to represent the country's national culture. After achieving independence in 1962, the idea arose that national culture and heritage needed to be established through cultural prop—Carnival could do this.[11] The Williams government needed a way to prove that they were strong on their own without needing a metropole to ensure that. The onset of independence brought a flurry of disappointments plaguing the Trinidadian government, such as poverty, unemployment, and cultural conflicts.[12] These issues would reflect poorly globally if they became the foundation upon which Trinidad had to build their national identity. Jamaica and Grenada were able to participate in various non-alignment policies in their postcolonial period to establish themselves; thus, Trinidad also needed a way to forge this 'third-way' for their development as a third-world country.[13]

To do this, Carnival had to be presented in a way that seemed applicable to base a national culture. Prominent Carnival historian Garth L. Green defines cultural nationalism as creating, encouraging, and maintaining solid national cultural institutions shared without any outside influences.[14] How the historical roots of Carnival situate themselves in both Afro and Indo-Trinidadian histories and how the event adapted to the changing times of the country made it the perfect institution to fit Green's definition. Going off this definition, one would

[6] Ibid., 92.
[7] Milla Cozart Riggio, "The Power of Play: Performance, Time, and Space in the Caribbean Carnival World," *Caribbean Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (February 2019): pp. 575-602, https://doi.org/10.1080/00086495.2019.1682358, 576.
[8] Amanda Lynn Zavitz and Anton L. Allahar, "Racial Politics and Cultural Identity in Trinidad's Carnival," *Identity* 2, no. 2 (2002): pp. 125-145, https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532706xid0202_02, 135.
[9] Ibid., 139.
[10] Ibid., 141.
[11] Garth L. Green, "Carnival and the Politics of National Identity in Trinidad and Tobago" (dissertation, UMI Press, 1998), pp. 2-450, 40.
[12] Garth L. Green, "'Come to Life': Authenticity, Value, and the Carnival as Cultural Commodity in Trinidad and Tobago," *Identities* 14, no. 1-2 (May 2007): pp. 203-224, https://doi.org/10.1080/10702890601102670, 215.
[13] Natasha Barnes, "The Utopic Popular: Trinidad's Carnival," in *Cultural Conundrums Gender, Race, Nation, and the Making of Caribbean Cultural Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), pp. 71-98, 88.
[14] Garth L. Green, "'Come to Life': Authenticity, Value, and the Carnival as Cultural Commodity in Trinidad and Tobago," *Identities* 14, no. 1-2 (May 2007): pp. 203-224, https://doi.org/10.1080/10702890601102670, 204.

not call African and Indian influence an outside culture, as the beauty of Trinidad is that it is formed through this diversity. However, that diversity is precisely why a solid national culture was needed. The multiethnic and multicultural country had to find a way to balance all these cultures in the new postcolonial world where the power structure known for so many years was now unsettled.[15]

How Carnival reflects the country's significant social changes after independence has become intertwined with the event. It is a constant pattern that Carnival constantly changes with historical circumstances in which its social actors emphasize them.[16] After independence, Carnival became accessible to the middle and working classes, thus grasping the 'regular' person and most of the population. As mentioned previously, mas (masquerading/costumes) is one of the important three parts of Trinidad Carnival. Coinciding with the Second Wave of Feminism in the United States and the newfound openness of female sexuality, we begin to see the emergence of 'pretty mas.' Along with the various cultural costumes dating back to colonial times, a growing number of working-class Trinidadian women played mas, a traditionally male-dominated event.[17] Pretty-mas is what is seen in Trinidad Carnival today—tiny bikinis and thongs with gems and elaborate feather pieces on the costume, with a type of dancing known as 'whining.' The development of women sensually playing mas is seen as a form of reclamation of beauty from how women of colour were viewed in colonial times to now.[18]

The liberation of women in Carnival after independence is only one way Carnival began to show Trinidad's significant social changes as the middle class began to gain power. At Independence, Eric Williams and the People's National Movement (PNM) were the government in power. This partly reflected a liberal and socialist platform that would uplift the middle and working class in the country. Williams himself was a notable advocate for the Caribbean and Trinidadian nationalism, and his achievement of independence with his party allowed this to be seen.[19] On the night of formal separation and independence from Britain, there were Steelband performances in Queen's Park Savannah and Memorial Park. These steel bands then roamed through the streets with a following of Trinidadian citizens, regardless of the class following and celebrating.[20] This became a standard practice in Carnival that arose out of this. Mas was no longer limited to those in the upper class in Trinidadian society but anyone. These people could find their place in Carnival by playing pan and calypso.[21] As a symbolic reference to gaining independence, on the final day of the Carnival, mas bands, mixed with every culture and ethnicity, would parade from Memorial Park to Queen's Park Savannah, dancing and celebrating Trinidadian culture before presenting themselves in front of the Carnival judges on the 'savannah grass.'

