



Photo by Herb Jones

CARNIVAL TALK: Mrs. Muriel Donawa-McDavids on, Parliamentary Secretary for Youth Affairs, (with handbag on lap) among the audience listening to Dr. Hill as he lectures on the history of Carnival. Several Roman Catholic nuns are also in the audience.

HISTORY OF CARNIVAL

Dr. Hill says steelband caused true cohesion of all classes

By ROBERT LUCAS

DR. ERROL HILL, Trinidad-born Professor of Drama at Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, United States, sees the steelband as being the cause of what he calls "a true cohesion of all classes in the Carnival celebrations."

He told this to a packed hall at the Public Library, Port-of-Spain, on Wednesday night, in the first of four lectures entitled: "Trinidad Carnival, Mandate for a National Theatre," sponsored by the Public Library.

Wednesday night's lecture, entitled "The History of Carnival," traced the influence of French-speaking planter immigrants on Trinidad Carnival nearly 200 years ago; the clearly social separation of Carnival in the early days, and the influences of the freed slave population in the equalisation of Carnival as we know it today.

Dr. Hill said that once the steelband had overcome initial hostility, the "magnetic pull of this great invention" caused everybody to "jump in the line and shake their bodyline in time."

The "magnetic pull" Dr. Hill saw in a literate sense. The coming of steelband music, he said, proved "irresistible." So much so in fact that the drawbacks of jumping to the music "while riding on a Carnival float"—a pretentious caution by "dainty-footed brown skin girls" who came to earth when darkness fell ("what happened in the general jump-up on the streets was nobody's business but their own")—were soon set aside for complete involvement.

Maturity

Dr. Hill also credited for this cohesion of Carnival the "political maturity of the country," which manifested itself in the election of the first party government in our history; and the resounding theme of "all ah we is one," in knitting the people together to make the Trinidad Carnival the outstanding festival it has become.

Earlier on, in tracing the history of Carnival, Dr. Hill said that by 1797, when the Spanish capitulated to the British, there were 18,000 people, 90 per cent of them Spanish-speaking settlers and their slaves.

Quoting the historian, Pierre Borde, Dr. Hill said that

Carnival at that time lasted from Christmas to Ash Wednesday "merely one long succession of feats and amusements enjoyed in the most lively manner."

He said the Carnival was an European import via the islands to the north, celebrated chiefly by European colonists and their descendants.

But it was not to remain so for long. The Carnival "underwent a complete metamorphosis, a rebirth, resulting from peculiar historical and social pressures of the nineteenth century" said Dr. Hill.

The effect of all this was to make the Carnival "essentially a local product in form, content and inner significance."

But, he said, the population cedula was not wholly a blessing—"depending on your point of view."

Strong will

Quoting Claude Hollis's "Brief history of Trinidad under the Spanish crown"—though some of the settlers were of good type, others were of an undesirable character; each immigrant sought to bring with him as many slaves as possible on account of the additional land he could acquire; and slaves deported from other places were welcomed in Trinidad.

"Trinidad in fact became a refuge for the riff-raff of the Southern Caribbean."

"Bearing in mind that we are dealing with a colonial, slave-owning society, these-called riff-raff must have been men of strong will, courage and ingenuity."

"I often wonder if this was not the beginning of all our troubles, that the Trinidad society was forged from independent-minded outlaws who would neither be pushed around nor herded under a nationalist banner;"

The coming of the British further led to an increase and diversification of national groupings and by 1850, we had "a society composed of a galaxy of social groupings, artificially structured, the broad mass of which comprised two numerically strong segments hostile to the established system."

Carnival, said Dr. Hill "the traditional leveller of social distinctions, was incompatible with the society as existed at the time."

It was one of two things: It had either to die or to change its character. The former "honest prediction" belonged to the upper classes. But it was not to be so.

Carnival continued until emancipation and beyond to be a thing for the upper classes. "The free coloured were ignored; they could amuse themselves as they wished, provided they kept in their place as second class citizens. The black slaves, of course, had no place at all in the festival."

No mixing

Against this background came canboulay, which Dr. Hill said "qualifies as the first indigenous aspect of Trinidad Carnival."

But the emergence of the coloured masses in the festival served only to cause the elite to withdraw. "So long as the elite had the Carnival to themselves, street revels were in order."

But there could be no mixing with coloureds and erstwhile slaves." The elite were forced to withdraw as the masses took over, which caused the leading newspaper of the day to campaign for its abolition.

Carnival was then referred to as "a wretched buffonery tending to brutalize the faculty of the lower order of our population."

Nineteen years later, it was "an annual abomination." In 1963, "a licensed exhibition of wild excesses." In 1874 "a diabolical festival"; and in 1884 "a fruitful source of demoralisation throughout the whole country."

But the tune was soon to change. Four years short of 1900 Carnival was approved in the same journal... "most successful and one of the pleasant features was the number from the upper classes who joined in the celebration of the custom."

Dr. Hill pointed out that the

change of tune was shortlived, for the newspaper went back to its former theme and continued its attack on the moral and sociological values of the festival "into the 1930s."

The lecturer said that Carnival had become, through canboulay, "not merely a season for frivolous enjoyment" but one of "ritualistic significance."

Dr. Hill touched on stick-fighting and the early Carnival bands of this century and concluded that the carnival struggle over the years was one of "freedom... freedom of expression."

"I make bold to say, without fear of contradiction, that our Carnival is the greatest annual national festival to be found anywhere on this planet."