

Kanaval: a People's History of Haiti

I first visited Haiti in 1991 and I have been questioning what keeps taking me back there ever since. And it is history that binds me to Haiti. Writing an introduction for my book on Jacmel Kanaval only two weeks before the earthquake I used a seismic metaphor for Haiti and History. I said Haiti seemed to be on a fault line of history. So I think its best that I avoid that one. But maybe History as Lava, bubbling and spitting through cracks and craters, or as a volcanic steam, hissing and spouting through blow holes and geysers. Now there's a thing. And I can sense it under every step I take in Haiti.

And it's not just a case of what a History Haiti Has Had. Though that has been pretty stellar in global terms. For me it is a case of How Haiti reveals its History. I have visited other Caribbean islands where it feels that History has been mopped up, rather like blood after an airport massacre, and then re-presented as idyllic views on restaurant place mats or murals on hotel walls. But those cities and nations feel history-less. They feel like lands with weaker breathes of life or culture, beside the glut of bars and hotels for tourists. Businesses that are utterly fearful of any wrong-footed historical connotations.

Haitian culture is a potent vessel for this history, continually transmitting, telling, retelling and reinterpreting Haitian history. School fees are excessive for the majority of the Haitian people, and education standards poor, but you will be hard pushed to find a Haitian who doesn't know the vast and intimate details of their own history.

Haiti, as a Nation, uses every cultural tool in its box to transmit its History, from the drums, songs, dances and possessive ritual of the *Vodou* religion, it uses the improvisational songs of *Twobadou* groups and the collective melodies and rhythms of *Rara* bands. Haitian history uses the words, theatre and poems of its great literary tradition and the unique visions of its painters, sculptors and flag makers. Haitian history, and not only that of the revolution, is also replayed through the masks, costumes and narratives of the carnival in Jacmel, a coastal town in southern Haiti.

Each year, Jacmel holds pre-Lenten Mardi Gras festivities. Troupes of performers act out mythological and political tales in a whorish theatre of the absurd that courses the streets, rarely shackled by traditional parade. Whatever the Carnival lacks in glitz and spectacle, it makes up for in home-grown surrealism and poetic metaphor. The characters and costume partially betray their roots in medieval European carnival, but the Jacmellien masquerades are also a fusion of clandestine *Vodou*, ancestral memory, political satire and personal revelation. The lives of the indigenous Taino Indians, the slaves' revolt and more recently state corruption are all played out using drama and costume on Jacmel's streets. This is people taking history into their own hands and moulding it into whatever they decide. So within this Historical retelling we find mask after mask, but rather than concealing, they are revealing, story after story, through disguise, gesture and roadside pantomime.

I first witnessed and documented Jacmel carnival in 1995. From the first time I saw it I realised it was very unique. The surreal costumes that I had never seen before first really sparked my imagination. The whole thing was a very weird lo-fi inversion of spectacle. But also what became increasingly apparent is that the carnival itself is quite nebulous as different troupes set out at different times. There is no set time, route or parade. So often I could wander the streets not finding anything then suddenly I will turn a corner and find a group of cardboard masked solicitors and judges with portable chairs and a table seated in the middle of the road. Or another corner and find a painted boy with riding a donkey which is wearing sneakers, trousers and speaking on a mobile phone. It was a kind of carnival of flaneurs and meanderers. And this lack of traditional parade I feel is very important. This is what, in my mind, gives the space for the narrative, and consequently the history. To lose this fluidity with a procession would be to reduce the complex poetry of mask, gesture, theatre and costume of the narrative to pure spectacle.

This is to a certain extent happening with the National carnival which now takes place a weekend before actual Mardi Gras weekend. It has been organized, to a certain extent, to accommodate the visiting diaspora and enable them to see Jacmel carnival and return to Port-au-Prince for the big one. A marriage between expediency and profit has the carnival characters processing along Avenue Baranquilla in front of an audience seated on stands built by local businesses. The costumes lose their potency through the parade and narrative diluted if not disappeared. But happily the carnival spirit is highly robust and reverts to its anarchic, unfettered form the weekend later.

