

Martinique



LA MARTINIQUE

Carnival Guide

A Mardi Gras in Fort-de-France

Doesn't this photo speak for itself? We wish we could beam you here, but we would very much like to

invite you and those who have not experienced it yet. We would like to share it with you, like we were sharing one of our most precious treasures.

This guide is your passport for this celebration, a way to fully understand it and to know what to expect, a way to better discover this lively aspect of our traditions.

On the calendar of events, the four fat days of Carnival are almost sacred and are a legal holiday for most of us. This says quite a bit about the place it occupies in our lives. . . in all our lives.

This guide is for the children as well. It will be the visual memory of something they have not experienced, but that they will pass on in other ways, by finding there the same festive spirit, spirit of vacation, of fun . . . of liberty.

Because this is really what defines our carnival : liberty. You can find it in our artistic creations, in the way we outrageously mock everything or in our most daring caricatures—a humorous dive into our deepest fantasies. Freedom of expression grounded in major events that happened the year before. . . A warning to those were in the news. They will be, “*asiré pa pétèt*” (for sure), the heroes of our bawdy songs, the object of derision and mockery. . . until Ash Wednesday! *Fout sa bèl !* (how wonderful!)

This riot of exuberant creativity stops as quickly as it started. It ends consumed like the King of Carnival, Vaval, ceremonially burned at the end of those excessive and liberating four days.

This is why our carnival is so beautiful: intense, colorful.

This is why it is so powerful: carried and shared by its people. A brief moment lived to the max.

This is why it is authentic: a whiff of anarchy, spontaneous and true.

You will find in this guide mementos to remember past carnivals and their origin, and to live its evolution through time. We have saved what's best: that strong connection that binds us together during those four days. That connection is our deep roots, our multi-faceted culture and our exceptional sense of celebration.

May this guide accompany you throughout your unbridled carnivals ! Get ready to add your own photos and contribute to the history of Martinique's most popular celebration. **Mi vidé a !**

Long live carnival in Martinique!





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Havana, 19th century, private coll.



Ejumba Mask (*Diola*) from Senegal

The Martinique carnival stands out for its creative spontaneity the very essence of which is popular. Each year, a vital revival takes place which characterizes the effervescence of the people's imagination. It is the various districts, towns and villages and sociable gatherings which create, compose and set the carnival's themes. From this point of view the Martinique carnival is nothing like those of Brazil or Trinidad which are more lavish, but indisputably less creative. The carnival is all about surrendering unreservedly to an authentic festival which attracts increasing numbers of tourists.

From the earliest decades of colonization, excluded from the *burlesque* festivals and *parades* pitting Normans against Parisians organized by the colonists, festive gatherings of slaves of the same ethnic origin, brought together through linguistic and cultural affinities, took place. Coming together on Sunday afternoons they partied until dawn despite the bans in place, entranced by the songs, dances and rhythms typical of their land of origin.

In the middle of the 18th century, these gatherings, called *Nations*, were prohibited from taking part in the procession of the *Fête-Dieu* by a newly-arrived governor who claimed that the splendor, the organization and the discipline with which

they paraded presented a threat to the established order.

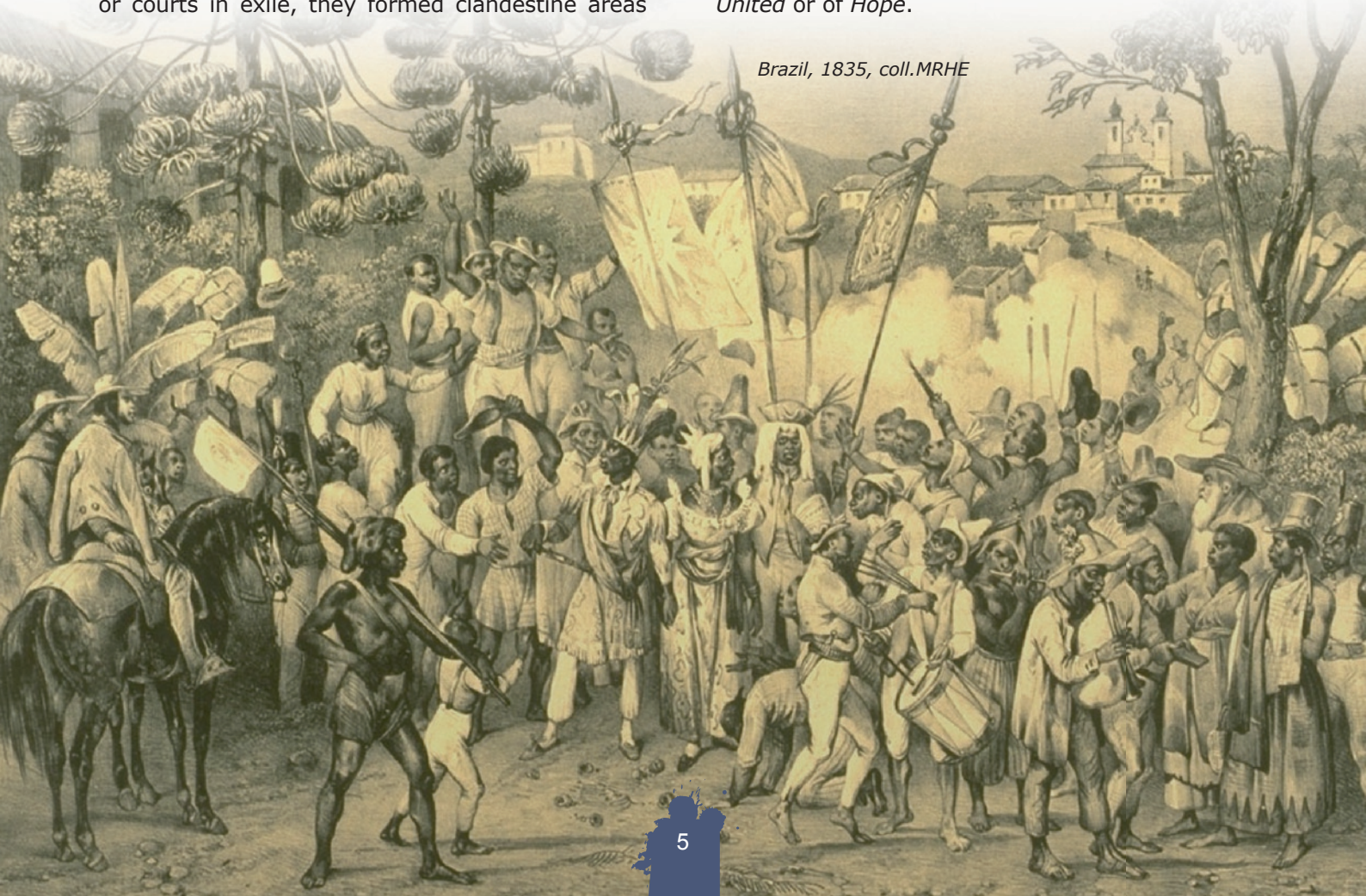
Falling in line with the dominant calendar and making the most of any public holiday, whether religious or secular, to express themselves in public, these organizations were structured following a formal hierarchy of elected members.

