

## Sailors Adrift: Semiotic Evolution and the Problem of Tradition in Trinidad's Fancy Sailor Mas

*"They tell us that we lost our tails  
evolving up from little snails  
I say it's all just wind in sails  
are we not men...?"*

Mark Motherspaugh<sup>1</sup>

*"Full fathom five thy father lies,  
Of his bones are coral made  
Those are pearls that were his eyes  
Nothing of him that doth fade  
But doth suffer a sea-change"*  
"Ariel's Song", from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*<sup>2</sup>

A newcomer to Trinidad's Carnival might not immediately identify the Fancy Sailors, one of the most durable of the traditional characters in the annual costumed procession, locally known as the Mas. At first glance, they hardly resemble the furloughed US seamen they once imitated in the 1950s<sup>3</sup> although a more careful inspection might reveal – buried under sequined peacock wings, Chinese lanterns, protruding elephant-tusks, or simulacra of Hawaiian cocktail-bars – a tell-tale pair of bellbottom pants or a naval insignia. There is an intriguing disconnect between the official narrative of the Sailor (as a Postwar-era parody) and the complex visual spectacle it actually presents in performance today. Clearly the Sailor has evolved, and its continuing adaptations and mutations pose an interesting dilemma for those who seek to identify and preserve it under the rubric of Tradition.

My introduction to the Fancy Sailors did not take place during Carnival Monday or Tuesday (where, outside of a few steelpan outfits, fully-costumed Sailors are now scarce), but rather during a special "Old Mas" showcase staged by the National Carnival Commission as part of ongoing official efforts to preserve Traditional Carnival.<sup>4</sup> Yet the event I witnessed was the antithesis of Carnavalesque, requiring paid admission to a fenced-in area comprising a one-block "stage" on Victoria Square. The audience was sequestered from the street in grandstands, from which announcers called out contestants' official registration numbers with staid formality over a PA system, as if summoning the next in line at the Department of Motor Vehicles. The anarchic spontaneity and one-on-one encounters essential to the processional street theatre of Carnival had been clinically removed from the proceedings. Spectators issued occasional polite applause but otherwise demonstrated little enthusiasm.

The goal of preserving Carnival tradition through such events seems worthy, but as I watched the surreal cortege of Sailors pass by I questioned how one can define tradition or insure its preservation within the context of the Mas. One associates preservation with historic entities like 19<sup>th</sup>-century buildings, indigenous crafts, or period-instrument chamber music, in which either a tangible object or a rigidly unchanging art form is protected from extinction through careful stewardship. In contrast, Carnival by its very nature seeks to subvert and burlesque prevailing power structures, aesthetic conventions, and social mores. Tradition implies a certain ideological purity; what we call "traditional" retains its integrity by shunning

outside, in particular modern, influences. In contrast, Carnival, especially the Mas, has always readily absorbed the pop culture of its day, from the illustrated weeklies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the Hollywood films of the 20<sup>th</sup>.<sup>5</sup> The Mas has always been necessarily *contemporary*, continuing to innovate, absorb, and respond – up until the very point that it suddenly required institutionalized preservation. Mas designer Peter Minshall, reknowned for his controversial and innovative adaptations of traditional characters, recently lamented, “At what point did the Old Mas become *Old*?”<sup>6</sup> In a heterodox and ever-changing art form, at what moment does one arbitrarily stop the clock and declare the defining point for tradition? Was Carnival of 1920 more authentic than that of 1950, or 1970? Or does the essence of the Carnival Tradition lie more in an ethic of adaptable, even subversive, response than in a fixed and orthodox aesthetic?

