Before the “bikini and beads” masquerade bands with their thousands of masqueraders, before the theatrical epics of Peter Minshall, the fantasy portrayals of Wayne Berkeley, Irvin McWilliams, and Edmond and Lil Hart, before the historical epics of George Bailey, Harold Saldenah, and Bobby Ammon, before the Carnival we take for granted today, there were other masquerades — older, and sometimes stranger, stories to tell.

These were the stories of animal mas, of sailors, wild Indians, minstrels, and baby dolls, of parodies like the pierrot grenade, negre jardin, and Dame Lorraine, of sinister characters like devils, moko jumbies, midnight robbers, and jab molassies.

As Carnival was prettified and commercialised in the late 20th century, these traditional masquerades became less visible, their distinctive dances, speeches, and rituals disappearing from living memory, becoming subjects for study by cultural historians and anthropologists.

Carnival as we know it was introduced to Trinidad in the late 18th century by French planters arriving after the Cedula of Population. They brought with them the tradition of pre-Lenten masquerade balls of the kind still celebrated today in some parts of Europe with large Roman Catholic populations. The planters’ African slaves and the island’s free coloured population, who also introduced rituals, characters, music, and dance from their own cultural traditions, soon parodied these elegant affairs, which often spilled over into street processions.

After full Emancipation in 1838, the formerly enslaved outnumbered the white population by at least four to one. They took over the streets of Port of Spain with wildly exuberant celebrations and “vulgar” displays. They sought to shock and offend the ladies and gentlemen they held responsible for their years of servitude.

It worked; the upper and middle classes withdrew their Carnival fetes to behind closed doors, and it was to be a century before polite society re-joined the mas of the streets. In disapproval of these developments among the lower orders, colonial authorities curtailed the Carnival celebrations, which traditionally lasted from December until Ash Wednesday, to just two days. In 1846, they even banned the wearing of masks.

Nonetheless, new characters, many of them parodies of existing European masquerades with distinct African elements, continued to appear at Carnival. The Cannes Brulées (or Canboulay), during which slaves had been driven with whips, horns, and flambeaux to put out canefield fires, was also reinvented. At midnight on Carnival Sunday, in what might be considered a precursor of modern-day J’Ouvert, the character of the negre jardin (field slave) took on the ferocity of his former driver, whip and stick in hand.

By the 1860s, stickfighters, prostitutes, chantuelles, dustmen, migrants, and the unemployed — the residents of Port of Spain’s destitute slums — had taken over the
street mas, finding release from the rigours of everyday life in the annual free-for-all. These men and women from the diameter — the wrong side of the city, “behind the bridge” — lent their name to the Carnival of this era. “Jamette” Carnival, with its criminal associations, revelled in sinister characters like devils, demons, and imps, threatening polite passers-by and further outraging the upper classes.

As Trinidad’s population was swelled by immigration and Port of Spain’s barrack yards grew more and more crowded, Carnival turned into a battleground for stickfighters, batonnaires, and whip-wielding warriors, who took the opportunity to settle rivalries and tensions. By 1881, the powers-that-be had had enough. To curb the worst of what were considered immoral, violent, and obscene public displays, the colonial government banned many customary Carnival activities, including the use of drums, sticks, and torches. When the police tried to enforce the new legislation by confiscating these items, once-rival bands of jamette masqueraders joined forces to retaliate, in what are today remembered as the Canboulay Riots.

Similar confrontations occurred again in 1884. Having failed to suppress the festival, the authorities decided on a different approach: to tame it by restricting when, where, and how the masquerade could take place, including a ban on the Canboulay re-enactments. To help Port of Spain’s merchants began to offer prizes for the best costumes and to sponsor bands, giving masqueraders a more socially acceptable channel for rivalry. As so often, commercial incentives succeeded where legal threats failed, and by the 1890s much of the “indecency” of jamette mas had been purged from Carnival.

This brought the coloured middle classes back to the streets, and many of the grassroots mas characters of the 19th century, already combining African and European elements, evolved further into more elaborate forms. The white upper classes finally re-emerged onto the streets as well — at first on decorated lorries that kept them safely above the crowds, but after the Second World War, and all its disruptions of the old social order, revellers from the privileged classes began to stray into a street mas reinvigorated by early bandleaders like Harold Saldenah. The era of “pretty mas” had begun.

Most traditional Carnival characters reached the highest point of their evolution in the early decades of the 20th century, the era between the “reformation” of Jamette Carnival and the triumph of pretty mas. To portray one of these characters involved much more than simply dressing in the appropriate costume for two days every year.

In a combination of theatrical performance and cultural ritual, the masquerader became the character, adopting its persona and history, characteristic speeches and dances and conventions. To portray a devil, for instance, you had to start as an imp, work your way up through the hierarchy of beasts and demons, demonstrating your worthiness by a metaphorical spilling of blood. These masqueraders didn’t just play mas — they were the mas, sometimes to the point where the idiosyncrasies of their characters stayed with them the other 363 days of the year.

But the pretty mas revolution of the 1950s and the increasing commercialisation of Carnival over the last sixty years has left these traditional characters stranded. Every year, fewer people remember the complex rituals and traditions that gave them life and spirit, and since the 1930s no new characters have emerged. Is there still room for the devil, the wild Indian, the bat, and the Dame Lorraine in today’s Carnival?
Devils and demons

In the taxonomy of traditional Carnival characters, the devil is a whole family, with dozens of different species in a full-scale devil band — some accounts mention as many as 42 versions of devil mas. The distinctions between the various types have blurred with time, but even today at least eight main ones survive: the imp, the beast, the demon, the bookman, the dragon, the jab jab, the jab molassie, and the devil proper.