King, queen, deputy king, deputy queen, first, second, third and fourth maid of honor, treasurer, secretary, standard bearer, master of ceremony, general and soldiers made up their ranks. Kingdoms without territory, *Nations* without land or courts in exile, they formed clandestine areas

within which African societies would attempt to reconstruct themselves, to assert their distinction by reactivating their collective memory, by forming a hierarchy with ranks and rules to make up for the destruction of their traditional lineage.

Before the revolution, a number of *Nations* became creolized and gradually lost their "ethnic" character which was becoming less significant as the majority of the slave labor force was now made up of people born on the islands. They took the name of *Convoy*: *Rose Convoy, Carnation Convoy, Jasmine Convoy as well as Convoy of the Indias, Convoy of the United or of Hope.*

Brazil, 1835, coll.MRHE



Parties, dances, merrymaking, or carnival balls were not the only aim of these *Societies of slaves* which sprang up in urban areas and which also began to provide mutual aid between associates as well as funerals for their members. They were also suspected of being the place of secret ceremonies and rituals celebrating the mysteries of the black continent.

The numerous bans on masquerades or disguises which affected the carnival from the second half of the 18th century to after the abolition of slavery

in 1848, testify to the obsessive fear of colonial authorities of seeing the carnival degenerate into confrontations between members of rival convoys who might take the opportunity "to run through the streets masked and disguised at all hours, armed with steel-tipped sticks, cutlasses and other knives" (Decree of the governor Fénelon, 1765).

Closely watched by the authorities, banned from public processions other than funeral corteges, these *Societies of slaves* which developed almost clandestinely in the French colonies of the Lesser

Jamaica, 1837-38, private coll.



Antilles were on the contrary looked upon favorably by the Spanish and Portuguese authorities of the Americas who, with a bigger slave population to control, saw an opportunity to *divide and rule* by intensifying ethnic identity and antagonisms.

Authorized before and during the Carnival days, private events such as carnival balls or parties, freer than the street processions, were the occasion for sumptuous festivals organized by these *Societies* who vied to outdo each other with their elegance and splendor.

In rural areas, the carnival which took place on the plantation estate to the rhythm of the drum brought together slaves and free people from the surrounding area while a *bwabwa* was paraded around to the sound of the conch shells.

In the English speaking islands which had similar *Sociétés* but which did not observe the same calendar as the Roman Catholics, the *Junkanoo* carnival festivals took place between Christmas and New Year's Day while in Havana, kings and queens of the Cuban *Nations* would parade amid their mascots and their praetorian guard on Twelfth Night.

Their numbers declined gradually after abolition. The former *Convoys* which found it hard to adapt to freedom faced competition from the charitable *Brotherhoods* of *Saint Joseph* and *Notre Dame du Bon Secours* established by the church to lessen the *Convoys'* influence while the legal *Mutuelles* which were then set up took charge of the financial mutual aid which they used to offer their members. Initially

called *Bamboula* their festive gatherings on Sunday afternoons on the Savane in Fort-de-France became known as *Bel-air* at the end of the 19th century. At this time, the term *vidé* was used to refer to the dances which they performed under the aegis of a star dancer called the *Bel-air queen*.

Thousands of miles away, in the same cultural context, Creole festive gatherings in the famous *Congo Square* of New Orleans led by the *Bamboula queens* produced *Jazz* and *Rhythm and Blues*.

The neighboring island of Saint Lucia held on to its *Rose* and *Marguerite societies* which had the same origins as those of Martinique. After the mass held in honor of their patron saint, the *societies* would go to pay their respects to the Governor General, the Queen of England's representative who had once invited them to a ball where the monarchs led the grand waltz.

Continually restrained by the slave order ruling before 1848, it was only after the abolition of slavery and therefore in the second half of the 18th century that the Martinique carnival acquired popular recognition. Its theatre was the town of Saint Pierre which at that time was already confirmed as the cultural and economic capital of the Lesser Antilles.