These questions come into focus when one examines the incremental changes and re-inventions undergone by the enduring Mas characters, and the Sailor offers a particularly apt example. The modern Sailor Mas is rooted in a parody of US Naval servicemen, a response to Trinidadians’ deep ambivalence towards a two-decade military presence that they found both lucrative and invasive.<sup>7</sup> The Sailor costumes of the post-WWII era imitated the typical seaman’s outfit, complete with cap, tie, insignia, and bell-bottom pants. Subsets of the Sailor Mas took on specific classes of seamen, such as the black-uniformed firemen (coal-stokers) and denim-clad SeaBees (construction battalions, or CBs). Performers often sported a cane (or a variant such as the fireman’s coal scuttle) and a corn-cob pipe (alluding to Popeye, in a classic Carnival burlesque upon a burlesque). Though a few rhinestones and other decorative flourishes were soon added, the costume was, in its early days, a reasonable facsimile of its source. To play Sailor was defined as much by choreography and character as by costume. “Bad Behavior Sailors” would imitate the chronic drunkenness of American sailors on shore leave in Port of Spain, bobbing and weaving, falling into gutters, catcalling women, and generally acting out the part in all its nuances. One classic Sailor walk involved a group walking arm-in-arm, careening to the left, then back to the right, as if trying to maintain their balance on the deck of a rocking ship. Another group, the “Long Nose Sailors”, wore cone-shaped appendages protruding from their foreheads. Veteran Mas-man Bill Trotman explains that the long nose is essentially a Caucasian feature, as opposed to the flatter African nose<sup>8</sup>. However, a nose by any other name may not smell as sweet, and the Sailors appendage, often supported aloft in a net women’s panties also represents a penis, depicting the notorious sexual appetites of sailors on leave and the resulting economy of sexual exploitation and unclaimed children that caused havoc in Trinidadian society. Another early Sailor, Desmond Sobers, recalls chanting the ribald refrain “Suck me nose, suck me nose”<sup>9</sup>

The 1961, under mounting public dissent led by Dr. Eric Williams and the ruling PNM Party, the US relinquished control of the Chaguaramas Base, ending two decades of American military presence. Deprived of an antagonist to parody, the Sailors Bands were, in a sense, cut loose from their moorings and set adrift. Costumes became increasingly stylized, as rhinestones and braids proliferated and caps grew more elaborate, eventually becoming totemic towers encrusted like 17th-century Wonder Cabinets, with incongruous imagery drawn from a wide range of ethnic, mythological, and popular sources. Trotman interprets these exquisite temples of kitsch as a parody of the tourist’s hunger for souvenirs of any sort<sup>10</sup> (one theory, recounted by Mas artist Lari Richardson, attributes the Sailor-cane’s origins to carved mango-wood walking-

sticks sold to sailors, and later tourists, as souvenirs)<sup>11</sup>. Since the tourists coming to Trinidad throughout the 60s and 70s were primarily attracted by the spectacle of Carnival, they were in effect contributing to a classic Carnavalesque recursion, craning their necks to witness a parody of themselves.

The drunken walk developed as well, becoming a refined and highly individualized dance of gliding footwork and pivoting hips that resembles a hybrid of Japanese Noh theatre and Michael Jackson's moonwalk. At Victoria Square, I saw one sailor who wore an eerie costume some 12' tall, in which two ghosts of his African ancestors played conga drums upon a cloud of thousands of white feathers. He choreographed his walk perfectly to make the two figures above play their congas in time to his steps, as if the ancestors were accompanying him from the beyond. Below the plumed avatars, the signature cane, sailor-pants, and a pair of epaulets still remained. Generations removed from their original purpose, these features appeared through a veil of obsolescence, like the coccyx on a human spine testifying to a long-vanished tail.

The long noses evolved as well, growing from simple cone-shaped forms, into elephant's trunks, bird beaks, or other fantastical protrusions. As a growing number of East Indians have participated in the Mas over the years, one wonders whether the Sailor's noses have become repositories for Hindu iconography, incorporating in particular the image of the popular elephant-headed god Ganesha.<sup>12</sup> The sexual connections between Ganesha and the Sailor Mas seem more intricate when one contemplates the mythic origin of Ganesha's head. Commanded by his mother Parvati to guard the door to her bath, Ganesha refused entry to his absentee father, Siva, whom he did not recognize. In a lustful rage, and blind as well to Ganesha's identity, Siva tore off his head. When a grieving Parvati pointed out that Siva had destroyed his own progeny, Siva replaced his head with whatever was closest at hand, which turned out to be an elephant. The key ingredients in this tale – sexual aggression, the disavowal of patrimony, and the hybridizing of races – all speak not only to the Trinidadian experience of the of US Naval presence, but to the legacy of Colonialism in general.

While it makes sense that Ganesha – rather than, say, Krishna or Hanuman – found his way into the iconography of the Sailor's headdress, it does not necessarily mean that any particular Mas-maker consciously decided to make a Ganesha/Sailor. Trinidad is a churning sea of images that drift in and out of Carnival on their own terms. Certain images wash up on the shore and then endure because Mas artists or spectators feel an unconscious affinity (or anxiety) toward them. Effective changes are imitated, and these imitations in turn beget further imitation or augmentation. Such changes were often incremental and haphazard, not necessarily part of a deliberate intent to discard traditions or establish a particular ideological program in the Mas.