I started this project in 1995 and kept returning for seven or so years. It became rapidly apparent to me that there were many underlying narratives. As a photographer, I was always keenly aware of the difficulties and responsibilities in representing Haiti. Since the slaves revolt Haiti has been a mythological epi-centre for racist and colonial anxieties. And many of these encoded mythologies are reproduced and replicated through the visual representation of Haiti. Looking at my increasingly iconic photograph of the Lanceurs de Corde, the two men with the bulls horns, one of the first images I took of carnival in 1995, I was aware of how easily the wildly exotic image could feed into a deep well of stereotype. The issues of 'who can represent who, and how', are significant issues of power, race and class in our increasingly inequitable world. Whilst I could not eradicate all the power imbalance inherent in my position representing people in Haiti, or overturn the 200 year cultural demonization of Haiti - I could at least find strategies for 'damage limitation'. So after seven years of photographic documentation I realised that the images were not enough, I needed the signified alongside the signifier. So I returned three times to Jacmel in a calmer, more tranquil, none carnival period and collected the oral histories of the people making and wearing the costumes. The stories behind the masquerade. I tracked down the leaders of the carnival groups and asked them to tell me their tales. To restore the narrative to the photographs and try to reduce the level of spectacle.

I'd also like to highlight a few technical details not so much to bore you but as an extra explanation of the form and aesthetic of the work. I use a 40 year old Rolleicord medium format twin lens reflex camera and a Lunasix lightmeter and shoot onto black and white negative film. The camera is totally mechanical and once the film of only 12 exposures is loaded the shutter has to be cocked before you can actually take a picture. All exposure changes are manual and

winding onto the next frame is quite laborious too. I wander the streets searching for characters that will agree to be photographed. I always ask beforehand and pay people for the chance to photograph them. If they agree, and many do not, they always seem to be very patient with the long process. As I have to take a light reading, change the speed and aperture and focus. There is always stasis in my images as the process takes a bit of time. But perhaps with the slow process a space between myself and the sitter is created which seems to leave the hustle bustle of the street and enter the territory of the old fashioned portrait studio. The sitters strike poses reflecting their masked characters. I do not feel that my photographs ruin any carnival energy as they are not attempting to represent any level of authentic carnival mood but more recreating a photo studio. The time and space created seems to allow for a little of the historical narrative to seep through. One of the essayists in the book referred to this as 'performed ethnography'.

It's also important to say that my attraction to Haiti is also a part of a trajectory. A culmination of my love of folk traditions and people's histories. From the feminist folk punk band I sang and wrote the lyrics for in the mid-eighties, to my enduring love of British folk traditions from the Burry Man to the Gloucestershire Cheese Rollers, from my photographs of fairground ghost trains and streethawking children with Guy Fawkes to my love of August Sander and Studs Terkel. I love when people keep hold of their own traditions, their own creativity and their own worth for their own class. Without blanket consumerism and broadcast entertainment to dilute history. And what I feel we have lost in the U.K. I still find in Haiti—a nation tirelessly binding their history into sculptures, paintings, novels, poems, song, ritual and costume.

I'd like to finish by reading a few of my favourite oral histories. It has been hard to choose them because I love them all.

Madam Lasiren

Andre Ferner 59 years

Lasiren is a spirit that lives under the sea and does mystical work there, she is a Vodou spirit, I dream of Lasiren all the time. That is the reason I do Lasiren for Mardi Gras. I chose Lasiren because my grandmother, father and mother all served the spirits, I love her & honour her. The baby that I carry in my arms is the child of Lasiren who is called Marie Rose. When I walk the streets I sing her song which goes 'I am Lasiren and I cry for Lasiren, when I work mystically in the night bad luck can come my way'.

I prepare for Lasiren by putting on a hat, a mask and carrying an umbrella. I put on a necklace and gloves. This necklace is called Mambo Welcome, it is a fetish. Because Lasiren is a fish she has to disguise herself as a woman to be at Mardi Gras. My mask and hat cover her fish's head. And the dress she wears covers her fish's tail. The chain I wear is a sacred chain. Each year I change the disguise and fashion a new baby. In order to get inspiration I go to the place where the big beasts live and they instruct me how to do Mardi Gras. I have been doing this for 18 years. Before that I did another Mardi Gras call Patoko. This was a group of men who were dressed as women, with nice dresses and high heeled shoes. We did a marriage between men and woman on the street. After that we had a group called the duck who carried brushes in their hands wearing blue trousers, white t-shirts, new sandals and a scarf around our waists. We swept the streets of Jacmel. I have always found a way of doing a Mardi Gras.

**Chaloska (Charles Oscar)
Eugene Lamour a.k.a. Boss Cota 61 years**

The Chief Charles Oscar was a military commandant in charge of the police in Jacmel. He died here in 1912. He was tall and strong with big feet and teeth and feared by all. At a time when there was political instability in Port-au-Prince, when President Sam had just been assassinated, Charles Oscar took his chance to take 500 prisoners from the local jail and kill them all. There was so much blood it made a river of death. The population was so angry that that revolted and tore the police chief to pieces in the street and burned him down. He was killed in the same violent way that he had treated the people.