Saint Pierre, 1900, coll. MRHE

The carnival of Saint Pierre, like the town itself, was from the 19th century one of the richest of the Antilles, with three specific characteristics: firstly, it was a popular carnival, secondly, it boasted exceptional musical creativity and finally, while during the day the carnival was out on the streets, in the evening it continued in the dance halls which were then called "casinos", meaning places of merriment which only closed their doors in the early hours of the morning.

Saint Pierre, before the eruption of Mount Pelée which wiped out the town on 8th May 1902, was an exceptional town for that time, with a wealth of economic and cultural activities to such an extent that it was called the "Paris of the Lesser Antilles". Its very active port, industrial output, businesses and stock exchange, its high school, boarding school for young girls,

botanical garden, theatre and its carnival had ensured that the town's reputation extended far beyond the Antilles.

Most visitors were literally fascinated by the town. This was the case of Lafcadio Hearn who wrote numerous accounts on the social and cultural life of the town and the carnival in particular. Hearn, a journalist of Anglo-Irish origin, writing for the New York *Harper's Magazine*, described the beauty of its population in a book entitled "Two Years in the French West Indies": "A fantastic, astonishing population – a population of the Arabian Nights. It is many-colored, but the general dominant tint is yellow, like that of the town itself, yellow in the interblending of all the hues characterizing *mulâtresse*, *câpresse*, *griffe*, *quarteronne*, *métisse*, *chabine* a general effect of rich brownish yellow. You are among a people of half-breeds, the finest mixed race of the West Indies." These are the people, described by the visitor in this way, who would ensure the success of the Saint Pierre carnival.

It is worth noting that the beauty and splendor of the everyday clothes, especially those worn by women, were already exceptional. The low-cut blouses, often embroidered, the petticoats with an embroidered or lace hem showing off the multi-colored full skirt, slightly raised, or the dresses



1842, coll. MRHE

pulled in at the waist emphasizing the grace of the dancing gait of the women, the scarf thrown over the shoulder, the headdresses with their audacious shapes and bright colors, the *tête calandrée* with its symbolic points, each element helped to form the charm of the traditional Creole costume which would later become one of the symbols of the carnival. It is in fact customary among Martinique women throughout the carnival period to showcase the most sumptuous elements of traditional Creole dress combining them with majestic necklaces, brooches and other jewelry. Although already existing during the time of slavery, a period during which the festival allowed slaves, with the consent of their master who would sometimes accord it, to sample the delights of dancing and music, this Saint Pierre carnival only really became popular after the abolition of slavery in 1848.

The carnival participants reproduced through their gestures and dances scenes from the work in the sugarcane plantations, dramatizing, with remarkable realism, the different stages of this agricultural production so symbolic of Martinique at that time. The people could now exorcise this suffering of the cane workers which they knew all too well and unreservedly give free rein to their festive spirits. It was customary after the dance of the women cane cutters accompanied by traditional drums, for one of them to move through the crowd to collect money.

Fernand Yang-Ting pointed out that preparations got underway as early as Christmas: "Christmas is here," he wrote in the *Courrier des Antilles*. "In the lively streets, in the quiet of the night, the song of the next carnival will be revealed. For weeks now,

at Latifordière's, the famous tobacconists on the Grand'Rue, it has been simmering away. Extracts have even been released. Around fifteen young tobacco rollers, aged between eighteen and twenty-two under the musical direction of their friend Apiti, have written the words, chosen the subject, composed the rhythm."

In any case, from January onwards, everybody would begin to prepare this exceptional festival which would last a good two months. Dresses, costumes, face masks and eye masks were made, appropriate accessories and shoes for those who could afford them. Others, from the poorest classes, made what they could from salvaged materials, including animal jaw bones used to create some masks.

Saint Pierre, 1900, coll. MRHE





Saint Pierre, 1900, private coll.

Every year on the Sunday before the carnival days, crowds would invade the streets with indescribable jubilation. They sang, taunting each other with their songs, moving forward in rhythmic steps, swaying their hips, enchanting participants and spectators. The band preceding the flood of carnival participants provided the tune, with the singer casting out the words, repeated in chorus by the crowd, and backed up the rhythm with the clarinet and the trombone, two major instruments of that time. Spectators amassed all along the well-known route: the carnival would leave from the Batterie d'Esnotz, before making its way to the Grand'rue, and then to Le Fort district over the Pont de Pierre to Le Fort Church. It would head down towards Mouillage passing through Figuier, Bertin Square, then returning along the Grand'rue, from where they would carry on to the Rue du Petit Versailles, Rue Saint Jean de Dieu, Rue Pesset and many other streets.

They confronted each other in song, as rivalries existed between the two main districts: the more affluent, more residential Fort quarter and the more popular, trading Mouillage quarter. Devils from Le Fort traded insults with devils from the Mouillage. Women's societies, led by women with names such as *Les Intrépides* ('The Intrepid') and *Les Sans Soucis* ('No Worries') confronted each other as, although

the details would never be known, disputes would have arisen in their daily lives and scores would be settled at the carnival. Lafcadio Hearn wrote, "Simultaneously from north and south, from the Mouillage and the Fort, two immense bands enter the Grande Rue: the two dancing societies, the *Sans Souci* and the *Intrépides*. They are rivals; they are the composers and singers of those carnival songs: cruel satires most often, of which the local meaning is unintelligible to those unacquainted with the incidents inspiring the improvisation."

The carnival of Saint Pierre, the musical creations, the themes and the disguises were not cut off from the intense social life of the town.

Everybody could recognize themselves in the allusions, insinuations and innuendos because the songs would refer to common well-known figures in the town who were mocked, derided, caricatured and satirized by the people during the carnival.