Most historians agree the last three were the first devil characters to appear. Before emancipation, slaves were forbidden to participate in Carnival, but this never stopped their backyard mas. After the end of slavery, the celebrations became more public, as gangs of recently liberated slaves, covered in black grease, molasses, or varnish, took to the streets, revelling in their freedom, and scaring the life out of the upper classes. Naked but for shorts, and sometimes with chains and padlocks round their legs, they attempted to offend polite society, which they blamed for decades of suffering.

The writer Max Harris points out that during the Jamette Carnival era devil bands were common on the streets at night. Hooting hordes of semi-dressed “beasts” acted out hellish scenes representing the days of slavery. By the end of the 19th century, these creatures gave birth to full-scale devil and dragon bands. One of the first recorded devil bands, Demonites, was created in 1910 by “Chinee” Patrick Jones, who was inspired by Dante’s Inferno to create an elaborate depiction of the denizens of Hell.

Leading the way in most devil bands are the imps — Carnival’s greatest-ever dancers, according to masman Narrie Approo — who twirled and skipped in highly complicated steps as they taunted the beasts, dragons, and creatures they restrained with long chains. “The imp was a ballet dancer,” Approo says. “The other devil mas don’t want nothing with him. They say God threw holy water in the canal, and when an imp come to the canal, the amount of actions he make ’cause he scared holy water, boy, none of the other devil mas could compete. And when an imp meet a next imp and had to compete with him in a dance, that was mas.”

Imps come in many different colours and versions. The King Imp is attended by smaller imps, some in black, others in red, like their leader. With tights, masks, wings, tails, axes, scrolls, horns, bells, dice, or scales with weights, the details vary, but it is always the imps’ role to torment both the other creatures in the band and their human audience, as they bully frightened onlookers into handing over spare change.

Meanwhile, at the ends of the imps’ chains lurk beasts and dragons of many varieties, usually equipped with wings and a tail. The beast dance consists of sudden lunging movements, as the creature tries to strike down the pack of imps surrounding and constantly goading him.

The dragon is a special kind of beast, with its own history and tradition. Some say dragon mas was influenced by the traditional Chinese dragon dance, and was introduced to Trinidad Carnival around the turn of the century by “Chinee” Patrick. The dragon’s dance is central to the character. According to Brian Honoré, “The dragon dance, known as the ‘crossing of the water’, occurs when the dragon’s path is blocked by water in drains or gutters: here the dragon exposes his rage and his cowardice. He rages at his tormentors, the sprightly winged imps, but he lives in mortal ‘fear’ of
water, since water may be ‘holy’. He finally crosses the water-filled drain . . . by lying on his back in supplication to the true living God in the heavens, and flipping over the drain. By this time the imps have collected all the financial encouragement thrown by spectators, and the dragon band, led by the bookman, move on to another lucrative venue.”

The bookman — with his white or red devil mask, pointed goatee, Tudor-style pants, embroidered velvet gown, pleated bodice, and flowing cape adorned with biblical scenes — is the principal character in a traditional devil band, a representation of Satan himself. His name comes from the enormous book he carries, in which he records the names of souls for prospective damnation. As the band proceeds down the street, the bookman does an elaborate waltz, stopping to bow to the crowds, even while he supposedly jots down their names in his doomsday book.

Outside the elaborate devil band, with its ranks and orders of demonic creatures, other forms of devil mas have their own traditions. The jab molassie — the name means “molasses devil” in French patois — is one of the oldest Carnival characters, possibly dating back to the days of slavery. He represents the ghost of a slave who met his death by falling into a vat of boiling molasses in a sugar factory. The jab molassie’s costume is nothing more than a pair of pants cut off at the knee, and a thick coat originally of molasses and later of tar, oil, or grease, all over his body, including face and hair. He often sports a tail and horns and carries a pitchfork. As he dances and gyrates wildly through the streets, to the sound of drumming on a pitch-oil tin, he runs after children, terrifying them until their parents hand over money.

Modern jab molasses are likely to wear running shoes and speedos, but the head-to-toe layer of oil or grease hasn’t changed in 150 years. A similar character which remains popular is the blue devil, dressed much like a jab molassie but with a coat of bright blue paint. Blue devils appear making animal howls or high-pitched screams. Some beat pieces of iron, others drag imps against their will, and some even blow flames from paraffin torches. On the street, they lunge savagely at the crowd, thrusting single fingers in the air to express their demand for money, sometimes chewing roucou berries to create a red drool dribbling down their chins, representing their victims’ blood. Like jab molasses, blue devils are avengers, threatening retribution for crimes done to them in the past. Nowadays, blue devils — and devils of all descriptions — have become associated with the village of Paramin in the mountains north of Port of Spain, to which they flock on Carnival Monday after J’Ouvert. The jab jab — patois for “double devil” — has a similar name to the jab molassie, but a different history. His costume makes him look like a medieval European jester — two-coloured shirt with points at the waist, decorated with bells, mirrors, and rhinestones; a cape; a hood, sometimes with horns; stockings on his legs — but this clownish getup disguises a fierce warrior who carries a thick whip, ready to use in battle against any other jab jabs he may encounter. In the old days, the jab jab would usually wear an iron pot under his hood to protect him in battle from his opponent’s whip. He showed off his battle-readiness with chants about his ferocity and his resistance to civil society.

Historians point out that the jab jab character was often unofficially, and with no derogatory intent, called “coolie mas”, because East Indians took it on as their own. “The jab jabs, with their fancy clothes, whips, and bells, had a particular Indian involvement,” says Burton Sankeralli. “The Indians understood the bells as gunghroos (sunghroos), bells Indian dancers attach to their ankles, and jab jabs were indeed
referred to as ‘cooly devils’. Indians were attracted to the devils because they evoked images from Indian mythology.”

