

Keep Calm and Let People Enjoy de Ting

KEEP CALM AND LET PEOPLE ENJOY DE TING: TRINIDAD CARNIVAL IN GLOBAL SPACES

Joanne Briggs

PhD Candidate, The University of the West Indies, St Augustine.

Joanne Briggs is a fourth year Ph.D. Candidate with a keen interest in the global movement of the contemporary Trinidad Carnival. A die-hard masquerader and passionate about the Carnival artform, Joanne was a journalist with 20 years' experience. During that time, she often explored aspects of T&T cultural identity.

ABSTRACT

Meanings, practices, and symbolism...are anything but fixed (Kelvin Yelvington, 2003). Yelvington's point of view on the movement of culture across geographical as well as invisible borders, encapsulates the trends affecting the Trinidad Carnival. While it has touched (Trinidad) diaspora spaces such as Brooklyn, Leeds, and Toronto, the cultural consumption of Trinidad Carnival has spread to sites where there are little to no connection to the root. Globalisation therefore explains the movement of one culture from its base, to settle to another site. It is in that crossing, the Trinidad Carnival is mitigated to suit its new space. Africa and Japan are examples of such connections. This paper explores these two sites, in an attempt to highlight how the Trinidad Carnival, as a transnational product, is now consumed and presented. This paper also attempts to address a fervent concern that arises when the Trinidad Carnival travels to unfamiliar sites.

Keywords: Trinidad Carnival, consumption, transnational, movement, culture panic

Introduction

The title of my paper is youthful at best, using a trending social media meme to connect two perspectives on the movement of the Trinidad¹ Carnival beyond physical and invisible borders. The first perspective noted is the interaction with cultures that have no diasporic (Trinidad) connection. I use Trinidad diaspora in this context to emphasise the roots of this cultural product and explain the cultural flows between the two Continents in question – Asia and Africa. The second perspective is directly related to the instruction to Keep Calm, to assuage what could be seen as fervent concern when people within Trinidad diaspora react when someone outside the local borders attempt to emulate or produce something that is related to the Carnival product.

¹ While it is understood that the Carnival emanates from the country Trinidad and Tobago, the reference to the Carnival traditions and products are directed at Trinidad.

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I begin with the latter, actually, as it seems to be a more comfortable entry for my discussion. Perhaps it has to do with the fervent concern which has been articulated incessantly over the years and requires just as much exploration as the discovery of the interactions in other countries. Yet, I do take heed from Carnival scholar Garth Green² who points out that one can make judgements but still understand the purpose of the action. I often find myself in that dual circumstance, but the judgement is related to people's reaction to "an intrusion" which can be a bit too high-pitched to the point of cacophony and at the same time acknowledging the reason for the concern.

Take for example, the use of the word J'ouvert. For many Carnivalists, the word is a sacred word/verb that connects the roots of the Trinidad Carnival tradition – as a celebration of rebelling against colonial restrictions which disallowed the enslaved from performing their own masquerade and more importantly, initiated the fight for emancipation – to a rite of passage, a liberation of self under the (un)masking in a musical street procession that greets the sunrise. But when US actor Michael B. Jordan introduced his rum labelled J'ouvert on social media, it was not well-received in the Trinidad space. Some of the reactions collected by one national newspaper³, reflected the following:

"One man said, "The name, the name, the name is a problem sir! How you going to trademark this? We need to contest this. This cannot pass."

One woman said, "Who gave him permission? Has he ever been to Trinidad, or even played J'Ouvert?"

...One woman mused, "We look for dat. This is what happens when we are consistently ambivalent about our culture, largely ignore its historical, spiritual and ideological significance.""
(Trinidad Newsday, June 21, 2021)

In that same article, the reporter also added the voice of an intellectual property expert who explained the word J'ouvert used in the context of a rum's name held no power nor property over the performance of the pre-dawn Carnival ritual. Yet, the fervent concern was relentless until Jordan offered an apology and considered another name for his spirits. While my voice did not join the overwhelming verbal petition to stop Jordan (because I disagreed with the pitch), I also understood the cause for concern.