To add to the carnival fervor, the crowds would avail themselves of songs which were usually written by women and spared nobody. Political, scathing or burlesque in character, they allowed the creators and the people who sang them, to provide a social critique of events in their everyday lives which highlighted the acts of authoritarianism, broken

promises, social or racial prejudices which were common at that time in Saint Pierre. The attitudes of various people, men or women were denounced in choruses which were sung throughout the carnival. These songs could be quite damning for those they targeted, such as the very well known beguine, entitled *La Rue des Bons enfants*, dedicated to someone known as "Big Turtle", which ended in dramatic fashion for the poor man. And as Lafcadio Hearn pointed, these carnival songs would be preserved for generations to come meaning their victims could not hope that they would be quickly forgotten.

The fantasy, pertinence and audacity of the songs of Saint Pierre helped to make the carnival a popular festival which gave the lower classes from the poorer districts the opportunity to express themselves. The more affluent classes meanwhile, preferred to go to the carnival by car or horse, thereby disassociating themselves from the more popular groups of carnival goers.

The dances were, of course, very well attended. The public dance, which was held in the town's indoor market and went on into the early hours, was enormously successful. There was also the option of private areas which could be used by dancers.

The diversity of the carnival sites with evocative names such as the *Casino*, *Bléssé-bobo*, the *Palais de Cristal*, *Chez Bégoa*, or *Chez Bébé Faïs* enabled the two classes to come together during the evening dances, but some places were more likely to be frequented by certain social classes.

Saint Pierre, 19th century, coll. MRHE



In his novel, *La Caldeira*, Raphaël Tardon reproduced the advertisement from a newspaper from that time giving information on the dances and other events related to the carnival:

"Everybody please take note! Tomorrow is the last day of carnival dances:

1 The manager of the old Lodge, rue du Petit Versailles, Mr Wilhems, has the pleasure of informing his loyal customers (mainly mulattos) that the famous clarinetist Médouze will be leading the band;

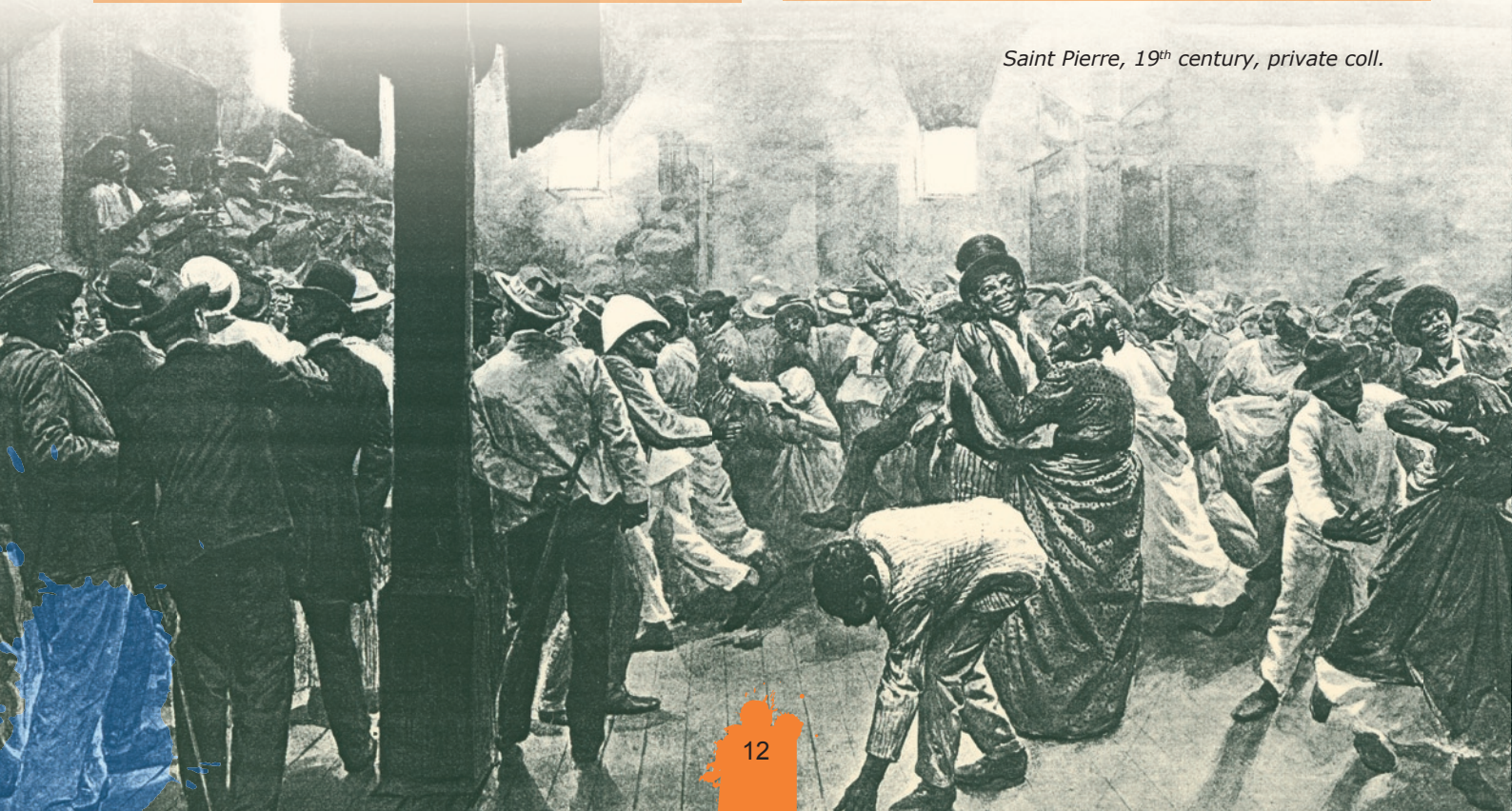
2 At the Casino, as well as at chez Médouze, electrical lighting is guaranteed and like last year, the boss Pétrarque, alias Satanas, will be leading his wild band. The management is counting on all

the "best quality blacks" to come in their numbers to the Casino;

