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Jamettes, mas, and bacchanal

A culture of resistance in Trinidad and Tobago

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Urban Black working-class women (jamettes) have a long “herstory” of engaging in acts of resistance in Trinidad and Tobago. Within the context of Carnival and the wider society, jamettes did not allow their bodies, sexuality, or femininity to be policed by public criticisms but instead, became carriers of tradition and embodied resistance. Jamette women were members of stick-bands who rivaled and fought each other and were among protestors in the 1881 Canboulay Riots and the Water Riot of 1903. The scrutiny of female bodies, masquerade, and performance, as well as debate on the role and place of Black women within society, persisted in the nineteenth century and continued into the late twentieth century, particularly when women became the predominant players of mas during Carnival. The development and predominance of “pretty mas” and “skin mas,” which focus on bikinis, beads, and feathers that reveal much of the female body – considered excessive by some – extends the historical discussion on decency, morality, sexuality, and gendered identities within the space of the modern Trinidad Carnival, a discourse which arguably began with jamette women of the nineteenth century.

Carnival in Trinidad and Tobago is a time that allows all to feel free and to “bring out de jamette inna me,” according to Trinidad and Tobago soca artist, Denise “Saucy Wow” Belfon, who created the song “De Jammette” in 2002. Trinidad Carnival is a topic that has been explored from various perspectives. Scholars such as Errol Hill (1997); Pamela Franco (2007); Hollis Liverpool (2001); Andrew Pease (1956); Bridget Brereton (1982); John Cowley (1996); Richard Burton (1997); Gordon Rohlehr (1990); and Susan Campbell (1988) have all focused on traditional masquerade, the historical development and practice of Carnival, and the socio-economic and political context of Carnival in Trinidad and Tobago from the nineteenth century. Some studies focus on national and cultural identities, gender, the diaspora, and Carnival, such as those by Philip Scher and Garth Green (2007); Milla Riggio (2004); and Patricia De Freitas (1999). Meanwhile, Keith Nurse (2004) addresses the creative and cultural industries and festival tourism of the Trinidad Carnival from the late twentieth century into the twenty-first century.

The literature also discusses women and Carnival from both a colonial and a postcolonial perspective (Frances Henry & Dwaine Plaza 2020). Belinda Edmonson (2003) examines female public performance with regard to women’s rituals, behavior, and popular culture in the public sphere. Edmonson notes how Black women are consistently portrayed as not respectable and lewd. Samantha Pinto (2009) highlights the public debate on “indecent” behavior.
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of masqueraders and the issue of respectability as linked to blackness. Samantha Noel (2010) similarly states that jamette women were judged, disregarded, and disrespected and that they used their bodies in order to rebel. Anna Perkins (2011), too, examines notions of sexuality and women’s bodily displays during Carnival, contrasting these to Christian notions of the body and sexuality. This chapter seeks to add to this literature with historical attention to jamette women and the ways in which they embodied protest and agency through cultural resistance.

Origins of the Jamette Carnival

In the late eighteenth century, French immigrants introduced Carnival to Trinidad at a time when Carnival was segregated by race, color, and class (Franco 1998, 62). Elaborate masked balls, house to house visiting, music, dancing, and street promenading were a major part of activities embraced by the white and free colored elites, who celebrated in exclusive circles, especially in the towns. The enslaved were onlookers or took part when requested by special favor, while Indians, who migrated to the island primarily from 1845 to 1917, did not participate (Pearse 1956, 179–81). Prior to emancipation in 1838, Carnival was mainly confined to the island’s elites.

In the post-emancipation era, Carnival “denigrated into a noisy and disorderly amusement for the lower classes,” according to one local elite member. Carnival from 1860 to the end of the nineteenth century was referred to as Jamette Carnival by the French and then the English due to the acts of aggression and sexual themes displayed by Blacks during this period (Liverpool 2003, 253). Jamette Carnival retained some links to West African traditions, which included stickfighting, drumming, and singing, and represented African working-class culture adapting to a changing society (Liverpool 2003, 253).