“Until the 1950s,” adds John Cupid, “Jab jab mas used to be plentiful in Aranguez, Quay d’Orsay, St Joseph, Tunapuna, Dinsley Village, Tacarigua . . . and in all places along the Eastern Main Road where sugar cane villages used to be.”

**Pierrots and pierrot grenades**

The pierrot pantomime character was a popular figure in the theatres of France from the 16th century onward. He made his first appearance in Trinidad at Carnival balls held by the upper classes at the end of the 18th century. His lavish costume included a satin gown decorated with bells and hundreds of little triangles, a velvet breastpiece with sequins and mirrors, and a plush beret. He was given to making long, boastful speeches full of allusions to Shakespeare and Milton, showing off a vast knowledge of literature and history. His pugilistic nature sometimes led to actual fistfights.

The pierrot grenade — the name means “pierrot from Grenada”, which is to say, a “mock” pierrot — was the freed slaves’ caricature of their former masters’ elaborate masquerade, and first appeared during the Jamette Carnival era. The satin and velvet pierrot costume was too expensive for the ordinary man in the street, so the pierrot grenade cleverly used whatever material was available, cutting scraps of cloth of many colours into strips and sewing them onto burlap bags. Instead of silver sequins and mirrors, he embellished his costume with tin covers and pieces of foil; sardine cans with stones in them took the place of bells.

The pierrot grenade may have been the pierrot’s poorer relative, but he too wanted to show off his erudition and verbal dexterity, to prove he was just as learned as his former master. He spoke in patois, the language of the streets, fighting mock battles of absurd rhetoric, boasting of being able to spell any word in the dictionary. From this evolved the distinctive pierrot talk, a kind of spelling rhyme.

Felix Edinborough, the best-known contemporary pierrot grenade, explains. “He would ask you to spell something, and then he would say ‘no no no, that’s not the way to spell it.’ And he’d show you how to get it by breaking it up into syllables.” The word “Chicago”, for instance:

*I do not spell words letter for letter,*  
*Although my method is a thousand times better.*  
*You see every word for me is a story*  
*And sometimes I even use allegory*  
*And according to the situation from time to time,*  
*I does shorten into pleasant rhyme.*  
*This one I’m sure you know:*  
"De CHIcken in de CAr and de car can’t GO — That’s the way to spell CHI-CA-GO.

According to Edinborough, the original pierrot grenade had a mask of fine wire mesh, which allowed some of the more “respectable” members of society to play the masquerade in downtown yards. “People weren’t meant to see your face in those days,” he says. “You were meant to be someone else, you couldn’t have the same face,
and you would change your voice. You never used the same voice. What I do today is try to be a patois person speaking English. I actually grew up in a village where they spoke patois, so I know the accent. I try to imitate it today, and because I do it in the theatre I paint my face.”

“As a pierrot grenade, you have to be able to bring out a punch-line properly,” he adds. “They constantly believed ‘I am better than you, I can dominate you’, and that is why they always ended up in battles. So you had to be quick witted and able to make your own words to win.” Pierrot grenades performed in pairs from the same village, and were very territorial. One was the master pierrot, the other a student. If they crossed into another village there would be a battle of words.

“The pierrot grenade makes comments on the political situation. They are social commentators,” says Edinborough. “Apart from the midnight robber, who is more serious, what other character makes that social commentary? And is more colourful and positive too?”

**Bats**

The first bat masqueraders in Trinidad Carnival were probably members of the early devil bands, where they joined the other infernal characters — imps, dragons, demons — in their imaginative exorcism of the suffering of the past. “Chinee” Patrick’s first devil band is said to have included at least one bat. But before long the bat character had broken away, and began to perform as an individual, developing his own personality. It’s often said that masqueraders who played the bat eventually came to resemble the creature they portrayed. The costume was made of black or brown cloth, tightly fitted over the body, with a headpiece made of *papier mâché* and swansdown, realistically depicting a bat’s eyes, nose, and teeth, completely covering the head. The mouth of the mask allowed the masquerader to both see and breathe, and in the extreme heat it was sometimes necessary to lift the headpiece like a visor. Gloves and leather boots with metal claws were usually part of the get-up.

But the key elements of the costume were the wings, sometimes as large as 15 feet in span, made from cane or bamboo and covered with the same dark cloth as the rest of the costume. Attached to the masquerader both at his arms and at his ankles, the wings were almost completely mobile, almost like natural extensions of the masquerader’s body, which made the characteristic bat dance possible. In performance, he would crawl, flap and fold his wings, and dance on tiptoe, mimicking the flight of an actual bat.

“The traditional mas players are continuously studying the characters they are portraying. They will look at a real bat when they are making the costume,” says historian John Cupid. “They will take a bat into their room and examine every detail of its structure. In the streets or on the competition stage during Carnival, it is the real bat in a larger form. Not only how it looks, but the sound is there, the movement is there, the detailed physical features are there; it is a bat of their minute observation.” Bat masqueraders would “mime like bats, walk like bats, make sounds like bats, eat fruit like bats, dance like bats, even suck blood like vampire bats.”

Less flamboyant, perhaps, than some other traditional characters, and perhaps demanding a peculiar personality to carry off verisimilitude, the bat has become rare in
today’s Carnival. The late Edgar Whiley was in his time Port of Spain’s best known old-time bat; the mas doesn’t seem to attract younger folk. But in one particular way the bat continues to have a crucial influence on today’s mas. Designer Peter Minshall, who has made a special study of the architecture of traditional mas characters, has over the years adapted the basic structure of the bat costume — its flexible wings — into an astonishing variety of incarnations, starting with his breakthrough costume From the Land of the Hummingbird in 1976. Where Minshall has led, other designers have — eventually — followed, and the “kinetic mas” of the last 20 years can in many cases be traced right back to its evolutionary source in the humble bat.