Though the appearance of new Mas elements may have been in part accidental, their subsequent persistence is not. The semiotic drift of the Sailors parallels the process of evolutionary drift one finds in nature, in which mutations that lend themselves to survival will replicate and spread. The Carnival characters that have survived have done so by maintaining a precarious balance between continuity and adaptation. In *The Selfish Gene* biologist Richard Dawkins suggests that cultural organisms evolve precisely like natural organisms, according to the strictest Darwinian sense of replication and incremental

mutation. He suggests that culture's inherited traits (from stiletto heels to belief in God) survive based on how reliably and readily they are imitated. He calls these traits *memes* (from the Greek *mimesis*). Like genes, *memes* will seek the best avenue of replication, even at the expense of the larger organism or species that contains them.<sup>13</sup> Thus, if the Sailor Mas as a whole is viewed as a species, one could look at individual elements (e.g., cane and long nose) as memes that may have been transmitted from other Carnival organisms.

So if survival in the natural world depends on how well organisms vie for food, resist predators, or produce fertile offspring, what then defines survival and propagation in the Carnival world? Perhaps it lies in the ability of a single element to carry a multiplicity of meanings. Carnival images are rarely simple, linear metaphors (though they are often publicly explained as such). The sailor's rhinestones allude simultaneously to military medals, gaudy tourist trinkets, and the mock finery of "Pretty Mas". His long nose serves simultaneously as a racial parody and a sexual symbol. The white talcum powder he throws in performance is the fragrant residue of sexual conquests, but also the inversion of the minstrel's racial masking, while also alluding to the dyed powder hurled in the Indo-Trinidadian festival of Phagwa<sup>14</sup>. As Irish potato farmers learned the hard way, diversified gene pools yield more resilient species, whereas monocultures can be wiped out by single blight. Likewise, for a symbol to endure and replicate in Carnival it must have diverse, multiple, and sometimes even contradictory, referents. The striped sailor's cane survives because it fulfills so many cultural needs at once. It is a satirical affectation of gentility; relic of Trinidad's *kalenda*, or ritual stickfight tradition<sup>15</sup>; a choreographic stylization of the *tambu-bamboo* (from the Indian "tambor") that preceded steelpan; a tourist souvenir; a candy-striped barber's pole (Sailor Bandleader Jason Griffiths earned his living as a barber)<sup>16</sup>; a phallus, a scepter/miter, and so on. As one interpretation is obscured or forgotten, others remain vital and contemporary, while still others are appended, ensuring the cane meme's survival as part of the Sailor Mas, even as its precise meaning shifts.

Thus the Fancy Sailor has accumulated a residue of inherited signifiers, some historically specific and others primordial, just as our own species inherits and passes on traits which no longer serve an identifiable purpose. The polka-dotted, roller-skating sailor portrayed perennially by Mas veteran Gilbert De Freitas sports an Elizabethan crown, a diaphanous white cape, a corn-cob pipe, and a frilly red Victorian umbrella. His performance defies a concise reading, since so many of his signifiers were acquired in response to different historical and cultural moments and now float unmoored from their original referents. He shares that paradox of human evolution that has lately stirred so much controversy: his existence seems at once supremely unlikely and at the same time strangely inevitable. Whether by chance or design, he has drifted into a Post-Modern sea where, as semiologist Roland Barthes might suggest, symbols rely solely on one another to make sense, independent of any objective referent or concrete object.<sup>17</sup> In a sense, the amalgam of symbols that comprise the Fancy Sailor functions less like a fleet of ships anchored to fixed points on the seabed, and more like a flotilla of rafts interconnected to one another but unattached to anything below. In his evolution from simple mimicry, to allegory, and finally to a self-contained system of meaning, the sailor presents a paradigm of durability and complexity that any organism, or any contemporary artist, would do well to imitate.