² In his article, "Authenticity and the Construction of Identity in Trinidad Carnival" (2005), Green mentions that even in the discussion about Carnival's quality of events, he does not mean "to suggest that one cannot make judgements about the relative quality of Carnival events, practices or components." (310)

³"Controversy brews over Michael B Jordan's J'Ouvert rum." Trinidad Newsday, June 21, 2021

As it relates to my doctoral research on the interactions of the Carnival products in non-diaspora spaces, I could not help but notice similar tensions as I explore the Carnival exchanges with Japan. As I interrogate this relationship, I have come to the realisation that a lack of understanding could lead to accusatory concerns. Just like the discussion on J’ouvert rum, these concerns are often voiced in social, informal conversations about taking Trinidad Carnival to the global stage and the need to protect its artforms. In this case, comments made by Dean Ackin, owner of the Trinidad Carnival conglomerate Ultimate Events (producer of the popular Carnival bands Tribe, Bliss, and Lost Tribe; and host of a series of parties during the season), expressing his worry over of the direction pan was headed, his wariness about Japan’s interest in the T&T cultural product, peaked my interest. At the launch of a Carnival conference titled CarniCon, in Port of Spain in 2019, Ackin noted that “(steel)pan is recognised in Japan” and that they (the Japanese) may take it away from the home of its birth because Trinidad does not have the patent. It was mere coincidence that I was present at the launch to hear him say this. But his public comments resonated as an undeniable concern. Understandably, we the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago hold on to Carnival with a sense of national pride and identity. Like all involved in the production of the national festival, there is a tendency to view the development of the carnival product outside familiar borders as an invasion.

Coming back to Green, he suggests that culture panic may evoke such thoughts. “The fear is that Trinidad will not receive proper credit for what it has contributed to the world.” (Green 2005,) He also noted that in 1993 and the following year:

“news stories about Germans, Swedes, Japanese or Canadians using their financial resources to formalise and standardize the methods of constructing pans. The origins and methods of making, tuning and playing pan, calypso and Carnival itself all seem to suffer from inadequate publicity.” (Green 2005,)

However, it is my view that there needs to be some analysis of the action before a concrete conclusion of appropriation is made. That is where the challenge lies as the frequent reaction is to go into an immediate state of culture panic before the information is properly processed. In the context of the movement of a cultural product(s) from one border to the next, I agree with anthropologist Kevin Yelvington when he says that “meanings, practices, and symbolisation...are anything but fixed.” (Yelvington 2003, ix) In other words, what they represent as the root, could hold different meanings in the new space. Nonetheless, for a community looking at the movement from homebase, it could be difficult to accept that the traditions and rituals, even in their contemporary form, are changing the further they travel.

My paper offers initial thoughts on this movement as it asks the question: How do we, meaning Trinidadians (and Tobagonians), mitigate cultural consumption of the Trinidad Carnival when it makes landfall in non-diasporic spaces? To answer this

question, I will share my early findings in my research on Japan to unpack some meanings of the interactions of the Trinidad Carnival. While I have mentioned the movement of the Trinidad Carnival to Africa, I explain further here that I will use the performance of the Trinidad Carnival in Lagos, Nigeria based on my earlier post-graduate research, as a parallel to how the Carnival product is viewed and presented. While it is known that the roots of the Trinidad Carnival is based on the traditions of Africa, the product that is presented at the University of Lagos is not African but Trinidadian/Caribbean. To add, since this research ventures on new ground and source gathering continues, I rely on qualitative methods rather than quantitative data to reflect trends in the consumption in both Japan and Nigeria to offer what I have so far. In this case, initial discussion notes, third-person narratives already in the public domain, as well as previous research, serve as the information to ground this discussion.

Identity, Globalisation, and Appropriation

I return to the opening of my abstract, as it serves as the anchor for the theoretical framework here. In this case, Yelvington's point of view on cultural flows allows for further analysis under identity and globalisation. Breaking it down further, there is also consideration for the topics of cultural essentialism and cultural appropriation.

