

Carnival, transnationalism and multi-cultural citizenship

Introduction

There is a popular notion that you can find a “Trini” anywhere on the planet. In my years of travelling as a musician, I have repeatedly found this to be true. Not a day would go by that someone didn’t approach and enquire, “*You from Trinidad? Wey in trini you from? I from diego.. yuh know so an so?*” And as Trinidadians, we go even further as to state without apology that “*God is a Trini*”. So Trinibagonians are not only to be found all around the world, but also in the hereafter.

All of this is to say that we, as Trinbagonians, are not limited by the boundaries of our twin island nation state. The transnational nature of Trinbagonians ensures that wherever two or more are gathered in her name, Trinidad and Tobago exists there.

This is a bold assertion I know but how do we know this? The answer lies in the proliferation of Trinidad style Carnivals, numbering in the 100s, all over the globe. These Carnivals provides insight into our ability to carve a space for ourselves, and our culture wherever we may be, sowing the seeds of our cultural past and present, to affect and effect our cultural future.

Trinis abroad

It’s interesting meeting migrant Trinis abroad. They are some of the most patriotic people you’ll ever hope to meet, with their Trini flags, rags, caps, and t-shirts. You see them “*dressing up in dey red, white and black*”. Transnational Trinis spent an inordinately large amount of time thinking about, talking about, reading about home. And

with the advent of the internet, through social networks, are communicating with friends and family members at home on a daily basis, and have opinions on the daily political shenanigans of Caribbean life. They make annual treks home every year for Carnival or Christmas. As an immigrant community, Trinidadian clings nostalgically to things of home. But they weren't always that way. The pattern is usually the same, you grow up with a sort of disdain for Trinidad culture, instead relishing in foreign programming and dreaming of the day you would break free of this society to engage the first world. However it is precisely when we're away from our culture, that we miss it the most. Homesickness sparks interest in the land that we left behind and we seek out links into our cultural past. The things we took for granted then, now shine in a new contrasting environment, and we finally come to appreciate the culture that raised and made us.

And so our people settle in Brooklyn, in Miami, Toronto, Montreal, Washington, in London, Leeds, throughout the world taking with them the seeds of our culture and transplanting them in new spaces. Multi-cultural and multi-ethnic spaces that will test them, maybe oppress them, rebel against them but will eventually come to terms with their warmth, color and grace, as they negotiate their identity outside of the Caribbean and define their citizenship transnationally.

And as Trinidadians transplanted to new multicultural environments in the metropolises, in many ways we are already ahead of the curve when it comes to multi-cultural relations. Our history in the Caribbean, of coming from a plural, come Creole society, has unwittingly prepared us for it.

Our Background

The Caribbean in general, and Trinidad in particular, has a rich cultural history that include contributions from the Dutch, English, Portuguese, French, Spanish as well as the Amerindian, African, Indian, Chinese, Syrian and Lebanese to name but a few. We have never had an official multi-cultural policy, yet as a people we have enjoyed a relatively harmonious existence, with social cohesion. For “Trinis” at home and worldwide, our acceptance of our diversity is our strength. We are the sum total of all our peoples. And in our diversity, we cross pollinate, we share with, and assimilate from each other, while enriching our distinct self, and our collective self. Our interwoven tapestry of cultures has prevented to a large extent, the severity of ethnic clashes as has been seen all over the world. And in a lot of ways, Carnival has been our introduction to cultural harmony by presenting us with an annual opportunity for negotiating identity, belonging and acceptance.