3 What are you waiting for? Aristocrats, bourgeois, men of the world, what are you waiting for? The Hôtel des Bains will be lit up at Giorno. From nine o'clock in the evening. Take note! What will you hear? Waves of harmony. Choice music in an artistic setting. Polka lovers, take note; the Master Isambert will surpass Orpheus. Evening dress is required, tails or frock coat, like at the theater;

4 Mr De Massias, the honorable manager of the Périnelle Estate and deputy mayor is organizing a grand Negro ball on the plantation. Cérique Band. Unlimited rum. Four barrels have been ordered. Come in your numbers;

Saint Pierre, 19th century, private coll.





5 *My fellow townsmen. You cannot finish the Carnival without attending the masked ball organized by the La Française gymnasium, 50 masked gymnasts (fifty) will be taking part. Come in your numbers, 50 masked gymnasts! La Française will be lit up with electricity”.*

The role played by women at the town carnival cannot be understated. All these evenings were graced with the presence of Ball Empresses with allusive and enthralling names. *Marie Clémence, Ti Rose-Congo, The big Olive, Adrienne the old Hag, Julia Lapidaille, Suzanne Coulée, Avan mèl pon’* were some of the most well-known. All these pseudonyms and nicknames, attributed without any due care for the person concerned, shows to what extent the activity of these pillars of the carnival were dramatized for the occasion.

Damiso éha ! ou mandé moin saïbot
Moin ba ou commode.
Damiso éha ! magré tout ça kon ça
Ou ka ba moin cône !!
.....



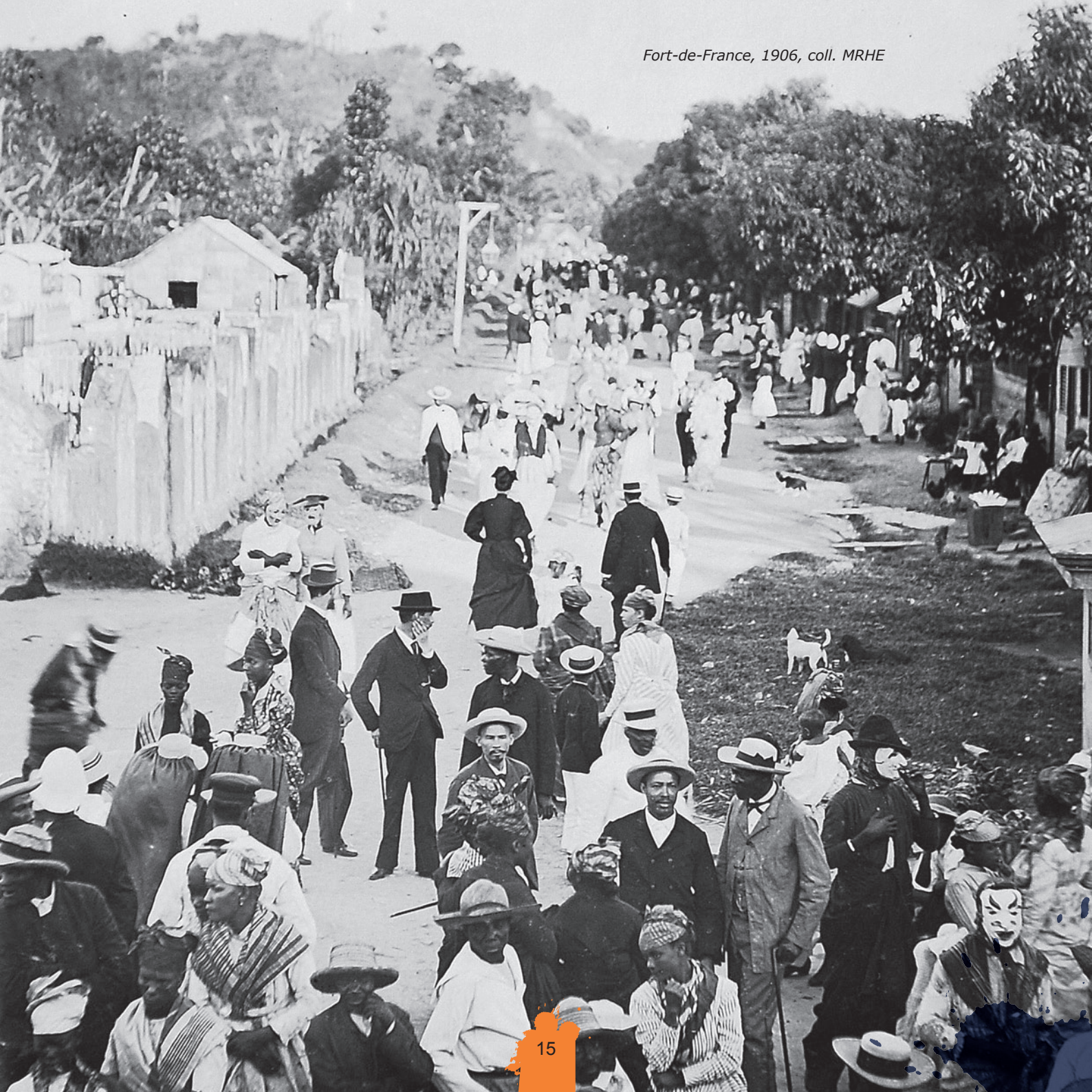
Ash wednesday, Saint Pierre, 20th century, private coll.