I turn to cultural theorist Stuart Hall first, to grasp identity. I lean on his work, "The Local and the Global: Globalisation and Ethnicity," and his idea of an unattainable singular identity as it relates to the "turning world" (Hall 1997, 22). I agree there is a juxtaposition of the expectation that identities remain the stable tangibles of the past while the world's incessant movement makes room for new ones. Therefore, within the constant push and pull, I acknowledge the formulation of identity will always be multi-faceted. What is striking here to me is Hall's warning that in such movement, there may be a retreat to exclusionist and defensive enclaves (Hall 1997, 36). The exclusivity of which Hall speaks, connects with the conversations on culture panic mentioned earlier in my introduction.

Based on that, I detect a conjecture between identity and globalisation. Hall supports my argument that the permeation of cultural borders contributes to the development of an identity while it is rejected by those who believe its original form should be the only recognised form. But I also agree with Hall's counterargument that a position must be taken, "it cannot be unplaced" (Hall 1997, 36). This is where the problem space lies, as one position does not speak for all positions. While there must be a grounding, even that is not the final conclusion:

"Do they (the position) have to be trapped in the place from which they begin to speak? Is it going to become another exclusive set of local identities? ... There is a part to be learned about...and has to be grasped as a history...it is grasped through memory...it is grasped through reconstruction" (Hall 1997, 36-38).

Globalisation theorist Arjun Appadurai helps me to seek clarity in the position I have begun to develop. In his discourse on globalisation, I immediately connect with his suggestion of the imagined space as the platform for receiving new ideas: “The imagination has become an organised field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labour and culturally organized practice) and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility” (Appadurai 2005, 31). While the imagination of which he speaks has greater significance than a simple escape or an elite pastime, I agree the imagination allows for the inclusion of a new cultural interaction. What I gathered from Appadurai, is that there is no limitation to how the new host receives the cultural source. A linear view inhibits the understanding of the connection; therefore, it cannot be derived by simply acknowledging the locations but there must be a granular approach, an in-depth understanding, which explores how the new host engages with the cultural source.

But the challenge here, I believe, is marking the starting points and trajectories. If it is not linear, how is the interaction situated or should flexibility be considered in such movement? I go back to Hall’s reasoning that there must be some grounding. But I also consider Appadurai’s view in which he notes that points of departure and points of arrival are in flux (Appadurai 2005, 44). Agreed, fluidity becomes a push and pull challenge when one tries to locate the habitus and finds instead, representation. Appadurai’s framework for such exploration looks at five dimensions of global cultural flows, but two dimensions stand out as it relates to this research – technoscapes and mediascapes. In the former, technology moves at high speeds across various kinds of impervious boundaries (Appadurai 2005, 34) and in the latter, global audiences experience media as a complex interconnection of print, celluloid, electronic screens, and billboards (Appadurai 2005, 34). These dimensions have similar characteristics as they are able to penetrate physical and invisible borders. Yet, there is a caveat which lies in the blurred lines between realistic and fictional landscapes. Consequently, the farther away audiences are from direct experiences, the more likely they are to construct an imagined one, thereby creating a new narrative.

I suspect that even in the new narrative, tensions arise in groundings and authenticity. Peter Scher’s discourse on cultural appropriation sees a negative outcome for this conflict between true and the authentic. He acknowledges that among the effects of cultural appropriation is a degradation which harms “the appropriated community at the level of integrity and identity of the local group” and can “damage, distort or change a given cultural good or practice itself” (Scher 2010, 163). I agree, the appropriators will feel the brunt of unnecessary ridicule and as a result the appropriated would have lost the battle to establish foundation.

Erich Matthes, whose scholarship focuses of ethics on cultural heritage, also gave me food for thought as he pinpoints caution must be taken while policing boundaries. Therefore, the contention here is discerning cultural appropriation. To be clear, I note the general understanding that cultural appropriation is objectionable when

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a member of a dominant cultural group appropriates from a member of a marginalised group. However, I am intrigued by Matthes' view that the practice of distinguishing insiders (the marginalised group) from outsiders (the dominant group) and resulting objections may lead to an essentialist conception of culture (Matthes 2016, 356). He says it is more than unjust credibility, in the context of one culture claiming the culture of the other, but a strong, possibly emotive, assertion to discern authenticity and "disenfranchise those who do not meet all the relevant criteria" (Matthes 2016, 355). Hence my reference to high-pitched cacophony as I have noticed in some informal conversations I have experienced, the emotive assertion and often times this distracts from objecting to the act of expression and unnecessarily targets the worthiness of the individual performing the act.