The conditions of urban life in Port of Spain played a crucial role in the history of Carnival and to the emergence of jamette culture. During the nineteenth century, the sugar industry, the main source of income for the British West Indies, faced challenges after the abolition of slavery in 1834 and also due to the 1846 Sugar Duties Act, which equalized all sugar coming into Britain, and competition from beet sugar. In Trinidad, sugar factories closed down or were amalgamated, and jobs were lost. In 1880, 109 sugar estates were in operation, and by 1895, only 59 existed (Campbell 1988, 16).

Another response to the economic situation in the region was migration. Migrants from islands such as Barbados sought a better life in Trinidad. With many Trinidadians leaving the plantations or being forced to do so while migrants sought out better opportunities, the urban areas of the city of Port of Spain became crowded. In 1860, the population grew from 16,457 to 29,468; 40 percent of the latter figure were born outside Trinidad (Pearse 1956, 190). In the city, many of the laboring classes lived in barracks, which formed a barrack yard community. Barrack yards were back to back with the houses of the middle and upper classes (Pearse 1956, 190–3). There was little privacy, water and latrines were common facilities, and the yard in the center was a common living space (Pearse 1956, 190–2). Epidemics such as smallpox and cholera were prevalent. With competition for resources and space, sometimes rivalries would occur in the overcrowded city (Pearse 1956, 190–2). This continuous immigration placed increasing pressure on housing in the slum sections of the capital, which led to vagrancy, juvenile crime, and prostitution (Brereton 1982, 132).

Unsanitary conditions, competition for space, and unemployment were some of the factors that contributed to the formation of stickbands in the city, in addition to the increased numbers and heightened tensions between band members. By the 1870s, there were at least a dozen bands that signified different areas of the city (Campbell 1988, 10). For example, the Maribones
were from Belmont Road and the Bakers from the streets behind the Market (Liverpool 2003, 282–3). Bands also represented occupations; for instance, the Coraille band was comprised of store clerks. Bands, namely the Free-Grammars, Bakers, and Maribones, fought each other for turf and rights on Carnival Day. On this day, bands would also attack the elites and the police (Liverpool 2003, 282). Yet another reason for fighting was status to be gained. Victors often won the sexual favors of matadors (madams) and other women in districts, and some were even considered to be leaders of their communities as a result of their victories (Liverpool 2003, 285).

The urban center was dominated by young unmarried women. In 1881, women made up more than 50 percent of the Port of Spain population. In 1891, 60 percent of the city’s female population was born in Trinidad, and 31 percent was from another West Indian colony (Trotman 1984, 61). They were employed as domestics, seamstresses, shopkeepers, hucksters, and sex workers. Sex work was especially on the increase in the 1870s and 1880s, likely due to the economic distress of the 1880s (Trotman 1984, 69). As a result, jamettes emerged, that is, “black women in nineteenth-century urban Trinidad who were associated with the barrack yards, gangs and the streets” (Edmonson 2003, 5).

Carnival became controlled by “citizens of the underworld, petty criminals, prostitutes, thieves, pimps, who were called jamettes” (Green & Scher 2007, 17). The words ‘‘Jamet and Jamette’ were French-patois terms for male and female members of the unemployed and petty criminal … those beneath the ‘diameter’ (diametre) of ‘decent society’ ” (Campbell 1988, 10). The word “diameter” or “diamet” referred to the “underworld,” (Pearse 1956, 188) that of “prostitutes and their ‘sweet men’, gamblers, corner men … the celebrated stickfighters … and the notorious jamettes” (Campbell 1988, 10). Stickfighting was an art form that was practiced mainly by enslaved men across the Caribbean and was retained as part of a principal cultural expression of Carnival in the post-emancipation period in Trinidad and Tobago. Associates with the culture that revolved around barrack yards also included singers, drummers, dancers, matadors, bad-johns, obeah men, and corner boys (Brereton 1982, 134). This jamette class was organized into loose associations, bands, or gangs that took over Carnival in the 1860s and 1870s (Brereton 1982, 132). Subsequently, during this period, Carnival across the island “came to have a distinct character and significance for the society as a whole,” and was described as “Jamette Carnival” (Pearse 1956, 188; Cowley 1996, 72).