On Mardi gras, the Devil would come out onto the streets followed by children who provided a lively procession. Louis Garaud described the scene: *"In a scarlet costume, with his chest banded by a wide baldric, his enormous head, adorned with a yellow mane and two golden horns, his grimacing black face, his tongue hanging out, he walked, hideous and terrible, with a fast, rhythmic step. Hundreds of children followed him ..."*

The enthusiasm was such that it was at the carnival of Saint Pierre that the people, somewhat encouraged by some daring high school children took the initiative to prolong the festivities for an additional day and evening. The Martinique carnival became the only one in the world to celebrate Ash Wednesday with more merrymaking as a day devoted to the she-devil who thereby became, for the first time, one of the carnival characters.



Devil 20th century, coll. MRHE





Fat Tuesday, 1906, coll.MRHE

After the eruption of 1902 which in just a few seconds completely wiped out Saint Pierre and its inhabitants, the carnival of Fort-de-France which already existed but was far from having reached the same almost legendary dimension of Saint Pierre found it difficult to take up the baton. Left to the initiative of the street, it was not until the interwar period that some tentative steps to try and give some structure to the carnival were taken by a group of former pupils of the colonial boarding school who saw it as their duty to showcase the authenticity of the Creole costume and its related traditions.

After the Second World War, artists such as Loulou Boislaville, Alexandre Nestoret and Paulette Nardal launched the *Creole song contest* with the aim of spurring people to create carnival rhythms and texts like those produced at the time of Saint Pierre. The first carnival committee was created in 1964 and directed by Dr Rose-Rosette. It was succeeded by the *Active Carnival Committee* and *Fort-de-France Carnival* led by Grazielle Bontemps and Solange Londas.

Fort-de-France, 1939, coll.MRHE



Fort-de-France, 20th century, coll.MRHE

A passionate champion of the carnival, Solange Londas established in 1964 the *Schools carnival* and took over the running of the *Creole song contest* as well as the election of the *Fort-de-France Queen* before organizing the election of the *Mini-king* and the *Mini-queen of nursery schools*. Other personalities such as the husband and wife Bibas and Psyché, Mme Coppet and Mme Lung-Fu became involved in the revival of the Fort-de-France carnival.

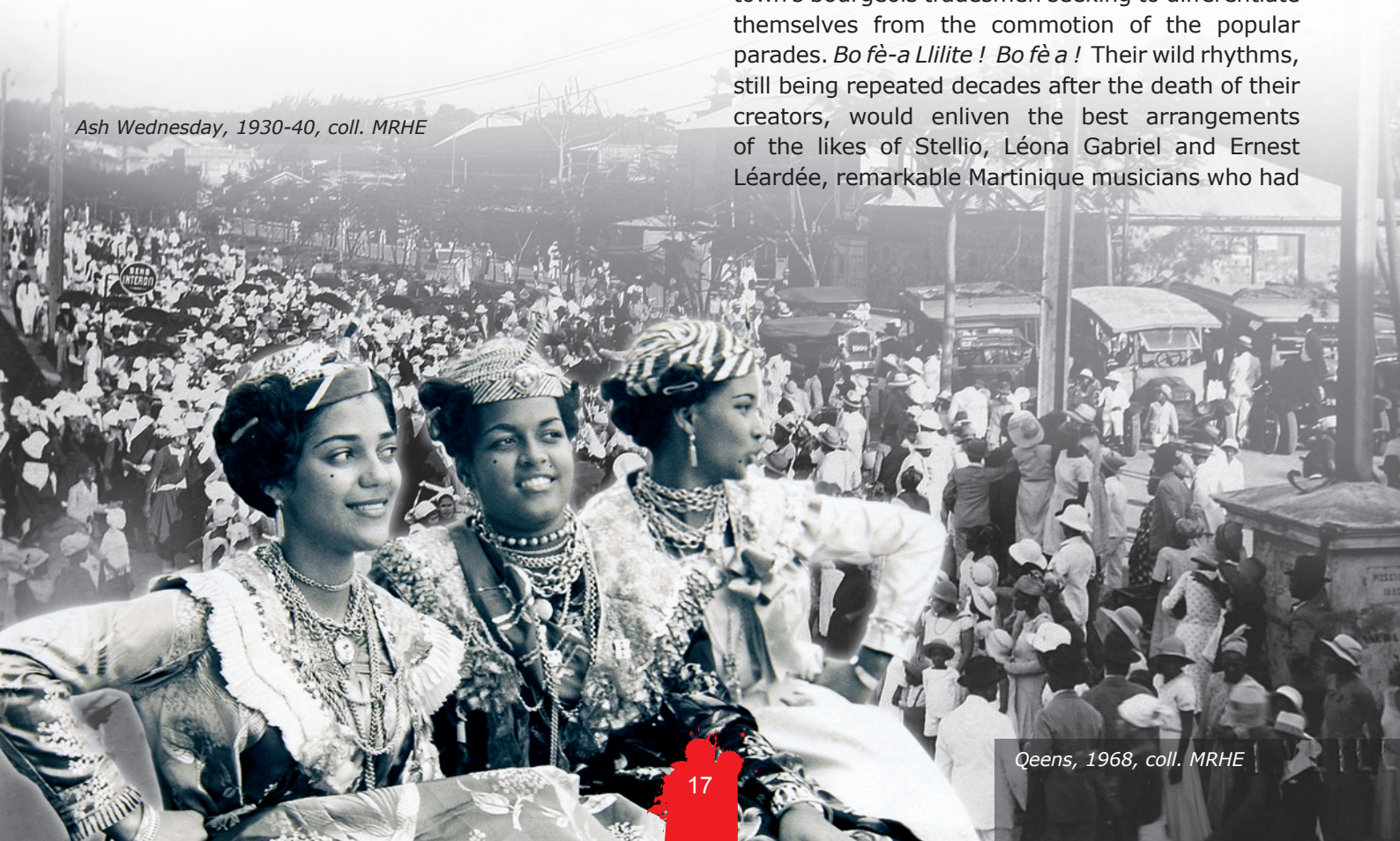
In the 1970s, some towns, which revived their carnival parades and created *Committees*, began to elect their *queens* or their *kings* before setting up the *Committee of the Carnival of the South* which each year organizes a gathering of carnival participants from several towns in the south of the island.