This story has always been very striking to me, and in 1962, I decided to create the character of Chaloska for Carnival. I designed the military uniform and made the big false teeth with bull's teeth bought from the market. Each year I change the costume a little by designing a different hat for the group to wear.

When I created Chaloska I also wanted to create some other characters to go along with him. I created Master Richard and Doctor Calypso. Master Richard is a rich man with a big bag full of money and a huge fat stomach. He walks with the group of Chaloska buying justice and paying the judges. He represents the impunity and corruption that hides behind Chaloska and is the real chief of the city. Doctor Calypso is an old hunch back with a black suit and a stick in his hand. He works for Chaloska and checks on the health of the prisoners, always reporting that they are healthy when they are dying.

These characters are still here in Haitian society so it is good to parade them on the street. It is a message to all future Oscars that you will end up this way. The group goes to different places in town threatening the people. The boss Chaloska always finally dies, and the others call for mercy as they are cowards, but then another Chaloska immediately replaces him. This is to show the infinite replication of Chaloska which continue to produce the same system. There will be Chaloska until the end of the world. They started with the beginning and will not end until the end.

**Bounda Pa Bounda (Arse By Arse)
Dieuli Laurent 50 years**

I was born on this mountain here where we speak but I went to Port-au-Prince to find work. It was there I did a famous number for Carnival, a little puppet in a cardboard box that I called La Mayotte. A few years later I moved to the Artibonite, to work in the rice fields. There I devised another kind of Mardi Gras. I started to wear a dress, a long black and purple dress. I had two musicians on two different drums. I also carried the makout (straw satchel) of Kouzin Zaka, the spirit of agriculture. I was a drag Zaka. Then, to find a means for life, I had to move to the Dominican Republic to work on the sugar cane plantations. It was there that I had my first revelation. I saw a small chap, very high up, picking leaves off the trees and putting them into a basket. But in all my dreams I did not know who it was. He called own and said not the purple dress but the red!

I left the Dominican Republic and finally returned to the mountains above Jacmel where I was born. I decided to form a group to follow my revelation. It was then that I realised that the character in the trees was Gran Bwa, the Vodou spirit of the forest. I started to wear a long red

dress, wig, mascara and carried a basket of leaves and flowers on my head. I brought together musicians and dancers and called the group Bounda Pa Bounda. One day, back in Port-au-Prince, I experienced a musical revelation and this song came to me.

'My arse is too small, you are going to put me on the kompa rhythm'

All my songs come to me in my sleep, but this song came as I was walking past a Vodou temple in the capital, and is the emblem of my group. I added the sunglasses to my costume just three years ago. Gran Bwa is an invisible and he dwells in the trees, but when you need him you will call him and he will tell you the secrets of the leaves. You must understand that this band is a roots phenomena, it is a mystical group. We are all Vodou believers and born into it and want to continue it. When we go out at Carnival we carry a basket of leaves so if we meet an oungan (Vodou priest) or mambo (priestess) they can buy the healing plants from us. The leaves are used for teas or baths, to heal people or ward against bad spirits. We are a Mardi Gras but also we are just the women bringing the leaves of the forest from Gran Bwa.

Lanse Kòd

Salnave Raphael a.k.a. Nabot Power 32 years

When I was child the Lanceurs de Corde were always my favourite group. But I wanted to do it on a much larger scale. I have a gym here in my yard and all my friends from the gym wanted to join. We have one hundred guys, all strong and fit. We are making a statement about slavery and being freed from slavery. This is a celebration of our independence in 1804. The cords we carry are the cords that were used to bind us. We are always sullen and menacing and we never smile. The blackness of our skin is made with crushed charcoal, pot black, kleren (cane spirit) and cane syrup mixed with a little water in a bucket. Although we know that slaves never wore horns, this is about the revolt of the slaves, and we wear the horns to give us more power and to look even more frightening.

When we take to the streets we stop at the first cross roads and at the blow of my whistle we all start doing push-ups. This is to show that even though the slaves suffered they are still very strong. Some of the slaves are so strong that they must wear chains to hold back their massive strength. I chose to do Lanceurs de Corde because I know and like the story, and in carnival people like to be scared. We are the scariest. The Zel Mathurin are supposed to be frightening but they are scared of us because they think that they will dirty their fancy satin costumes if they touch us. Also our costumes are much cheaper to make than many other costumes. No materials, no papier-mache just the charcoal and syrup mixture.