**Dame Lorraine**

At the start of the 19th century, Trinidad’s upper-class ladies dressed for masquerade balls in voluminous flowing gowns. Decked with exquisite jewellery, they danced elegantly through the night — observed through the windows by their slaves and servants. Naturally, these aristocratic ladies and their refined airs were prime targets for mockery when the freed slaves held their own Carnival celebrations, and thus evolved the burlesque character of the Dame Lorraine.

Copying the ladies’ fine gowns with whatever materials they could find — assorted rags, makeshift fans and hats, shiny objects imitating jewels — the masqueraders mocked the pretensions of respectable society. Over time, the Dame Lorraine mas became more elaborate. Heavily padded breasts and posterior reinforced the parody, and a large “pregnant” belly hinted at less than immaculate morals. Fine wire mesh masks, with eyes and mouth painted in, lent the masquerader the safety of anonymity. In Port of Spain’s backyards, the Dame Lorraine evolved into a theatrical event, enacted at midnight on Carnival Sunday for an eager audience. Imitating the stately scenes at the old plantation balls, a “butler” introduced arriving couples, who then performed exaggerated versions of formal dances, accompanied by small cuatro bands.

The Dame Lorraine mas was so engaging, its performers were not solely liberated slaves or even women. Often, beneath the masks were cross-dressing men, many of whom happened to be the descendants of the very French planters they were mocking. These persons of respectability paraded and danced for all and sundry, disguised from sight, revelling in the freedom of downtown Carnival.

Today, the Dame Lorraine survives in a less elaborate form, but she remains a favourite with spectators. Occasionally, designers incorporate the character into large bands, and perhaps the most famous modern-day Dame Lorraine, Janet Bruno, is one of the most popular individuals at the Tobago Heritage Festival each year.

**Negre jardin**

Like the pierrot, the negre jardin — “black gardener” — is a character first portrayed by the upper classes at their Carnival balls, and later adopted after emancipation by the liberated slaves. The negue jardin’s ability to cross barriers of race and class, back and forth, is rooted in its authenticity. For an upper-class planter, the masquerade, depicting a field slave, allowed him to play a role removed from polite high society. Acting out slave customs, behaviour, and dances was a thrilling and slightly subversive change from the elaborate Carnival masques of the ballroom.
Later on, for a liberated slave, playing the *negue jardín* character after emancipation was a chance to mock his former enslavement and invert reality through parody. During slavery, when dangerous cane fires (or *Cannes Brulées*) broke out on the estates, the field slaves were driven with whips and blaring horns to extinguish the fires. The toil could last for days, to the sound of endless drumming. Now the *Cannes Brulées* — Canboulay — was reinvented as a street performance. This time it was the *negre jardín* who carried the whip, cracking it like the estate drivers, while the streets were lit up with torches and the masqueraders were roused with cries and horns. The freed slaves used the substance of their own experience to create a powerful satiric masque, bellowing songs of defiance and wielding sticks.

After the 1881 Canboulay Riots, towards the end of the 19th century, the *negre jardín* again became popular with the upper classes, and reappeared at the masquerade balls still held behind closed doors. As before emancipation, the costume consisted of tight-fitting satin or khaki pants reaching to just above the knee, and a brightly coloured shirt with a heart-shaped panel sewn onto the chest, bordered with swansdown. Masks had been banned, and were replaced by soot on the masquerader’s face, but the *negre jardín* still performed old dances like the bamboula, the giouba, and the calinda.

Today the *negre jardín* is a rarity in Carnival, but his descendants, the stickfighters of Trinidadian lore with their kalinda songs, live on in villages across the country.

**Midnight robber**

Clad in black from head to toe, wrapped in a cape decorated with symbols of death and destruction, with shoes shaped like coffins and an oversize tombstone hat, announcing his dread arrival with a piercing whistle — the midnight robber has been terrifying children and intimidating adults for well over a century.

Brandishing what to the uninitiated might appear to be a real gun or knife, he declares his intention to devour and plunder the younger members of his audience, unless they hand over their “ransom” money. Older onlookers stand back, awaiting his boastful, idiosyncratic speech, eager for the audacious slang, double talk, and bombastic exaggeration.

Brian Honoré, the king of modern-day midnight robbers, explains that all this “robber talk” is really “a form of poetry.”

“His first official appearance,” says Honoré, “was in the early 1900s, until his self-imposed exile in the 1960s . . . although there are many different stories. It is like the debate over the origins of steel pan.” What’s certain is that the robber has played the bad-guy hero for generations, entertaining crowds with long speeches proclaiming his might and his right to avenge all the wrongs done to him and his own over the centuries.

Nowadays, those speeches cover topical issues like the IMF’s role in Third World investments, government corruption, and the proliferation of nuclear weapons, even the attempted coup d’état in Trinidad in 1990. These political and social commentaries have become intrinsic to his nature.
“You have a midnight robber, Brian Honoré, standing up and making speeches,” says Carnival historian John Cupid, “‘The dish runs away with the spoon’ — about all things which are adversely affecting human beings and indigenous culture and the environment.”

Some commentators argue that early film and television characters like Jesse James heavily influenced the development of robber mas but the story seems far more complex. The midnight robber’s heritage of master oratory results from a fusion of cultural influences from the bellies of three continents: Africa, South America, and North America.