Rhythms and Songs of Carnival

Born in the second half of the 19th century with the beguine in the legendary *casinos* of Saint Pierre, the songs and rhythms of the Martinique carnival were baptized in places which would have offended the Almighty Himself : the *Bléssé bobo*, the *Franc Choriste*, the *Moulin Rouge*, the *Palais de Cristal*, the *Corbeille Fleurie* or the town's *Theatre*.

Satirical, suggestive or sarcastic songs mocking a political event, the failings or a faux-pas of civil or religious authorities, they were created away from the *processions* and the gleaming floats of the town's bourgeois tradesmen seeking to differentiate themselves from the commotion of the popular parades. *Bo fè-a Llilite ! Bo fè a !* Their wild rhythms, still being repeated decades after the death of their creators, would enliven the best arrangements of the likes of Stellio, Léona Gabriel and Ernest Léardée, remarkable Martinique musicians who had

Ash Wednesday, 1930-40, coll. MRHE



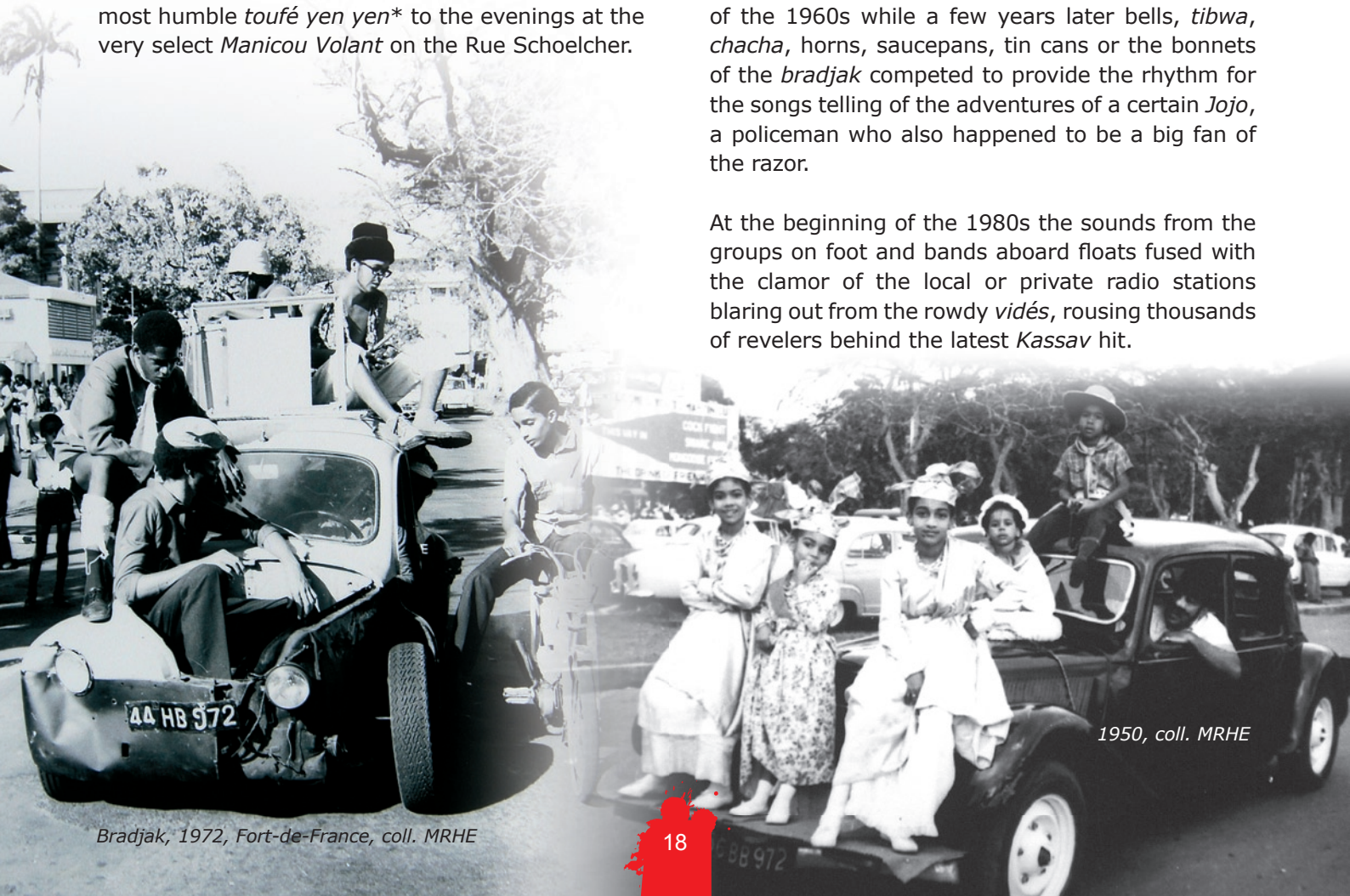
Queens, 1968, coll. MRHE



enchanted Paris. They would enthrall even more the Fort-de-France of the interwar years, those of the hot carnival evenings of the *Grand Casino* known as *Bal Loulou*, of the *Grand Balcon*, the *Folies Bergères*, the *Dancing Palace* or the *Sélect Tango*; from the most humble *toufé yen yen** to the evenings at the very select *Manicou Volant* on the Rue Schoelcher.

