

Long live the carnival mentality

By MERYL JAMES-BRYAN

THE POPULAR negative perception of the "Carnival mentality" is a perfect example of what seems to be a national tendency to berate, devalue and discredit everything indigenous as irrelevant, second-class, negative, or a non-existent non-starter.

Don't get me wrong. I am by no means condoning the "vie-ky-vie, dat-good-so" attitudes which seem to have tarnished every element of our society, and which are commonly associated with a "carnival mentality." Nor is the intention to discount the serious implication for national development which inheres in such "any-how" attitudes.

What I am submitting is that by blaming all the ills of our society on a "carnival mentality" without focusing on some of its strengths, we run the dangerous risk of negating one of the most powerful and dynamic aspects of our culture, thus throwing out the baby with the bathwater. It's a risk we can ill afford at this crucial point of development of our young nation.

But there's that word "culture" again. Agreeably, a complex, ambiguous term, which to most of us encompasses Holly B's "Scouting for Talent", "Mastana Bahar" and "Best Village" in one feel swoop that leaves us mildly entertained and profoundly unmoved.

Rarely do we see the word "culture" as an all-encompassing structure of knowledge, beliefs, values and attitudes constructed by a people to define themselves.

For to see it thus would force us to rethink our casual acceptance of things like our dialect, cuisine, national



"Play Your Cards Right" emcee Horace James coming down with Minshall's 1984 presentation, *River*.

holidays, music, and that most controversial subject of all, art. It would force upon us a fresh, new perspective of the crucial importance of this thing we glibly call culture in the struggle for redefinition and self-realization of a post-colonial people.

That's some heady stuff that, lo and behold, might actually cause us to acknowledge, accept, understand and like ourselves. Could you imagine, a Trinidad and Tobago sans self-ridicule, self-defilement, self-ignorance and self-confidence, self-reliant and productive.

But are we ready for that, when after 145-200 years of Carnival we choose to see only the negatives in a festivity which embodies our strength, our resilience and our fiery spirituality, and celebrates our lust for freedom, our love of drama in the face of dire difficulty, and our ability and capacity to sustain and overcome in the face of all odds.

But enough abstractions. Fully aware of all the excesses, negatives and wasted energy usually associated with the "Carnival mentality," let's note some of the positives to help explode the myth of the evils of the "Carnival mentality."

Having already de-

fined culture, and I hope those with their carefully structured definitions of Carnival would allow us that Carnival is culture, let's explore some of the strengths of this ritual, which, having been here much longer than almost anything important I could think of, will obviously outlive us all.

Let's look at some of the accoutrements of Carnival. Music, for instance. Carnival time is the only time on which local music enjoys increased air-play on radio stations.

Foreign hit parades become Calypso hit parades, and foreign exchange lost in royalties which the newly-formed Performing Rights Society must send out of the country for imported music stays right here where it belongs, and where it is needed.

Granted, in the overall scheme of things this may well be an insignificant amount; however, it is a major stroke in the continuing fight of local versus foreign. Increased purchasing of local records also means a "raise" for our calypsonians, and by extension, assuming that the money is spent in this country, a "raise" for us all.

The same applies for calypso tents which boost employment for calypsonians, musicians, chuck-outers, et al. We can go on and on with

the business of mas-makers, hoteliers and tourism-related industries. But, that's the hard, cold, dollars and sense aspect of the promotion of local music and carnival as foreign-exchange earner and economy-expander.

The concern here is the socio-cultural strength and value of carnival. Let's note, for example, the opportunity afforded responsible calypsonians to utilize their art and craft to inspire us in "Nature's Plan", for all its fatalism, to "hold on ... if yuh let go yuh lost;" to address the pervasive insensitivity and callous individualism of our upwardly mobile, reminding, as Poser does, that "the higher yuh climb, the harder you go fall;" to join Penman in a declaration of our patriotism, and to educate our youth on the evils of drug abuse, a task Explainer ably accomplishes.

Sure, there is vulgarity in calypso, some so barefaced that they lack even the creative cover of the double entendre. But this is a quest for positives ... remember? And calypso as oral literature attempts to declare and define ourselves.

And even, when we seek fantasy and crown surrealism in Carnival, it is our calypso that keeps us in touch with reality, amidst the delirium of Carnival Monday and Tuesday. For as V.S. Naipaul acknowledges, "It is only in the calypso that the Trinidadian touches reality."

It is impossible to address the positives in the "Carnival mentality" without turning to the steelband, although, sadly, the historical association of carnival and steelband may soon be history itself. Yet, de-

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spite its dying presence on carnival days, Panorama remains a part of the carnival mentality of which we can be most proud.

The discipline, tenacity, hours of painful practicing and dedication, the pursuit of excellence, and the sheer genius and team spirit of pannists must not only be applauded. They must be emulated.

And if the powerful Carnival spirit carries a hex, may it be that we Trinbagians, individually and collectively, be inextricably "fixed" by the same spell cast on Panorama pannists.

Don't forget, our very acceptance and appreciation of the steelband are so new, that perhaps we are still reluctant to believe ourselves capable of such beauty, perfection and precision, and would rather the Germans or some other external force relieve us of it, and claim the glories of its origin for themselves.