The achievement of independence in Trinidad allowed it to be cemented as an event that showed Trinidad's progress in the world, from feminism beginning to play a role more than ever to the finale of the event being a direct reference to the night Trinidad became its nation. Carnival began to make noise globally as the independence era began. This small country could rarely have given the world so many cultures in a single internationally recognized event.[22] Politicians soon recognized the global impact. It became clear that a distinct national culture could be found in this event, as it became a space for making a pan-Trinidadian identity. Carnival began

[15] Ibid.
[16] Garth L. Green, "Carnival and the Politics of National Identity in Trinidad and Tobago" (dissertation, UMI Press, 1998), pp. 2-450, 65.
[17] Ibid., 91.
[18] Natasha Barnes, "The Utopic Popular: Trinidad's Carnival," in *Cultural Conundrums Gender, Race, Nation, and the Making of Caribbean Cultural Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), pp. 71-98, 105.
[19] David V. Trotman, "Acts of Possession and Symbolic Decolonisation in Trinidad and Tobago," *Caribbean Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2012): pp. 21-43, https://doi.org/10.1080/00086495.2012.11672429, 29.
[20] Ibid., 30.
[21] Milla Cozart Riggio, "The Power of Play: Performance, Time, and Space in the Caribbean Carnival World," *Caribbean Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (February 2019): pp. 575-602, https://doi.org/10.1080/00086495.2019.1682358, 577.
[22] Ernest D. Brown, "Carnival, Calypso, and Steelband in Trinidad," *The Black Perspective in Music* 18, no. 1/2 (1990): p. 81, https://doi.org/10.2307/1214859, 84.

not to see colour in Trinidadian society, instead reaffirming Trinidadians that they were, regardless of Indian, African, or Indigenous, Trinidadian at the end of the day.

With international attention, the infiltration of global capitalism in the marketing and commodification of Caribbean popular culture began to add another challenge—how to present to the world that Trinidad had a robust national identity in Carnival without losing the cultural aspect to it. The commodification of culture is dangerous as it reduces the event to a mere money-making scheme. However, Carnival is much more than that. Pretty-mas and the "wine and jam" Carnival were attracting tourism to Trinidad; however, it also gave way to the idea of Trinidad culture just becoming something that could be exploited.[23] In the 1990s, the National Carnival Commission (NCC) was established to avoid this.

This was a state-sanctioned governing body that oversaw every aspect of Carnival. It was created to revive the traditional mas that tells the story of the island's history—with the various costumes and music telling the stories of slavery, emancipation, indentureship, colonialism, and achievements of independence.[24] That is what Trinidad's national culture and identity should be representative of. One notable point from the Act of Parliament that created the NCC goes as follows: "(Paragraph c) the identification, evaluation and promotion of all Carnival related industries with a view to the enhancing and marketing of their cultural products and services."[25] While the pretty costumes and modern soca do well in helping achieve global recognition, it begins to overshadow the true significance of Carnival. The goal of the NCC was and continues to ensure that Carnival does not become a "whine and jam solely" oversexualized event that becomes one big party, but rather one that represents a nation with multiple ethnic groups fought against colonialism to become what it is today.

When the global world starts to notice it, the curious thing about national identity is balancing what attracts national attention versus how to preserve cultural heritage. A solid national culture can be viewed as an antidote to globalization, homogenization, and cultural imperialism.[26] After independence, former colonies try to achieve this to separate themselves from that past narrative. Carnival has always been and continues to represent the history of the island. As with Caribbean countries, tourism has always been a significant part of the economy. In Trinidad, it has become the busiest season for tourists.[27] However, the pretty mas and "whine and jam" soca attracted these tourists. The peculiar thing about the NCC was that it was created to ensure that traditional mas, with Moko Jumbie, Sailor costumes, and traditional calypso, still was present within the overall celebrations. However, the dangers of consumptive pleasures will triumph despite the dangers of commodification and usurpation of the base culture.[28]

The commodification of the culture means that the culture is treated merely as something that can be easily disposed of or changed to fit what suits best. However, this could also be a positive thing, as in the case of Trinidad and Tobago's Carnival. The creation of the NCC was a way for the government to present the standard image that Trinidad is a diverse society with nationalism that unites all people regardless of race and social class.[29] The blend of all cultures that make up Trinidadian society participating, whether through music, such as chutney and soca, or mas, which saw Indo and Afro-Trinidadians taking part, allowed Carnival to become commercialized and politicized.[30] In the post-Independence years, under Williams' PNM government, a