“His genesis, his speech, his intention,” says Honoré, “is descended from the role of the African griot in Nigeria, Ghana, and Guinea — and stretches across the Atlantic to freed slaves working in the Mississippi Basin, identifiable in Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn, to Brazilian cowboys in Bahia, to the Caribbean, where the similarity to the extemporaneous delivery of calypsonians is unmistakable.”

The original griots — travelling poets and storytellers — documented the history of their peoples. Transplanted to the New World by slavery, they continued to serve as social and political critics, educators, and recorders of history. Whether in the Caribbean or North or South America, they helped link the present to the past, often adopting a grandstanding tone in the face of opposition or oppression. The end of slavery triggered a reinvention of the griot in Trinidad — into the calypsonian, on the one hand, but also into the midnight robber, reciting and avenging the wrongs of history.

Robber talk is still a vital metaphor for the self-affirming, self-asserting “talking back” of once-marginalised people or groups. Honoré suggests that, apart from fertilising Caribbean musical culture and the literature of the Mississippi Basin, robber talk has expended its presence to cover the globe via popular culture. “Rap, hip-hop [lines like] — ‘I take the S off a Superman chest’ — these are all forms of robber talk,” he says.

An encounter on the streets of Port of Spain with a midnight robber and his fierce, rapid verbal assault — concluded with a demand to “Stand and deliver!” — is still a spine-tingling experience. Imagine meeting up with the late Andrew “Puggy” Joseph, one of the greatest midnight robbers ever and being confronted by this speech:

\[
\text{Away down from the heightless regions of the phantom graveyard came I the invincible, son of the undauntible Agent of Death Valley.}
\]

\[
\text{Now the motive of my sudden appearance here today is to accomplish the destruction of my father’s deadly expeditions.}
\]

\[
\text{For within these two bloodthirsty hands of mine lies that woeful book of challenge, headed by the warrant of death, written with the hands of the kings and sealed with the blood of monarchs . . .}
\]

And there is no sight in Trinidad Carnival more impressive than a midnight robber meeting head to head with one of his own kind in a contest to outdo each other with villainous bravado. It is the duel of all duels, with centuries of swaggering speech behind it.
Moko jumbies

Over the last forty years, Trinidad Carnival has spread its influence around the world, as Carnival-like festivals have been established in just about every city with a sizeable population of Caribbean emigrants — from London to Brooklyn to Toronto. And the traditional Carnival character that has proved most adaptable to these migrations is the moko jumbie, the stilt-walker, who, towering 10 or 12 feet above the crowds, has become an immediately recognisable symbol of Carnival itself.

Described in West African folktales as guardians and “dancing spirits”, moko jumbies were originally protectors of villages, using their towering height to ward off evil spirits and foresee approaching danger faster than ordinary men. The memory of these mythical creatures survived slavery and the colonial powers’ attempts to suppress African religious customs and symbols. “Moko” is an African name for the Orisha (or god) of fate and retribution; the term “jumbie” — “ghost” — was added later by freed slaves in Trinidad. After emancipation, in the mid 19th century, the moko jumbie rose again, reinvented as a Carnival masquerade. The moko jumbie’s wooden stilts were hidden by long, brightly coloured trousers or skirts. An elaborate jacket, feathered hat, and white mask completed his costume. To the accompaniment of a drum played by an escort, he danced a sort of jig, jumping from one leg to another, while collecting money from people watching the revelry from the upper balconies of Port of Spain’s old townhouses.

According to Carnival historian John Cupid, the moko jumbie, when asked where he was from, would say from behind his mask that “he has been walking all the way across the Atlantic Ocean from the West Coast of Africa, laden with many, many centuries of experiences, and, in spite of all the inhuman attacks and encounters, yet still walking tall, tall, tall.”

Today’s moko jumbies — often children and teenagers, taught to balance on the stilts from an early age — may not be aware of all these cultural resonances, and the traditional costume is often simplified. But, defying fears of heights, overhanging electricity cables, and an absence of insurance coverage, moko jumbies in their hundreds, if not thousands, at carnivals all over the world, continue to walk tall.

Minstrels

Trinidad’s minstrel bands are direct descendents of the troublingly racist minstrel character that was so popular in the American South in the decades after the Civil War. The southern minstrel was a white man’s parody — disturbing to 21st-century minds — of freed black slaves as cheerful, indolent simpletons. His black-painted face and exaggeratedly rolling eyes fed a stereotype that was still thriving in the United States well into the civil rights era of the 1950s and 60s.

At some point in the late 19th century, the minstrel character was introduced to Trinidad Carnival, and perhaps began as an upper-class mockery of Port of Spain’s jamettes. But Trinidadians are particularly adept at turning an insult inside out to suit their purposes, and it wasn’t long before the minstrel was transformed into a spirited parody of the white masqueraders who invented him. Instead of a white man in blackface, he became a black man in whiteface — a black man playing a white man playing a black man, if you will. Formally attired in scissor-tail jackets, striped trousers,
bow ties, and hats, minstrel quartets chipped along, singing “freedom songs” or Negro spirituals, accompanying themselves on banjos, guitars, and cuatros. To “sweeten” their voices, they wouldn’t drink any very cold beverages immediately before Carnival.

Unlike sailors or Indians, minstrels were never known for great numbers, but a handful of minstrel bands — among them, the late Theresa Morilla Montano’s Minstrel Boys of Paramin — continue to wander the streets during Carnival, singing wistful tunes about a time and place far removed.

**Wild Indians**

Assembling in “tribes”, chanting and singing in a foreign tongue, dancing in zigzags along the road, with a scout or chief warrior ahead of the main group, on the lookout for rivals — wild Indian bands were once a powerful presence in Port of Spain and San Fernando during Carnival. Indian mas, with its ceremonial traditions, has declined in numbers in recent decades, but dedicated red Indians, black Indians, and fancy Indians still roam the streets, awing onlookers with their elaborate headdresses and other paraphernalia.