This is why a static, preservational approach to Traditional Mas is so problematic for the Fancy Sailor and other Mas characters. Like many post-Colonial cultures trying to forge a national identity, Trinidad inherited a conflicted attitude toward the very idea of tradition. On the one hand, any preservation of the colonial legacy implied a romanticizing of the Empire, a forgiving of past deprecations, and a wallowing in a provincial anti-modern stagnation. (To this day, the few remaining Colonial plantation lie neglected and decrepit in the absence of any effective agency for historic preservation.) On the other hand, newly independent Trinidad required a national cultural identity, something entirely distinct from its Colonial forbearers. In Errol Hill's seminal work, *Trinidad Carnival: Mandate for a National Theatre*, he simultaneously praised Carnival's anarchic anti-establishment spirit while proposing it as the national art form, a paradoxical position that encouraged the nationalization of a quintessentially anti-institutional genre.<sup>18</sup> Hill's mandate has underscored the NCC's efforts toward establishing a Mas Tradition, but contrary to Hill's intent these efforts have come to focus on the aesthetic of Carnival costumes more than the subversive ethic of Carnival performance. This is particularly evident in the initiatives to encourage traditional Mas characters in Children's Carnival, both through school programs and in Junior Carnival Bands. Children regularly appear costumed as traditional Dame Lorraines (cross-dressing burlesques), Baby Dolls (abandoned single mothers), and Fancy Sailors, portrayals that emphasize ornate costumes but carefully avoid the essential sexual and sociopolitical underpinnings of the characters. Since it is easier to identify and preserve Carnival objects than Carnavalesque processes, the privileging of costume over character was probably partly out of convenience. However, the motivation for defining tradition in this way may also have been political. At the time Hill wrote *Trinidad Carnival* in 1972, the encouragement of the Carnival's revolutionary aspects would have seemed perilous to a young and fragile democracy, which was then reeling from the protests of a potent Black Power movement.<sup>19</sup>

The crisis facing Trinidad Carnival stems less from the erosion of traditional Mas than from a misunderstanding of what defines this tradition in the first place. Isolated and arrested by a prevailing attitude of folkloric preservation, traditional characters find themselves cut off from the mainstream of Carnival, which today finds itself polarized between a homogenous commercialization on the one hand (the "Bikini & Beads" phenomenon) and a reactionary preservationism on the other. Yet there is much fertile middle ground to explore between these antipodes, especially for contemporary artists seeking to incorporate Carnival's basic narrative of dissent, burlesque, and inversion into new forms based on, but not bound to, the so-called Traditional characters. The Carnival characters that have survived have done so, not through institutionalized segregation, but by maintaining a precarious balance between orthodoxy and innovation. The irony of successful "traditional" characters is that *they have always been contemporary*, whether anchored to specific socio-political conditions, or allowed to drift from their original source. Every Sailor Band believes it is upholding an annual Carnival rite, yet with every new manifestation of the Sailor, traits appear, vanish, or metamorphose, as with any species seeking to adapt and survive. Given the right conditions, the Fancy Sailor can continue to evolve as a dynamic artistic response to a changing world.

NOTES:

