

Caribbean religious festivals

Last Updated Sunday, 03 June 2007

Caribbean religious festivals are generally similar in content to English ones and the sheer diversity of the Caribbean migrant population made festivals based on distinctly Caribbean common cultural traditions unlikely to evolve.

The carnival tradition was a notable exception. This emerged partly from slave celebrations, which mirrored the balls and dances of the masters, partly from Catholic and Mediterranean feast day roots, and partly from the vestiges of collective West African celebrations.

In some of the islands of the Eastern Caribbean, the tradition of dressing up and public dance was known as 'masquerade'. Troupes of masked dancers would parade the streets, sometimes whipping passers-by, sometimes handing out sweets and cakes. The carnival tradition, however, was most highly developed in Trinidad, and took place in the week before Easter. It spawned its own industries, its own culture and its own stars. Calypso singers like The Mighty Sparrow and Lord Kitchener were awe-inspiring celebrities in 1950s Caribbean, and it was not long before the influence of the carnival culture began to appear amongst the migrant population in England.

In fact the first well-known Caribbean music in Britain was the calypso. During the 1950s, when the Blue Beat and Ska were still underground music styles heard only in Notting Hill clubs and private homes, Cy Grant, a former Air Force officer from Guyana, was appearing nightly on the popular BBC TV programme Tonight. He would sing a topical calypso about the day's headlines, in the style of the carnival calypsonians.

A fully-fledged Caribbean carnival didn't emerge on to streets in London, where most migrants lived, until the early 1960s. Following the murder of Kelso Cochrane a Jamaican in Notting Hill, a street procession had started and was quickly to become an annual local tradition. It was in effect a demonstration, by which the migrants asserted their right to be there, and a gesture of solidarity by some local residents.

As it happened the majority of migrants living in Notting Hill were Trinidadian and, as the decade went on, the procession began to echo the various elements of a Trinidad carnival. It also took on some new elements which were part of migrant life. Hi-fi systems were becoming increasingly powerful, and during the carnival, which began to take up a weekend, local clubbers would bring out their speakers on to the pavement and turn up the volume.

Local entrepreneurs also began to seize the opportunity presented by the large numbers of migrants attending and set up stalls selling Caribbean dishes. By the end of the 1960s, the carnival had become an annual event, attracting revellers from all over the country and by the 1980s it had become a national institution. Read the 1984 grant application for the Notting Hill Carnival.

As is usual with migrant cultural events, the carnival was a dialogue between old and new elements. The chosen date, the end of August, was different from the traditional carnival time in the Caribbean, but it had to take place during the warmth of the English summer, if only so the revellers could reproduce the traditional scanty costumes and stay outdoors for long periods. Masqueraders from the Eastern Caribbean also began to take part, shifting their dances from the appropriate festival times. Jamaicans, relatively unfamiliar with the tradition of carnival procession, brought their sound systems and danced to them.

In many ways the carnival became more than a festival. In the early years it was the vehicle for protest and demonstration on the part of immigrants. Later on it became a model for other different and smaller festivals wherever Caribbeans lived; by the 1970s similar festivals emerged in such cities as Manchester, Leeds, Bristol and Birmingham, and even relatively tiny communities, such as Wolverhampton, began to stage their own carnivals. Finsbury Park Carnival advertising entertainment by Soul to Soul amongst others.

The carnival also helped to focus attention on and encourage respect for Caribbean traditions. Up until the 1960s, many migrant Caribbeans had wanted their bodies returned home when they died. Import/export businesses conducted a flourishing trade in transporting coffins back to the Caribbean. But from the 1960s onwards this funeral tradition, with their characteristic ceremonies, began to change. More migrants began to be buried in Britain, using the services of their Black congregations and ministers and the familiar style of Caribbean funerals.