Genesis of Carnival

The social and cultural origins of Trinidad Carnival are varied and are essentially a reflection of the multiethnic composition and history of the society. Carnival is in fact, “*a genuine ancestral Caribbean expression*”(Nettleford). According to Nurse (P.81) “*Carnival is not just about merriment... Carnival is born out of the struggle of marginalized peoples to shape a cultural identity through resistance, liberation and catharsis.*” *It is these values that have facilitated its replication wherever the Caribbean diaspora is found. It has acted as a bond between the diasporic community and those at home, contributing to a pan Caribbean identity.*”

Bakhtin (1984) says that the Carnival employs an esthetic of resistance “*that confronts and subverts hegemonic modes of representation and thus acts as a counter-hegemonic tradition for the contestations and conflicts embodied in constructions of class, nation, race, gender, sexuality and ethnicity*”.

Therefore social conflict is the genesis of Carnival but Carnival also provides the mechanism through which we recognize the mosaic of culture of our rich heritage as indigenous, and integral to the social fabric of Trinidad and Tobago and the wider Caribbean. It allows us, if only for an instant, to be ourselves, see ourselves, play ourselves, while at the very same time allowing others, in the very same space, to do the same exact thing. Distinctly different yet together. And just because we agitate for or from a particular ethnic position, it doesn’t make us any less Trini, just as where we reside, doesn’t make us any less Trini.

Multiculturalism

Oddly enough, recently there has been growing talk of multiculturalism, and of a multi-cultural policy to police the activities of our various peoples locally. But we were multicultural long before it was in style. According to Nurse (P.88) “*Trinidad by the turn of the 20th century was a multi-cultural and diverse ethnic community.*”

Diversity is who we are. It is quantitative. It is defined by otherness. Most obviously it is determined by race, gender, and culture. On a more subtle level it includes class, sexual orientation, religion, ability and appearance. As a democratic nation we define ourselves through diversity. Diversity exists in spite of, and sometimes because of, the actions we take.

Multiculturalism, as an evolving process, is qualitative. It is the shift that occurs when we stop defining everyone by one cultural norm, and move to an understanding of multiple norms. Critical to this process is the breaking down of systemic barriers to equity and justice. Chief among these are the various “isms” such as racism and sexism. Multiculturalism exists only when we make an informed commitment to change.

In Trinidad, daily life revolves around race, class and ethnicity to a large extent only because fundamentalist leaders with clandestine agendas (political, religious, media, big business) seem bent on dividing to conquer, and have perpetuated a system of national patronage based on political, economic and religious affiliations. While at the community level, we continue to live in relative harmony.

Carnival Omniculturalism

In my humble opinion, we are past multi-culturalism and well on our way to omniculturalism. Being twice diasporised, transnational “Trinis” have known this for a long time. Overseas Carnivals, while started by Trinidadian nationals, have taken on an international complexion because its inclusiveness beckons to all that they are welcome. The terms of engagement are constantly in flux as different groups jostle for positions at the carnival table. Some clamor to retain traditional forms while other push for inclusion and change. The overseas Carnival is now shaped by constant negotiations among various interest groups who bring with them, their own distinct cultural traditions and yet find space to include them in the festival. And not only to find space in the festival, but to have them accepted and assimilated by others within that space. The Carnival is then reconstituted to suit the new landscape and lifestyle. The contributions from all the

represented cultures that occupy the inhabited space, transform the Carnival from a Trinidadian or West Indian festival into a heterogeneous festival. Culture is not static. It evolves and changes shape.

Conclusion

The ability of Carnival to cross cultural divides is probably our best hope for the future of Trinidad and Tobago, the Caribbean and its Diaspora. The participation of not only Trinbagonians, but also other Caribbean nationals as well as the host nations, opens up space for creative input from all. In this case diversity is its strength. T&T is not a paradise by any stretch of the imagination. However what we are, is a young nation, who at 49 years young, is still in the process of defining and re-defining our selves, our hopes, dreams and aspirations. The situations we face everyday as a nation are simply a reordering of the status quo in order to better reflect our changing cultural face. I have no illusions about Carnival as a panacea, a cure all for what ails us, however like Carnival, our society must reconstitute to face the new challenges and to suit the changing landscapes in a manner that continues to foster a cohesive heterogeneous society we can be proud of.

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