For the participants, it was an opportunity to play off old grievances in ritualized conflict and to let off steam. In spite of attempts to regulate Carnival by officials and upper-class hostility, Blacks were successful in preserving some of their values and traditions (Brereton 1982, 135). In the 1850s, masques such as negres jardins, linked to plantation life and African enslavement, were popular. These featured Black participants, who carried baskets on their heads, being driven by a man with a long whip. Masques depicting death and demons, in which tar was used to cover the body, were also prevalent (Cowley 1996, 80).

Another activity that became identifiable with Jamette Carnival was Canboulay. By 1847, Canboulay was integrated into Carnival and became a primary opening feature. Canboulay, which is a derivation of Cannes Brulees, was said to have originated during African enslavement: “Whenever fire broke out upon an estate, slaves of the surrounding properties were immediately mustered to the spot, horns and shells were blown to collect them and the gangs were followed by their drivers cracking their whips and urging them with cries and blows to their work.” However, after emancipation, the formerly enslaved “began to represent this scene as a kind of commemoration of the change of their condition, and the procession of the ‘cannes brulees’ used to take place on the night of 1st August, the date of their emancipation.” They carried flambeaux (flaming torches) in procession throughout the streets (Campbell 1988, 10). Cannes Brulees, which featured stickfighters of bands who clashed with each other, in which the rules...
of single combat were forgotten, were accompanied by kalenda/kalinda music. Sticks, stones, and bottles also became the weapons of the bands and were used by both male and female followers (Liverpool 2001, 274; Pease 1956, 192). Canboulay was a main form of Carnival for the Black working class.

However, stickfighting and stickbands were not understood or embraced by the wider society. Subsequently, in 1868, an ordinance was passed to authorize police to end Canboulay torch-bearing in the event that it became a public nuisance (Campbell 1988, 15). In 1884, there was an amendment to the Peace Preservation Ordinance of 1883, which “outlawed disorderly assemblies of ten or more people, as well as unauthorised dancing, processions and drumming” (Campbell 1988, 15). The enforcement of this law led to the imprisonment of many band members over time (Cowley 1996, 75).

Women and masquerade

Women contributed to the masquerade of Jamette Carnival in several ways, as subjects of masques and as masqueraders themselves. The female masqueraders, in the 1860s, depicted sexual themes. Bands of men and women portrayed “matadors,” “prostitutes,” and “jamettes.” For instance, jamette women would startle bystanders by opening their bodices and exposing their breasts. These women were known to wear sexually revealing clothing and for dancing indecently in the streets. They would fight among themselves for the attention of men and openly solicit men, particularly of the middle class (Liverpool 2001, 276). Some of these jamettes of notoriety were Annie Coals, Myrtle the Turtle, Boadicea, Alice Sugar, Hard Back Doris, Petit Belle Lily, Baje, and Cariso Jane (Liverpool 2001, 276). The presence and performance of these women at Carnival reveals narratives between Carnival and racial and gendered identities, because their actions indicated that mainly Black working-class women would behave in an inappropriate and suggestive manner. They were at ease with flaunting their bodies publicly in a provocative manner in order to entice men, especially those of higher-income strata, for their benefit; men who may have been lured by their exoticism, directness, and freedom of sexuality.

During the age of the Jamette Carnival, some elements of masquerade parodied gender roles. From the 1860s, the masque “piss en lit”/“pisse-en-lit,” “pisani” (“wet-the-bed” or “stinker” crossdressers for the day) featured men wearing long transparent night gowns, some replete with “menstrual cloths” that were appropriately stained: “Some carried chamber pots on their heads and ‘washed’ themselves on the streets” (Liverpool 2001, 277). Furthermore, “the “pisse-en-lit” male masqueraders threw powder and flour on passers-by while pretending [to be] women [who] beautify and powder their faces” (Liverpool 2001, 278). It was noted in 1888 that “most of the bands of men dressed as women paraded the whole city from morning to night, repeating the same song, containing double entendres of the most obscene meaning and dancing in the lewdest manner.” Arguably, the very existence of masquerade such as pisse-en-lit signified how important women – both cis- and transgender – were to this masque. Women were the subject of their masque to be portrayed, because part of playing the pisse-en-lit was not only to dress and act like women of the lower class but to target elite women deliberately in order to make them uncomfortable.

