

Introduction: Carnivals, Festivals, and Pan-Africanism

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In any culture, festive events are often far more than simple opportunities to feast and celebrate. They can also be focal points for political or cultural movements, a chance to speak and act in ways that may be forbidden or limited in non-festive times. In the Caribbean, with its particular history of slavery and crosscultural encounter, festivities were often highly policed, explosive points in the calendar. Slave dances were breaks in the repetitive routine of the plantation, and chances to breach temporarily the strict colonial authority, in which the threat of retributive violence was ever fused with the equally strong need to escape the rigors of everyday life through festive activities.

One such festive insurgency occurred Christmas 1805, on the Shand Estate in Carenage, west of Port of Spain, Trinidad. The historian Edward Lanzer Joseph writes of a conspiracy among some French and African slaves, who, he says, “meditated on the destruction of all the white men, and the dishonour of all the white women on the island.” Convinced of the authenticity of the plot, the Governor and planters had the conspirators tried; found guilty, four slaves were executed, others were flogged and banished, while more still were “disgustingly mutilated” (Joseph 229–30). The Caribbean roots of pan-African festivals may be found in incidents like this, which brought together Creoles and African-born enslaved persons at a time of festivity and breached the precarious order of the colonial society.

The most enduring of these Caribbean festivals is the Carnival, perhaps most significantly so in Trinidad, with its long history of pre-Lenten celebration. Although the

enslaved did take part in the Carnival before Emancipation, it was in the 1830s that the newly freed black population truly asserted its place in the festivity. The same period saw increasing official control of the Carnival, exemplified in an Ordinance issued in 1837, which restricted the playing of certain musical instruments, namely “any drum, gong, tambour, bangee, or chac–chac in any house, outhouse, building or yard.” Thus was confirmed the colonial anxiety over black festivity, and in particular the ways in which it feared music and dance had the capacity to undermine the order that generally prevailed at other times of the year. The long history of post-Emancipation Carnival is full of other examples of this white, colonial anxiety over black festivals, and indeed of incidents that demonstrate the black population’s ability to channel political and social frustrations into festive events such as Carnival. These festivals were also precursors to other pan-Caribbean events such as CARIFESTA, which in turn shares a lineage with other contemporary festivals, such as the First World Festival of Black and African Culture (*Premier Festival Mondial des arts nègres*) that was held in Dakar, Senegal, in April 1966, and which brought together thousands of artists, musicians, performers and writers from across Africa and its diaspora. On a far broader scale, and with a transnational set of participants, the Dakar festival sought, like the earlier Caribbean festivals, to perform an emerging pan-African culture, a sense of solidarity at a charged time of decolonization, Civil Rights, and Black Power. It is significant that it was a festival that channeled this pan-African feeling, a coming together of artists and musicians that was at once an act of memory, a reunion of separated but connected people and cultures, and a future-oriented event that sought to imagine time to come through the festival’s ethos of collaboration, solidarity, and collective engagement.

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the 1966 event, the editors of this special issue held a conference at Florida State University that sought to examine the festival and its multiple legacies, with the aim of promoting a better understanding of both the utopianism of the period following the Second World and the ‘festivalization’ of Africa and African diasporic cultures of recent decades. The visual arts played a central role in each of the major Pan-African festivals held in the 1960s and 1970s—from the 1966 Dakar festival, through the First Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers in 1969 to FESTAC 77 in Lagos—and four of the essays published here (Twa, Taylor, Underwood, Tolan) engage with the complex dynamics involved in these three events in marrying individual artistic creation with the desire (and/or pressure) to contribute to a shared black identity. The other two essays (Murphy/Vincent and Finley) explore role of Dakar as a key site in the troubled evolution of the visual arts scene in post-independence Africa. Overall, these articles are presented as examples of the vibrant scholarly work that is being carried out on the theme of festivals, and as evidence of the continued relevance of festivals as means of expressing a pan-African feeling that stretches across time and across the Atlantic, and that has survived slavery, colonialism, and their ongoing aftereffects.

Work cited

Joseph, Edward Lanzer. 1970. *History of Trinidad*. London: Frank Cass. (Orig. pub. 1838)