Therefore, I agree that the attempt to marginalise and purge for essentialism's sake often derails the original objection to outright theft or cultural degradation which denies a group of both its heritage and its ability to express an authentic, separate identity (Scher 2010, 163). But as Matthes points out, in some cases there is "no morally unique harm" (Matthes 2016, 364) if less attention is paid to such individual acts of cultural appropriation and focus is placed on the broader problem. I can argue here that cultural appreciation can be allowed a space amidst such tensions as it has much to do with performance than it has to do with claiming the culture.

The Japanese Way

I noticed a blossoming cultural connection between Japan and Trinidad and Tobago during my career as a newspaper journalist. Then, I was very much intrigued by the Japanese presence in our Carnival space specifically, in the participation in our heavily-contested Panorama steelpan competition. I was genuinely fascinated by the interest of a people, separated by thousands of miles and possibly two time zones, who made the effort to come to Trinidad to learn more about this locally created instrument. My fascination heightened when I saw International Dancehall Queen, Junko performing at Machel Montano⁴'s Alternative Concept 4 (2004) on the Monday before the frenzied Carnival days of masquerade. I was surprised to know the woman in the spotlight, who performed splits and was wining on her head, was an Asian woman. Likewise, Minmi (Michiko Ewana) was the first Japanese woman to appear on the International Soca Monarch⁵ stage in 2007 with Sha Na Na (Japanese Wine), a duet she recorded with Montano (Book of Angels, 2007). But as I delved more in the ground work for this research, I realised the interconnectivity between Japan and Trinidad occurred much

⁴ Machel Montano is revered as soca royalty, having won the International Soca Monarch title and the highly competitive Road March on numerous occasions. He is a top-tier performer who has successfully made an enriching career in the artform.

⁵ International Soca Monarch or ISM is an annual soca music competition, with the best soca performers vying for the title of top performer. The finals are held on every Carnival Friday, fondly known as Fantastic Friday in Trinidad and Tobago. The competition was cancelled in 2003 with a hope to return in 2024

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earlier, meaning there were interactions long before my curiosity tuned in on these aforementioned movements. What I have also noticed was that connection at that time was emanating from Trinidad. Based on what I have discovered thus far, the cultural flow was initiated as far back as the 1960s. The steelpan and mas, in particular, were already the transmitters.

At this point, I refer to my initial discussion with Trinidad ethnomusicologist Mia Gormandy who has researched the adoption of the steelpan instrument in Japan. She revealed that the steelpan movement to Japan started in the 1960s, with Trinidad performers offering the music at niche establishments. In her research, Gormandy notes:

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the presence of steelpan in Japan was limited to performances by visiting bands from overseas and special interest publications that did shed unprecedented light on Trinidad and Tobago and its rich steelpan culture, but without generating a local Japanese steelpan culture per se, or even direct steelpan/Caribbean marks of influence in popular or other types of Japanese music.”

(Gormandy 2017, 28)

But it was in the 1990s, around the time I noted the Japanese presence in the Trinidad steelpan landscape, that Gormandy notes “Japanese musicians and bands themselves started to shape the contemporary musicultural world of pan in Japan.” (Gormandy 2017, 22) At her last count, there are some 40 bands spread across the country with Tokyo, Yokohama, and Osaka, as homes to several bands. (Gormandy 2017, 2)