The inversion of gender roles exemplified mediating trans spaces and those in-between. In 1888, it was noted that there was “the undoubted increase in the exchange of the dresses of the two sexes … as the cases of men dressed as women and women dressed as men … were far more numerous than we have ever seen before.” The state eventually intervened, and in 1896, “it became illegal for any male to appear dressed or disguised as female, or any female to be dressed or disguised as a male.” This decision underscored the fact that although Carnival allowed
for freedom of expression, this type of masquerade that reversed, or queered, gender roles was viewed as obscene, was not appreciated, and would not be tolerated.

**Jamettes as chantuelles**

Black women were visible in Carnival not only through their bodies but also by their voices in the capacity of chantuelles/chantuelles/chantwells/chanterelles. “Women were the chantwells who sang fighting songs to intoxicate male stickfighters as they prepared to do battle on Carnival and other days” (Trotman 1984, 68). The role of this soloist was “to boast the accomplishments of his, or more often her, band in song while pouring vituperation on rival gangs … in this period ca’iso, as calypso was called before the 1890s, was usually sung by women” (Campbell 1988, 12). Women first sang the “cariso,” an erotic song, at kalenda sessions (Liverpool 2001, 521). The belair and the calinda/kalenda were the two main types of songs during Carnival. The belair “could be a song of praise or satire on an individual or a group; it could be a witty or humorous commentary on topical events; or it could record personal adventures, real or imagined, amorous or otherwise” (Hill 1997, 72).

The belair was deceptive, and the double entendre (phrase or word having two interpretations) was an important weapon. However, the tunes of the calinda employed a direct declarative statement. They were more frequently used and became the popular lavway/calinda chanted on Carnival days. These “chanterelles,” or calypso singers, and their “carisos” were habitually castigated as being lewd and erotic and for allegedly instigating obscene dancing (Edmonson 2003, 5). Until the late 1890s, the songs were sung in Creole, and most were impromptu (Hill 1997, 72).

This style and genre of music, which produced “the vilest songs, in which the names of ladies on the island are introduced to be sung in the streets, and the vilest talk to be indulged in,” was not welcomed by other races and classes in the society. In 1898, there was a suggestion for the police to be on the alert to stop these “songs of a grossly indecent nature” that were sung in patois, particularly by those “members of the force who understand the Creole dialect.” The use of patois as the language of expression was a cause for concern for the local British elite, who had little knowledge of the language. By the 1890s, a consequence of suppressing Carnival’s jamette element was the decline of female singers and the increased male domination of calypso. Subsequently, the use of patois declined and was often only retained in refrain as English became the dominant language of calypso (Campbell 1988, 18–19).

Through their knowledge and creation of these various types of songs associated with kalenda and Canboulay, women were preservers of oral traditions, expressive culture, and social practices of the communities of Port of Spain. Singing these songs was a means of preserving their cultural identities and was also a way to make sense of experiences and their harsh realities. Furthermore, by their use of patois, and not English, the language of their then colonizer, they preserved this hybridized language, which contained phrasing, syntax, and words of African origin. Moreover, through the roles they played in performing these songs and the use of patois, women became the vessels that allowed cultural transmission of this aspect of intangible cultural heritage, that is, music and its role in the practices associated with the art of stickfighting.

Women’s participation in stickbands personified a culture of resistance in many ways. Some West African musical traditions survived through the jamette women who sang belair, kalinda, and cariso, which became part of an identity associated with blackness. Women contributed immensely to the retention of West African characteristics of music, namely the statement/response form, the frequent use of repeated short phrases, and the occasional litany-like pattern, and transformed satirical songs sung during enslavement in the post-emancipation context.
Their musical pursuits led to “cariso” – “the use of song for purpose of social comment and satire” becoming the “kalenda” songs, which developed into calypso. The latter did not start with cariso but existed alongside kalenda throughout the nineteenth century when kalenda was suppressed (Liverpool 2001, 321). Women were not only the carriers of the music and the engine for stickfighting, but practitioners of this art form as well, and engaged in many battles during the nineteenth century.

Jamette stickfighters

Black working-class women participated in organized violence as members of stick bands and as stickfighters during the nineteenth century. Bands devoted to drumming, drinking, and stickfighting were part of life and culture in the barrack yards. Being a part of a stickband gave members a sense of belonging and community. Generally, bands rivaled each other during and outside Carnival. Women belonged to either bands that contained both sexes or women’s bands. Some female-led bands included the Dahlias, the Mousselines, and the Don’t care Dams (Campbell 1988, 10; Trotman 1984, 68).