1. Mark Motherspaugh, "Jocko Homo", from *Q: Are We Not Men? A: We Are Devo* (Warner Bros. Records, 1978).
2. William Shakespeare. *Shakespeare's Comedy of the Tempest*. William J. Rolfe, Ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1892).
3. By most accounts, Sailor Mas, the Carnival practice of burlesquing the uniforms and behavior of Navy personnel on shore-leave, dates back to the 1880s, though it has earlier roots in the broader tradition of Military Mas. In 1941, the United States Navy established a base at Chaguaramas through its Lend-Lease agreement with Great Britain, greatly increasing the presence of foreign military personnel in Trinidad, and the corresponding popularity of Sailor Mas.
4. The Victoria Square event occurs annually on the Wednesday evening prior to Carnival Tuesday, and is part of a growing number of "Old Mas" showcases organized by the National Carnival Commission. Others include an Old Mas Parade on Carnival Friday afternoon along Frederick Street in Port of Spain; "Vie La Cou" which began in 1988 at the Boy Scout's Association in St. Ann's; the new "Nostalgia Parade" which occurs Carnival Sunday Woodbrook. The use of terms like "Old" (or "Vie" in patois) and "Nostalgia" serve to reinforce the perception of Traditional characters as static, historical entities, rather than dynamic contemporary performance forms. In the case of Sailors, the designation "Old-Fashioned" was appended in 1969 to the large bands of Belmont Mas-designer Jason Griffith, despite his use of contemporary portrayals such as the 1984 "Extra-terrestrial Voyage" which featured androids, UFOs the Spaceship Columbia, and even Darth Vader.
5. There are numerous examples of the influence of American popular culture has had on Trinidad Carnival. The early development of Wild Indian masquerades, which imitated the costumes of North American Plains Indians, used popular illustrated weeklies of the day as its source material. Hollywood Westerns contributed to the emergence of the Midnight Robber character, whose six-guns, bandoleros, and broad hat were standard props of the Mexican bandit. The large Historical Mas Bands of the 1950s drew inspiration from Hollywood costume epics such as Harold Saldenah's *Quo Vadis* (1952) and Irving McWilliams *Ten Commandments* (1957).
6. Peter Minshall, in conversation at Kapok Hotel, Port of Spain. 12 January 2006.
7. Job opportunities and living standards in Trinidad generally improved as a result of the US military presence in Chaguaramas and Waller Field from 1941 to 1961. However, there was also an increase in prostitution and other attendant social problems. Dr Eric Williams gave voice to widespread Trinidadian resentment toward the US presence, in a speech given on 17 July, 1959. "What progress have we made if we have substituted Chaguaramas, the naval base of the twentieth century for Brimstone Hill, military base of the sixteenth century." During a mass demonstration at Woodford Square on 22 April 1960, he publicly burned the Chaguaramas lease agreement, citing it as the first of "the seven deadly sins of colonialism". Quoted in Chaguaramas Development Authority website: <http://www.chagdev.com/Pages/Chag-HistoryChaguaramas-Independence.htm>.
8. Bill Trotman is a Mas designer, visual artist, and Calypsonian. From University of the West Indies Conference "Carnival in Education" held at Center for Creative and Festival Arts, St. Augustine. 10 March 2006.
9. Desmond Sobers began playing Mas in the 1930s. He played Sailor and Fireman (a variant of the Fancy Sailor) for many years, most notably as flag-bearer for the steelpan band Trinidad All-Stars in the 1950s. Interviewed at his home in Laventille, Port of Spain. 4 April, 2006.
10. Trotman, *ibid*.
11. Interview with Lari Richardson, Professor of Carnival Arts at Center for Creative and Festival Arts, UWI. 7 April 2006.
12. The practice of Hinduism came to Trinidad in 1845 with East Indian indentured laborers brought in by the British to work sugar-fields after Emancipation. Ganesha is one of the most widely worshipped of the Hindu Gods and is associated with intellect and good fortune.
13. Richard Dawkins. *The Selfish Gene*. (Oxford University Press, 1989) pp. 92-101.
14. Phagwa is a Hindu celebration of Spring. One aspect of Phagwa is the playful throwing of colorful powdered among participants. One tale attributes the colored dye to Krishna's anxiety about having a darker complexion than his fair-skinned lover, Radha. Krishna's mother responds by coloring Radha's features with dye. This narrative offers an interesting parallel to the white talcum powder thrown by Sailor Bands, which creates a similar racial masking, and reflects the practice of white masking in other Mas characters, such as the white minstrels and white devils.
15. The Kalenda (alt. Calinda) originated in West Africa as ceremonial dance, and became linked during slavery with the ritualized combat of stick-fighters. As with the Brazilian slave tradition of Capoeira, the Kalenda evolved as a means for honing martial skills under the auspices of dance. Stick-fighting became a central component of the Canboulay (from the French "canes brulees"), a post-Emancipation Carnival performance evoking plantation sugar-fields fires. Canboulay bands consisted of designated stick-fighters, along with flaming torches, singers (*chantwells*), drummers, and other visual elements. The practice of stickfighting was suppressed, along with the use of traditional skin-drums, following the Canboulay Riots of 1881, but influenced the culture of factional combat later common among early Steelpan bands. Today, stickfighting still takes place in Trinidad, but largely outside of mainstream

Carnival events. For further reading on Kalenda and Canboulay, refer to John Cowley's study on early Carnival, entitled *Carnival Canboulay and Calypso*. (Cambridge University Press, 1996) and Hollis Liverpool's *Rituals of Power and Rebellion* (Chicago; Research Associates School Times publications, 1993)

16. "Jason Griffith: Voyage of the Sailor Mas'" Interview in Triniview.com [online journal] 15 April 2005. Available at <http://www.triniview.com/jason-griffith/>.
17. "Myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a second-order semiological system. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second. We must here recall that the materials of mythical speech (the language itself, photography, painting, posters, rituals, objects, etc.), however different at the start, are reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth" Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), p.114.
18. Errol Hill. *The Trinidad Carnival: Mandate for a National Theatre*. (University of Texas Press, 1972) pp.104-118.
19. The Black Power movement emerged as a cultural and political force in Trinidad the late 1960s, capitalizing on popular discontent among labor unions, students, and the poor. The movement gained momentum after the 1970 Carnival, in which a band called the Pine-toppers wore modern military costumes and depicted "revolutionary heroes" including Fidel Castro, Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X. Following subsequent, and occasionally violent demonstrations. Eric Williams was forced to make changes and concessions in his cabinet and in national policy to assuage the growing movement.