I now turn to the movement of mas and the interest in the portrayal of Japanese culture. What is of interest here is while the steelpan seemed to have been initiated in Japan, the exchange in the masquerade seems to have been initiated in Trinidad. The first siting was in 1964 when Trinidadian Stephen Lee Heung, a revered band leader at the time, presented Japan: The Land of the Kabuki. He used this presentation to announce his foray in large band production. In his writings about the late mas man, researcher Ray Funk explained that the idea of the band came from Lee Heung’s wife Elsie. The presentations of other bands at that time were fixated on themes that interpreted cultures from other countries. Lee Heung himself had produced smaller bands titled Tutankhamen (1946), and King Bangkok of Siam (1947). But with Japan: The Land of the Kabuki, Lee Heung and his mas production team were “aiming at authenticity” (Tang and Funk 2014, 104). With support from the Japanese Chamber of Commerce and the Japanese Ambassador based in Venezuela, the band replicated elements of Japanese culture and featured sections that included the Maiko of Kyoto, the Odun Odori Festival, the Shinto priests of Nara, the Imperial court at Edo, the Dragon Boat of Nagasaki, Kabuki actors, dancing geishas, and court ladies.



Figure 1: Masqueraders from Stephen Lee Heung’s *Japan – Land of the Kabuki*.
Photo courtesy: Tang and Funk 2014

Six decades later, a young band led by seasoned mas producers, Kinetic Mas presented Yōsoko (which mean Welcome in Japanese) for Trinidad Carnival. Peter Samuel, a legendary King of Carnival-now band leader, said the decision to go with a Japanese theme was based on his love for Japanese culture. In an online media interview⁶, following the formal launch of the band, he shared he had been to Japan twice and had been “blown away by Japanese culture and decided to focus on that to bring back some creativity in the mas.” (LoopTT, July 13, 2023) The costumes seem to depict Japanese culture, with a fashionable outlook. In another newspaper article, he responds to concerns that the band’s portrayal may have been an insult to Japan, by saying “That’s why I laugh when I go on Facebook and see people saying that we have offended the Japanese culture.” (Trinidad Express, January 27, 2024) Like Lee Heung, Samuel received diplomatic support from the Japanese Embassy. Representatives from the Port of Spain mission advised on costume considerations, ensuring they did not encroach on rituals that were spiritual. In addition, the Japanese Ambassador and his wife, played with the band.

⁶ “Kinetic Mas says farewell to T-shirt mas and welcome to Japan for 2024” (LoopTT, July 13, 2023)



Figure 2: Geishas of Kinetic Mas' Yōsoko. Photo Courtesy: Kinetic Mas

While the interest for Japanese culture may have been triggered in Trinidad, on the other side the Pacific Ocean, there is a developing interest in creating a Trinidad Carnival-styled procession. Soca in Japan, a Tokyo-based group, has been behind these instances. In existence since 2015, the group has used soca and feteing (the party aspect of the T&T Carnival) as the core of its mini events that take place annually in September. In 2018, it expanded its series of activities to include its own version of “J’ouvert,” as participants enjoy dancing in mud and sprayed with coloured dyes – very similar to the J’ouvert parties that are hosted in Trinidad outside the Carnival season. The J’ouvert event is meant to attract Carnival enthusiasts from T&T and the Caribbean to visit and participate in the activities in Japan. In 2019, Soca in Japan was announced as part of the international Carnival calendar. 2023 was its maiden year producing a road experience meant to mirror the Carnival Tuesday mas and procession found in T&T and other Carnivals in the Caribbean. While the costumes offered a contemporary feel, much like the bikini, beads and feathers that are seen in the Trinidad Carnival, the Japanese culture was still reflected in its designs. The band’s title was Land of the Rising Sun, with each of the seven sections portraying Japanese Gods.



Figure 3: Costume from the section Tsukuyomi, from Land of the Rising Sun.
Photo courtesy: Soca In Japan.