Bands that comprised both sexes clashed with each other. During the Carnival of 1874, “herds of disreputable males and females … organised into bands and societies,” caused the closing of dwelling houses and shops to keep out missiles such as stones and broken bottles that were “set in constant motion by the contending bands” (Pearse 1956, 188).

Women’s bands also fought each other. In one instance in 1864, Clementina Millas, armed with a horsewhip, led a band of women, the “Mousselines” against another group called the “Don’t care dams” whose leader carried a flag. Both groups carried stones in their aprons, and were armed with knives and razors. With their frocks tucked up, they fought each other in a battle which spread from George Street to an open field on the banks of the Dry River.

In another case, in 1868, the women of the Dahlias and the Mousselines, who had prior tensions, fought. On the morning of the cannes brulees, besides this particular “Dahlia Association,” “there were also the Mousselines, Magneta, Mariburn, True-Blue, Black Ball and Don’t-care-a Dam associations parading the streets in fantastic dresses.”10 The leaders of the bands were called queens, and the members were princesses. The Queen of the Mousselines was Clementina Mills, and the Queen of the Dahlias was Elizabeth Simmons. Both bands were armed with batons and baskets, but the Mousselines also had stones and broken bottles. Juliana Gomez and 18 other young women appeared in the Supreme Criminal Court, before his Honor Justice Warner, who charged them with having unlawfully assembled together in warlike manner in the public street and making an affray on February 24. The 19 women belonged to the “Dahlia Association.”11

Jamette women, through their participation in Carnival as stickfighters, reconfigured gender dynamics and identity politics in Trinidad and Tobago. Some women gained a reputation as fighting women. Some of the most notorious women were “Annie Coals, Myrtle the Turtle, Alice Sugar, Alice’s younger sister, Piti Belle Lily, and Boadicea”12 (Trotman 1984, 69). Their pursuits and notoriety were kept alive through Carnival songs that extolled their prowess in combat and boasted of their sexual adventures and conquests (Hill 1997, 72). By embracing the culture of the barrack yards and practicing it by joining bands, jamette women collectively defied societal norms of respectable and acceptable behavior for women, especially as compared...
with the perceived delicate nature of white women and their Victorian norms, and the modesty and demure view of East Indian women within the same society.

**Women and popular protest**

During the nineteenth century, women were highly visible participants in popular protest and could be found in the forefront of affrays and riots (Trotman 1984, 68). They were especially present as protestors in two major riots: the 1881 Canboulay Riots and the 1903 Water Riots. Pertaining to the Canboulay Riots, in 1881, the bands, namely the “Maribone” Band of Upper Belmont and the “Bakers” of Market Street, which usually rivaled each other, united against the police on Carnival Sunday. Captain Arthur Baker, who had been appointed in 1877, succeeded in controlling the Carnivals of 1878 and 1879. In 1880, he called on participants to surrender their drums, sticks, and flambeaux; they complied with this order, and their torches were extinguished. His attempt to do so again in 1881 led to the riot, which commenced on February 27 (Pearse 1956, 189; Liverpool 2001, 304–5; Cowley 1996, 77).

Men and women prepared for battle with the police to defend their tradition. Revelers had bottles and stones lined up in the yards of the city. Some wore overturned utensils over their heads as a means of protection, and “the fighters were encouraged as is the custom in the Kalenda — by prostitutes and female stickfighters such as Lucretia, Pegtop and Sarah Jamaica” (Liverpool 2001, 307). Kalenda singing and chanting was heard as bottles and stones were thrown towards the police (Liverpool 2001, 308). The battle spread across the streets of Port of Spain, namely Duke, Prince, Charlotte, Queen, and Duncan streets. In the aftermath, 38 policemen had been hurt, between 40 and 50 masqueraders were injured, 21 arrests were made, and street lamps were smashed (Liverpool 309).