Red Indian mas is probably the oldest form, a link to the pre-Columbian Amerindian peoples of Trinidad. Sometimes called Warrahoon or Guarahoon mas (a local name for one of the indigenous peoples of the Orinoco delta, who often crossed the narrow sea passage to Trinidad), it keeps alive the memory of these cultural ancestors in a sort of ritual of annual remembering. Historian John Cupid explains that “Red Indians used the roucou berry for colouring, painting their bodies and faces with it. They were red all over. The stockings are red, the alpagatas [rope sandals], the bloomers, the skirts, the pants, and headpiece are all red. The top of the headpiece could be a boat or a bird, symbolising all kinds of things very important to them and their lifestyle.” Burton Sankeralli adds that “Indo-Trinidadians also played Red Indian, because of a creative ‘confusion’ both by Indian and Creole of the very word ‘Indian’.”

Black Indian mas, the fiercest of the traditional Indian masquerades, may have its roots outside Trinidad. Some authorities, like long-time black Indian Narrie Approo, suggest this mas had its origins with runaway slaves in the southern United States who were taken in by Native American communities in the early 19th century. This cultural intermingling eventually expressed itself in New Orleans’ Mardi Gras, where a tradition of “Indian practice” combines African rituals with Native American symbols (for an account of contemporary Mardi Gras Indians, see Michael Goodwin’s story on page 58). Black Indian mas is thought to have appeared in Trinidad in the 1880s, perhaps brought to the island by black immigrants from the United States, or perhaps by Trinidadians who had visited New Orleans.

True to their name, black Indians paint their faces black and wear predominantly black costumes, with large, elaborate headdresses fashioned from feathers and beads in the form of birds. According to researcher Carol Martin, “their pants are short breeches, not unlike Spanish pumpkin hose of the 16th century, with black and red strips of fabric sewn in vertical stripes. The shirt or jerkin has puffy capped sleeves, and the pants can have diagonally striped flanges. Individuals interpret this basic costume pattern in unique ways.”
The chants and songs of the black Indians, which remain largely incomprehensible to the ordinary observer, are based on West African languages. “We used to go and practice the Indian language and chant,” says Approo. “It wasn’t like today. We always went to the yard to rehearse our performance before we hit the road, and we chanted a prayer in black Indian language asking for strength.”

Black Indians considered themselves warriors, which sometimes led to actual street battles. If they encountered members of another Indian band on their parade course, they would first engage in a battle of words, a test of each other’s language skills — always of central importance in Indian mas. As the crosstalk grew fiercer, tempers might flare, and there would occasionally be a real physical battle. “Black Indian was fighting mas,” Approo explains.

Fancy Indian mas, today’s most common and most popular form, is also the most colourful, with headpieces of almost outrageous size and splendour, sometimes requiring frames of wire — or, in more recent times, aluminium or fibreglass — to support them. The cowboy-and-Indian Hollywood movies of the Second World War era were an immediate influence. Carol Martin suggests the fancy Indian is one of the most scrupulously researched of Carnival characters. “Creators pride themselves on the authenticity of their costumes. Players’ study goes beyond costumes and dance styles to include lifestyle, religious beliefs, and social structures, especially of the Seminole, Cherokee, Cree, and Plains tribes. Fancy Indians wear war bonnets with brightly coloured feathers, and their costumes have embroidery, beads, chokers, shields and painted tunics.” Meandering down the street on Carnival Monday, a full band of fancy Indians may seem a cultural puzzle to the uninitiated, but the history of the mas speaks to the strong links between the peoples of the various parts of the Americas.

Sailors

“You can’t play mas and ‘fraid powder,” goes a favourite Trinidadian expression. It means that you can’t expect to participate in Carnival without giving yourself to the wild spirit of the festival, but it derives directly from one of the oldest traditions of sailor mas — itself the form of traditional mas that demonstrates the most vitality in contemporary Carnival.

Sailor mas was invented in the 1880s and 90s, when British, American, and French warships docked in Port of Spain regularly, and their crewmen were frequent visitors to the city, inspiring mocking imitation by the locals. Masqueraders in starched white uniforms, gloves, and caps perfected a rolling gait parodying the wobbles of intoxicated crewmen. A walking-stick, a pipe, and ladies on both arms were crucial accessories, as was a tin of talcum powder, for throwing on unsuspecting passers-by (hence “you can’t play mas”).

The heavy American naval presence in Trinidad during the Second World War boosted the popularity of sailor mas, and the varieties of sailor portrayed — from ensigns to officers — grew in numbers. The “fireman” represented those crewmen assigned to a ship’s engine room, with a uniform made of blue or black melton, a pair of goggles, large leather gloves, and iron tongs and stoker. The “badly behaved sailor”, rolling around on the ground and in the gutter and piling up in the middle of the street, was based on rowdy sailors on shore leave, a common sight during the war. Some sailors sported Hawaiian leis, suggesting service in the Pacific. Others wore batteries of
imitation medals and ribbons; officers festooned their uniforms with yards of gold braid.

But while traditional sailor mas aimed at realistic imitation of actual naval crewmen, fancy sailor mas, which emerged in the 1930s, was a diversion into the surreal. The crucial figure was George “Diamond Jim” Harding (who died in 1999), the man who was to be hailed as the king of sailor mas. In a TV interview with Tony Hall, Harding described the genesis of the fancy sailor idea. “It was 1930 when I start really,” he said, “through seeing the real sailors about, walking through town. Then I saw a merino mask in Fogarty’s [a Port of Spain department store], and I felt I could do something with the costume.” On the way home with his newly purchased face mask, the story goes, Harding passed an ice-cream vendor, whose pointed cones gave him the idea to make a comic mask with a long, pointy nose.