It is a risk we ought not to take lightly. Fortunately we can still be treated to the excellence of the steelband outside of Carnival, now that Kirpalani has been called in, giving some validity to Chalkie's political cheek.

There are many of us who take lightly the elaborate preparation that goes into the production of bands, and ignore the fastidiousness and meticulousness with which bandleaders ap-

proach their work. The underlying assumption here is that there is an inherent flexibility and disorganization in Carnival which accounts for the Carnival mentality.

Consequently, if one spear is four inches longer than the other, or one wing is a different shade of purple ... no problem, because is Carnival, right?

Peter Minshall buried that misconception recently, when he related an incident that occurred years ago when he "designed" for a band. In the heat of an argument over cost versus creativity when he refused to sacrifice his art, a friend, attempting to mediate the conflict, gently said: "Oh gosh, Peter. Wha happen. Is only mas."

That, to hear him tell it, was the last straw. "Is then Ah start to get on bad," he volunteered in characteristic Minshallese. "Could you imagine ... our one big opportunity to display our creativity, using our own art form, and we saying 'is only mas.'"

Here's a man who is so hopelessly "fixed" with the Carnival mentality, that he dares to present mas as a mobile art form for the basis of his proposal to the internationally prestigious Guggenheim Foundation for a research award, and wins the coveted prize.

It is this self-confidence, this self-realization and self-praise of our local art and culture which become the core of a positive Carnival

mentality, and which we must sharpen and nurture if we are to survive as a people and a nation.

It is this ability to take ourselves seriously which we must insist on at every level, if we expect others to take us seriously. It is this projection of ourselves as thoughtful, serious people in tune with our art forms and our culture that will project us as a people with direction, in control of our destiny.

Such an image would nullify aspersions of "non-policy" and "decisions by fluke" when our government makes serious, well-thought-out and internationally-claimed decisions on regional politics. It is the struggle for freedom, and the freedom from bondage and captivity in all its traditional and modern versions that is the soul of carnival and the "carnival mentality" which we too loudly deny.

Enough sociologists, socio-psychologists, anthropologists, journalists et al have elaborated on the unifying force of Carnival as ritual to cause even the most cynical among us to lend some credence to this theory. I know, I know ... Trinidad, as stratified by race, class, ethnicity and means, is still visible in carnival bands, and any erasure of the socio-economic barriers is pretty much temporary.

Still, if carnival men-

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talities is responsible for our annual abandonment of callous snootiness, silly airs and crass insensitivity, arrogance and superiority, then may we forever wallow in a "carnival mentality."

If it allows us to "free up ourselves" in a mass liberation from foreign values, ideas and attitudes which we continually refuse to intercept through studied recognition, appraisal and channelling of our cultural selves, then may we effectively utilize the "carnival mentality" to tolerate and discipline ourselves and to produce both quality and quantity.

If, for us women, it is a temporary reprieve from the constraints, restraints and the stress of life in an archaic, male-dominated society, then let's wine, but decently. Let us look for the beauty, skill and grace in our African-influenced dance, not the vulgarity imposed by those who see it through European eyes.

The "Carnival mentality" as an indomitable force vitale that returns our self-exiled native sons and daughters is one to celebrate. It must force us to contemplate the brain drain, so characteristic of developing countries that these "foreign locals" represent.

It must compel us, to



Juba Youth Pan Groove were third in the Pan-Round-The-Neck Panorama Prelims at the Queen's Park Savannah on Friday night.

devise mechanisms for repatriating these external achievers and for creating the atmosphere which would enable them to make meaningful contributions here at home where they are most needed.

If we could employ this "Carnival mentality" as a national balm to quell our sado-masochistic inclinations, if we could only stretch it out beyond the season to end petty jealousies, rivalries and vicious crab antics, if we could use it for construction instead of

destruction, for helping instead of harming, for the collective good over the selfish individualism, then our year-round mas would be one of harmony, not havoc; goodwill and true nation-building instead of mistrust and paprapnoia.

Let us then look to Carnival as our national bush bath ... a ritual purging and cleansing as we submit ourselves to total immersion in our indigenous culture. As we celebrate this 101st, 145th, 150th or 201st Carnival, let us think for

a quick minute of the power of this festival which defied its detractors, its critics and those who wished to limit its direction, thwart its development and stamp out its very existence.

The positives in the "Carnival mentality" are probably our only reliable natural resources. Let's develop and use it wisely and constructively instead of doing what we do best, "ponging" it to death. Let us see carnival for what it is, a mirror in which our complex reflections parade before us for two days.

Let us hold our mas-makers, calypsonians and other exponents of our culture responsible for the images we project, so that on seeing those images, we will not be so disenchanted or dismayed by a brutality that forces us underground like Minshall's "Mancrab."

Let us, however, keep looking, seeing, changing, improving, developing and moulding those images until we see reflected images we can proudly claim. For therein lies the real power of the "Carnival mentality", the power of intellectual daring and creative action.

"PAN SHOOT-OUT"
SUN. FEB. 26

CARNIVAL-CITY

SPARROW'S HIDEAWAY

CLASH

OF THE