Through the Streets of Unilag

At the University of Lagos, the interest in the Trinidad Carnival was meant to showcase African and Caribbean identity. Dubbed the Unilag-Africaribbean Carnival and Festivals, it was established in 2005 and allowed third year students of the Creative Arts Department of the University of Lagos (Unilag) to present bands depicting different Caribbean countries. Founder Dr Cornelius Onyekaba said the Unilag-Africaribbean Carnival has become one of the most anticipated cultural events in Lagos State. His undergraduate exposure to Caribbean literature and culture through a former lecturer opened the path to exploration. In addition, Onyekaba said he learned more about Trinidad Carnival culture, calypso and mas while doing research for his BA Long Essay. Onyekaba's knowledge of Trinidad-style Carnival goes beyond basic research. In 2013, he was invited by the University of the West Indies' Creative and Festival Arts

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Department at the St Augustine campus to witness the Trinidad Carnival. The exposure allowed him to develop and infuse new ideas in his presentations

A newspaper magazine described the event this way:

As the carnival train moved round (sic) the campus, visitors, students, lecturers and staff of the institution were seen peeping through the windows of offices and cars to have a glance at the colourful parade; some even stopped and parked their cars to take pictures of the carnival team. (The Guardian Life Magazine, November 28, 2009)

Its movement is very similar to the Trinidad Carnival procession which is seen through the streets of Port of Spain. At the time of this particular research, I noted that the fusion of Caribbean elements including that of Trinidad and Tobago gave this independent festival its attractiveness. I have also come to realise that this Carnival procession is a form of pedagogy, a learning platform to celebrate the Caribbean and South American countries as the third-year students research and analyse the parallels between the carnival cultures of Nigeria and across the Middle Passage.

However, there are limitations in the adaptation of the Trinidad Carnival. Onyekaba said if Trinidad organisers expect the Trinidad-styled carnival to thrive in Lagos, there are cultural disparities that must be acknowledged. This includes minimal costuming of the women and public wining which are frowned upon by traditional religions, as well as by Islam and Christianity. Therefore it is safe to conclude that in order for the Carnival to be truly welcomed, it must be localised.

The transfer of the Trinidad culture at Unilag served two roles – to reconnect with an ancestral link, provide an understanding of other elements of the African Diaspora and learn more about the Trinidad and Caribbean Diaspora. Again, Yelvington comes to mind as movement of the Trinidad Carnival to Lagos demonstrates that as culture moves, it does not remain the same from whence it originated. Unlike the cultural flows between Trinidad and Japan, there is a distinct positioning that may be perceived as restrictive rather than fluid.



Figure 4: The carnival queen of Trinidad and Tobago leads her section. Her costume allows her to be modestly attired. The masqueraders behind her, although with costumed with less detail, are also covered. (Courtesy: Unilag Carnival)

Conclusion

The ideas expressed here are still under development. As initial findings, however, they have highlighted key concepts and provided responses to this paper's initial question on mitigating cultural consumption in non-diasporic spaces.

I add a confession here that upon noticing the trends in Japan between the 1990s and present, I was solely of the belief that the Japanese attraction to the Trinidad Carnival products was first initiated by the action of *iitoko dori*, which authors on contemporary Japanese culture, Roger Davies and Osamu Ikeno explain is based on Japan's a long-established tradition of adopting elements of "foreign culture" and adapting them to Japanese use. They add that the origins of this tradition can be traced to Japanese religious beliefs, in particular when the earliest religions of Shinto and Buddhism were able to exist harmoniously without conflict or tension. (Davies and Ikeno 2002, 128). But looking at the other instances of this cultural exchange, it seems to me that Trinidad performers may have been first to drop these breadcrumbs of interest because of their physical presence in a new space.

Regardless of what action came first or where the Trinidad Carnival has landed in Japan or Nigeria, even as culture moves and changes its dimension across borders, the commonality is the existence of freedom of expression and enjoyment. At the same time, what is noted is the digestible elements that allow the easy transport of the Carnival products from one side of the globe to the next.

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Perhaps this outlook is what cultural studies scholar Suzanne Burke was referencing in her observation of the overseas Carnivals:

“...inherent universalism of Carnival’s core values that reverberate with people everywhere...seen as a magical mirror that has the power to reflect the values of any society it inhabits, and provide a space for unbridled self-expression.” (Burke 2008, 81)

Therefore, the unidirectional cultural flows as presented here seem to be more of cultural adaptation and cultural appreciation in this context.

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