This basic idea evolved rapidly. Within a few years, Harding and other fancy sailors were creating elaborate crown-like headpieces of merino cloth stretched over wire frames, always with an absurdly long nose. Soon they were wearing everything from boats and airplanes to swans and elephants on their heads, and the rest of their costumes grew more colourful and complicated to suit, decorated with swansdown, sequins, tinsel, and mirrors. These fancy sailors were voyagers on a trip through the imagination, their costumes later described by designer Peter Minshall as “surreal indigenous expressions”.

In the 1950s and 60s, once-small sailor bands — many based in Belmont, a working-class neighbourhood in east Port of Spain — swelled in size, sometimes to as many as 150 masqueraders, and younger designers like Jason Griffith, Cito Velasquez, and Nasi Gomes grew increasingly ambitious in their productions. Velasquez’s 1959 band, Flowers and Fruits, gave the fancy sailors giant botanical headpieces; other bandleaders since then have produced fancy sailor bands on themes ranging from folk tales to space travel.

The sailors’ distinctive dance has always been a crucial feature of the masquerade. From a parody of drunken stumbling it developed into a variety of styles. The “bote”, for instance, starts with a sideways movement on one leg, twisting heel and toe; then the movement is repeated with both feet at once. Other steps, with names like “crab”, “rock de boat”, “skip jack”, and “camel walk”, all had to be perfected by prospective sailors, and have continued to be handed down from older masqueraders to younger ones. Traditionally, sailor bands had no musical accompaniment except their own singing, as they advanced in ranks of four or six down the street.

Even in the “bikini and beads” era of contemporary Carnival, sailor mas remains genuinely popular with both audiences and masqueraders, and Belmont remains the headquarters for most big sailor bands. From its origin as a parody of military power, sailor mas, in the 120 years of its existence, became and still is an exuberant display of the imaginative power at the heart of Carnival.

**Baby doll**

In her short, frilly dress, exposing her legs, and her large poke bonnet or mob-cap, the baby doll — named for her eponymous accessory, a child’s doll — was already a common sight during Carnival in the 1860s and 70s, the period of *Jamette* Carnival.
Sometimes she roamed alone, sometimes in pairs or groups, but the masquerade was always the same: the baby doll pursued any respectable gentleman she encountered on the street with piercing cries of "Mister! Mister! Look your child!", embarrassing him into forking over money for support of the hypothetical infant.

This clever routine spoke to one of the realities of life under slavery and in its aftermath, when many slave-owners fathered children with their servants, only to refuse to recognise these illegitimate offspring. One of the paradoxes of the baby doll was that she herself usually dressed like the infant whose mother she was meant to portray — in a simple child’s dress. Originally she wore a full wire mask, later reduced to a half-mask covering just her eyes, and finally no mask at all. There is also a character called the baby doll in New Orleans Mardi Gras, and some authorities have suggested a link between these two versions. The New Orleans baby doll is usually depicted as a prostitute unsure of the identity of her child’s father, which is why she accosts any man she sees. But cultural historian John Cupid believes the Trinidad baby doll has a distinct origin. “She is a woman looking for her husband, the child’s father,” he says. “The sailors and soldiers who came from the Second World War weren’t the start of this character. Instead they carried on a reality dating back to the slave period, when slave masters separated children from their fathers. With emancipation, the baby doll character evolved as an ironic release from the torturous conditions of their recent past.”

In the early decades of the 20th century, baby doll mas became less and less frequent on the streets of Port of Spain, but never entirely disappeared. Today she is most likely to be found at J’Ouvert or at special theatrical presentations of traditional mas characters, still reminding onlookers with her haunting, taunting cry of a painful phenomenon in Trinidad’s social history.

### Animal mas

One of the oldest masquerades in Trinidad Carnival is also the most primal. From prehistoric times, men and women have disguised themselves as animals for ritual purposes. The very earliest Carnival celebrations in Trinidad in the late 18th century probably included animal masquerades, both by French planters parading through the streets and by their slaves celebrating in their yards. Over the decades, every conceivable species of animal has been portrayed at least once. Bats have a whole tradition of their own; gorillas, bears, horses, donkeys, and birds have all appeared. But one of the best developed — though now long defunct — was the cow band.

Cow mas probably dates back to the mid 19th century. Masqueraders covered themselves in old rice sacks, to represent cow hides, with dry plantain leaves down to their knees, cow horns fastened to their heads, and brown papier mâché masks. The cow band had its fun charging among spectators with taurine ferocity, while the layers of leaves covering their gowns gave off a rustling sound. Often a janelle — a character much like a matador, with the same short Spanish-style trousers and red flag — tried to infuriate the cows by playfully goading them.

These original cow bands disappeared around the 1880s, but the mas returned towards the end of the 19th century, revived by men who worked in the Port of Spain abattoir. The costumes were now more refined, and included tight-fitting breeches of yellow satin, with gold braid and spangles sewn down the sides and a close-fitting, long-
sleeved blouse. Cream stockings and alpagatas covered their legs and feet, and well-polished horns completed the effect.

The last cow bands faded away before the First World War, but at J’Ouvert cow portrayals are still common — sometimes as basic as a pair of horns, a cowbell, and a layer of mud. Interestingly, a version of cow mas called pai banan (“banana trash”) survives to this day in St Lucia.

**Burrokeet and soumary**

*Burroquito* is the Spanish word for a small donkey, from which burrokeet is derived, and this traditional “donkey mas”, still popular with younger masqueraders today, probably dates back to the late 18th century, when Trinidad was a Spanish colony. Donkey characters are documented in Spanish carnivals as long ago as the Middle Ages, and the burrokeet still shows many signs of this heritage.