[23] Ibid., 81.
[24] Philip W. Scher, "Copyright Heritage: Preservation, Carnival and the State in Trinidad," *Anthropological Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (2002): pp. 453-484, https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2002.0054, 472.
[25] Ibid., 464.
[26] Ibid., 460
[27] Ibid., 462.
[28] Natasha Barnes, "The Utopic Popular: Trinidad's Carnival," in *Cultural Conundrums Gender, Race, Nation, and the Making of Caribbean Cultural Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), pp. 71-98, 96.
[29] Jonathan Boyarin, Charles Tilly, and Daniel A Segal, "Living Ancestors: Nationalism and the Past in Postcolonial Trinidad and Tobago," in *Remapping Memory: The Politics of Timespace* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pp. 221-239, 226.
[30] Amanda Lynn Zavitz and Anton L. Allahar, "Racial Politics and Cultural Identity in Trinidad's Carnival," *Identity* 2, no. 2 (2002): pp. 125-145,

tremendous amount of time, money and energy was spent developing the culture through Carnival.[31]

This could be attributed to the fact that it was to become a mascot for Trinidadian nationalism on a global scale, as it would showcase why the need for independence was so vital: that Trinidad has come together as one, and it can be seen here. In a UNESCO report on Trinidad in April of 1979, it was said that,

> "The Government of Trinidad and Tobago recognizes the need to record, stimulate and support its rich and diverse cultural heritage ... on the national level, Trinidad and Tobago is attempting to develop an integrated national framework, carry out an inventory of the country's cultural and natural heritage together with strategies for the effective management of artistic resources."[32]

The way to do this was with Carnival as not just a celebration but a commercial event that would garner attraction from the rest of the world. As a result, the government and the various institutions set up to aid the event, like the NCC and the Carnival Development Committee, were able to turn this event into a mere cultural object with a history of the past.

This was seemingly successful as Carnival boosted the Trinidadian economy heavily. This was one of the main reasons for the cultural commodification mentioned above, as it essentially helped Trinidad's failing economy. At the point of independence in the early 1970s, Trinidad came off the oil boom around the Second World War. However, that was not a sustainable source of growth and the country needed to diversify it. The event began to generate about USD 156 million (around 1 billion TTD) per annum and accounts for most of the country's cultural sector earnings.[33] Today, it continues to grow. Carnival's appeal to the rest of the world, including tourists, allowed the government to use the event to promote national identity and boost the overall economy.

The Carnival industry then became a cushion from external shocks affecting the traditional economic growth of the country as well as various foreign influences.[34] Although Carnival has become a tool for economic growth, it is still distinctly Trinidadian. However, it is still evident that old traditions and social cultures will be broken down as capitalism and cash nexuses enter the picture.[35] The state supported the creation of Carnival as a product as it heavily increased visitor expenditure and growth, but it still became a cultural phenomenon. At the height of the tourism economy, Carnival has become vital to the country's Gross National Product (GNP) amidst the dwindling oil production.[36] Whether Carnival loses its traditional structure, it will remain a vital part of the Trinidadian culture, as seen by its importance and contribution to the national economy.

There is a reason why Trinidad and Tobago is the first thought of when the word Carnival is spoken. It is more than just a party; it is an authentic national culture that tells the story of many cultures in one. Due to that, it is no surprise that it soon became the staple of national culture after the country achieved its independence from Britain. Carnival encapsulates histories and traumas while allowing all types of Trinidadians the ability to participate. It reflects current and past political and social movements, all while being presented as a way to gain national recognition and positive addition to the economy. As Machel Montano, the crowned King of Soca, said about Trinidad's Carnival, "everything you do must be rich in heritage and potential for the future."

https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532706xid0202_02, 139.

[31] Gordon Rohlehr, "The Culture of Williams: Context, Performance, Legacy," *Callaloo* 20, no. 4 (1997): pp. 849-888, https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.1997.0083, 876.

[32] Ibid., 873.

[33] Suzanne Burke, "Creative Clustering in Small Island States: The Case of Trinidad and Tobago's Carnival Industry," *Caribbean Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2014): pp. 74-95, https://doi.org/10.1080/00086495.2014.11672514, 74.

[34] Ibid., 76.

[35] Amanda Lynn Zavitz and Anton L. Allahar, "Racial Politics and Cultural Identity in Trinidad's Carnival," *Identity* 2, no. 2 (2002): pp. 125-145, https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532706xid0202_02, 142.

[36] Philip W. Scher, "Copyright Heritage: Preservation, Carnival and the State in Trinidad," *Anthropological Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (2002): pp. 453-484, https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2002.0054, 469.

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