From the 1890s, Carnival was brought under more effective control by the police, which eventually led to the end of Jamette Carnival. Street parading before dawn on Monday morning was forbidden with regard to Canboulay. Bands of more than 10 men carrying sticks were forbidden, and pisse-en-lit bands, transvestism, and obscene words and actions were prohibited (Pearse 1956, 189).

Carnival, as a result of enforcement of regulations and policing, had changed, and it became accepted by the middle and upper classes. Nonetheless, in the early twentieth century, protests continued in which women were involved, namely the 1903 Water Riot. This was a violent confrontation that transpired between the residents of Port of Spain and the colonial police on March 23, 1903. The Waterworks Ordinance of 1902 aimed to stop the waste of water by installing meters to charge for use of water, charge rates for baths exceeding 60 gallons, and so forth. However, the Ratepayers’ Association, which was founded in 1901 by some prominent businessmen with the objective of safeguarding the interest of Port of Spain rate payers, took up the specific issue of water (Brereton 1982, 149). The Ratepayers’ Association called on its members and public to assert their political rights and urged the public to converge on Red House to prevent the passage of this bill. “…Deep political tensions between an emerging Creole intellectual class able to organise mass political opinion and a powerful colonial establishment in near absolute control of the political framework” (Pantin 2016, 61) also contributed to causing the Water Riot.

On March 23, a crowd, which included “women, children and younger men of the poorer section of Port of Spain,” gathered outside the parliamentary building, chanting and shouting. Women from the diametre played a prominent part in the assault on the Red House. They were dancing and singing in the street as they approached the building before they threw stones (Cowley 1996, 162). During the delivery of a speech by His Excellency,
the crowds all around the Red House had been growing more and more noisy and turbulent and several small fights … with the police occurred. For a long while however nothing serious happened though the singing of the National Anthem, Rule Britannia etc., the beating of the drum, the blows of whistles and the cries of women carrying flags were on the increase.  

The incident that sparked the riot occurred when “a woman on the lawn to the East of the Red House was arrested by a constable, who was immediately struck by a couple of stones flung by two small boys.” The officer released the woman, but she attacked him immediately as well. Several members of the crowd dragged back the woman and the boys, and “in a moment the stone throwing was widely taken up by the crowd and the stones were pelted in a terrible shower in the Council Chamber.”

In the aftermath, the Government House (the Red House) was burned to the ground, 16 people were killed by the police, and over 40 were injured (Pantin 2016, 150). The list of those wounded or killed comprised predominately men, but some women were among those wounded or killed, namely Emily Donald of George Street, Eliza Walker of Belmont, Louisa Sobers of Henry Street, and Mary Seymour of Charles Street. None of the Ratepayers’ Association were involved in the rioting, and the victims were nearly all lower-class urban residents (Brereton 1982, 150).

Conclusion

By their very existence, jamettes embodied resistance through their bodies, whether as sex workers, stickfighters, or protestors in the 1881 Canboulay Riots and the 1903 Water Riot. They articulated resistance as chantwells, through which patois flowed off their tongues and through their songs. Their retention and preservation of this tradition were essential for stickband culture and barrack yard life. Women played an instrumental role and contributed tremendously to the cultural and racial identities of the Black working class of the city. At every turn, when they sought to bring out the jamette from within, they faced opposition from members of the public and the colonial government. Jamettes, nonetheless, continued to rebel in order to maintain a heritage that was based on African cultural traditions and resisted respectability politics to assert a liberated sexuality beyond racial and colonial confinements. Indeed, jamette women were survivors, strategists, bold, dangerous, violent, promiscuous, and skilled fighters, who held steadfastly to who they were and not what society dictated that a woman should be.

Notes

2 Ibid., 2.
3 Ibid.
4 Trinidad Royal Gazette, January 16, 1896: 66.
6 Ibid.
7 Trinidad Royal Gazette, January 16, 1896: 66.
8 Dennis Mahabir Collection, “Mr. Hamilton’s Report on the Causes and Disturbances in Connexion with the Carnival in Trinidad,” 3.
10 Trinidad Chronicle, June 16, 1868: 3.
11 Ibid.
13 Dennis Mahabir Collection, “Mr. Hamilton’s Report on the Causes and Disturbances in Connexion with the Carnival in Trinidad,” 3.
14 Ibid.
15 The Port of Spain Gazette, March 25, 1903: 4–5.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.

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