The costume is meant to give the illusion of someone riding a donkey. The masquerader wears around his hips a frame made of wire or bamboo covered with cloth or *papier mâché*, with a donkey’s head to the front and a tail to the rear, and an elaborately decorated cloth hanging on all sides, to cover the masquerader’s legs. The “rider” hangs on to a bit and bridle made from thick, colourful cord. The rider himself wears a satin shirt and Andalucian straw hat. To the accompaniment of cuatros, guitars, and maracas, the dance of the burrokeet imitates the behaviour of a frolicking donkey and is called the burriquite.

But, like so many Trinidadian people and phenomena, today’s burrokeet turns out to have a history interestingly complicated by other cultural influences — specifically, by a cousin called the soumary, a horse masquerade with roots in India, where it is associated with the Hindu Durga festival. The soumary was brought to Trinidad by East Indian indentured immigrants in the late 19th century, and its appearance has been documented at festivals held at small sugar cane villages in the early 20th century. Historian Burton Sankeralli explains that the soumary comes from “the leela of the Hindu goddess Durga . . . referred to as the harichand dance,” in which the principal characters are the horse and rider, a groom, and a princess. Like the burrokeet, the soumary costume is constructed around a bamboo frame worn on the hips by the rider, who dances to the drumming of tassas and Hindi folk songs. The soumary is also frequently seen in Guyana, where designer Peter Minshall recalls seeing it as a young boy (his 1996 band Song of the Earth included a whole section of burrokeets).

Estate owners and others observing the soumary a century ago tended to describe the masquerade as an Indian version of the burrokeet, though the two have separate origins, which led eventually to some confusion over which came first, or whether one derived from the other. But in recent years soumary performers like Birbal Jassant, in the process of keeping the character alive, have emphasised its unique history.

The truth probably is that the burrokeet and the soumary, though distinct, have influenced each other’s development over the last century, in ways impossible to pinpoint — which means that, wherever they did come from, they’re now both good Trinis.
Alive and kicking

"Once upon a time, Carnival was an expression of rebellion," laments Aldrick, the central figure in Earl Lovelace’s novel The Dragon Can’t Dance.

"Stickfighters assembled to keep alive the practice of a warriorhood born in them. Devils moved along the streets with horns on their heads and tridents in hand. Jab Jabs, men in jester costumes with tinkling bells, cracking long whips in the streets, lashed each other with full force, proclaiming they could receive the hardest blow without flinching. Suddenly they were all gone, outlawed from the city, or just died. The Dragon alone was left to carry the message. It would be lost now among the fantasy presentations, drowned amidst the satin and silk and the beads and feathers and rhinestones."

Cultural historians or older people who recall what Carnival was like fifty or sixty years ago may share Aldrick’s sense of loss. It’s true that the triumph of “bikini and braids” pretty mas has driven the old-time traditional characters, with all their rituals and amazing eccentricities, from centre stage to the festival’s more obscure wings. But characters like the sailor and the robber, the bat and the Dame Lorraine, are far from dead. You might not realise it from a visit to the Savannah Grand Stand on Carnival Tuesday, but some of these traditional characters have begun a slow and steady resurgence, away from the limelight of the Big Yard and the commercial pressures of the big bands. In fact, their escape from commercialisation is partly responsible for these characters’ continued survival. "People don’t play this for the money,” says historian John Cupid of the National Carnival Commission.

A love for the traditions of old-time Carnival is the reason masman Val Rogers — who loves to tell people he was born on J’Ouvert morning — founded the Viy la Cou event, which since 1988 has provided a stage for traditional characters to perform for avid spectators. The name is French patois for the “old yards” where many of these characters first emerged in the 19th century, away from the eyes of the colonial authorities. Today it means a dedicated space for masqueraders whose costumes and ceremonies might be lost in the crush of big trucks and thousands-strong bands on the streets of Port of Spain. Some big bandleaders, though, notably Peter Minshall, have made space for sailors and Dame Lorraines and burrokeets within their bands, and Minshall in particular has made a long study of the architecture of traditional costumes like the bat’s, adapting and modifying them to create the kind of “kinetic mas” beloved by the crowds. And of course bands of traditional characters still parade through the city on Carnival Monday and Tuesday, still rousing awe and admiration from audiences lucky enough to encounter them.

But it’s at the smaller regional Carnival celebrations held in various towns and villages across Trinidad and Tobago — often little-known to Port of Spain masqueraders, but attracting enthusiastic support from locals — that the traditional characters continue to hold their own. In these more intimate settings, uncrowded by large bands, older Carnival traditions connect present to past, and, as younger masqueraders get involved, ensure their survival into the future.

"The whole emphasis on the regional carnivals is how the traditional characters can exist,” says Cupid. “By putting it where it was . . . And children have a big part to play too, because a child will play in costume for three hours non-stop on the street. So,
you see, the thing is alive. It’s alive in everything. It’s the fabric of Trinidad. The kids doing it for three hours, that is what the Guarahoon was doing years ago.”

The connection doesn’t stop there. Look around — Trinidad and Tobago is full of Carnival people who unwittingly live the old-time mas style every day. In the conversation of street-corner limers and the bravado of our politicians, boastful robber talk lives on. In our inventive puns and made-up words, we jest like the pierrot grenade. In the playful aloofness and picong of our “tanties” and other matriarchs, the Dame Lorraine continues to laugh. Perhaps without realising it, we have been soaking up these characters for over a hundred years. The history of Carnival reflects the history of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. The experts talk about a comeback for our Carnival traditions, but in some crucial ways they have never truly left.