After the Second World War and its accompanying hardship, the *Creole Song Contest* established at the end of the 1940s picked up the thread of the Saint Pierre tradition and made its mark on the vidés of the 1950s. *Papillon volé* established the crowds of the 1960s while a few years later bells, *tibwa*, *chacha*, horns, saucepans, tin cans or the bonnets of the *bradjak* competed to provide the rhythm for the songs telling of the adventures of a certain *Jojo*, a policeman who also happened to be a big fan of the razor.

At the beginning of the 1980s the sounds from the groups on foot and bands aboard floats fused with the clamor of the local or private radio stations blaring out from the rowdy *vidés*, rousing thousands of revelers behind the latest *Kassav* hit.



Bradjak, 1972, Fort-de-France, coll. MRHE

1950, coll. MRHE

At the end of this decade, the groups developed a structure, forming, like *Plastik System Band* and *Tanbou bò Kannal*, real street bands with a diverse and highly-polished repertoire. Brass sections were added to the percussion and the heavy, cumbersome wooden barrels with animal skin drumheads were replaced by PVC tubes with synthetic drum membranes. For the bass, large plastic drums were used while *tibwa*, toms and snare drums completed the percussion sections which were no longer played with bare hands. The formations were given a makeover with band members wearing the same glittering costumes preceded by female dancers.

There was therefore a decline in the number of sound systems and bands on floats, replaced by the street bands from the popular districts : *Sakifèt fèt*, *Nou pa sav*, *Flash Bambou*, *Sé pann deyèy'*, *Difé nan pay*, *Kalan's ka*, *Défoulman*, *Bambous des îles*, *Baryl Band*, *Kalson*, *Waka*, *Koubouyon*, *Tanbou*

Volkan, *Double Face*, *Kaznaval*, *Pétrol-Band*, *Rafal*, *Rétro Band*, *Mi la ni Jenn*.

Other local bands such as *Secteur G*, or *Godissard*, *Môn kalbas* or *Bon-air city* – from the popular areas of Fort-de-France – remain loyal to the spontaneity of the free and frenzied carnival which they extol like a standard reviving each year the suggestive nature of the popular repertoire. Well-known, mass-market songs are hijacked and their words twisted and changed. The most inspiring are immediately passed from group to group, becoming instant hits in the streets and carnival parties and are used again the following year until a new creation sees it sink into oblivion.

In Martinique, it is still the street which invents, reinvents and sets the themes for the carnival.



Highlights and Specificities of Carnival in Martinique

The success of the Martinique carnival is based on three particularities from the different cultures which combined to form Martinique's cultural heritage.

Firstly, there is an element of creativity. *"The oldest or most loyal carnival," somebody commented, "is about making rather than seeing."* Making joy from nothing and bringing creativity to the fore are what the project is all about. Indeed, at carnival time the most archaic objects surface – old togs, umbrellas without their fabric, chamber pots, old telephones, old cars, etc. The aim is to use inventiveness to make fun of daily human reality. The scrap thereby ends up providing people with the essentials. From this point of view, the Martinique Carnival is nothing like those of Brazil and Trinidad, for example, which are more luxurious, but less creative.

There is also an element of inversion. Inversion of the sexes, inversion of hierarchy, a symbolic inversion of the established order. Thereby the obscene is displayed and takes power, an obscenity based on vulgarity (large stomachs and thighs), on the improper (ostensibly stroking the genitals) on immodesty or exhibitionism. The symbolic inversion of order can also be seen in the policeman or politician being ridiculed through caricature, gestures, chants or hollering.

Finally there is an element of metamorphosis. Through their costume people can appropriate the divine privilege of disguising themselves as an animal and denying their humanity. And the mask of course allows people to break away from themselves as well as their daily lives. For the mask provides concealment and thereby authorizes excesses, as





well as the possibility of an incarnation which defies reality and becomes a parody. The number of De Gaulles, Giscard d'Estaings, Mitterrands, Chiracs and today Sarkozys who join the parade, gesticulating to the crowds at the Martinique Carnival is really rather impressive.

The disguise enables convention to be defied: repressed tendencies can be expressed in the open.

Thereby "everyone can live their dreams, their long-held desires, to then accept their own limits". In the disguise, there is a search for the other self, sometimes even a search for duality as can be seen with the double-faced mask, clothes different on the front and the back, one side masculine the other feminine, not to mention the face with a different color on each side.

The metamorphosis may be total or partial and is carried out under the watchful eye of Vaval, the pagan god, whose own death results in a metamorphosis into another Vaval the following year.

Here, it is worth pointing out that Vaval and *bwabwa* should not be confused. Vaval is the authority figure of the carnival, he is the carnival king who dies each year and is mourned on the last day of the festivities. The figure of Vaval is designed by the organizing authority (for example an association,



federation of committees or the town council). On the other hand the *bwabwa* (or in French "boisbois", literally "woodwood") is the figure whose authority is brought into question: it is a person – an individual who plays a certain role in society or a politician – who in the previous year has demonstrated failings.

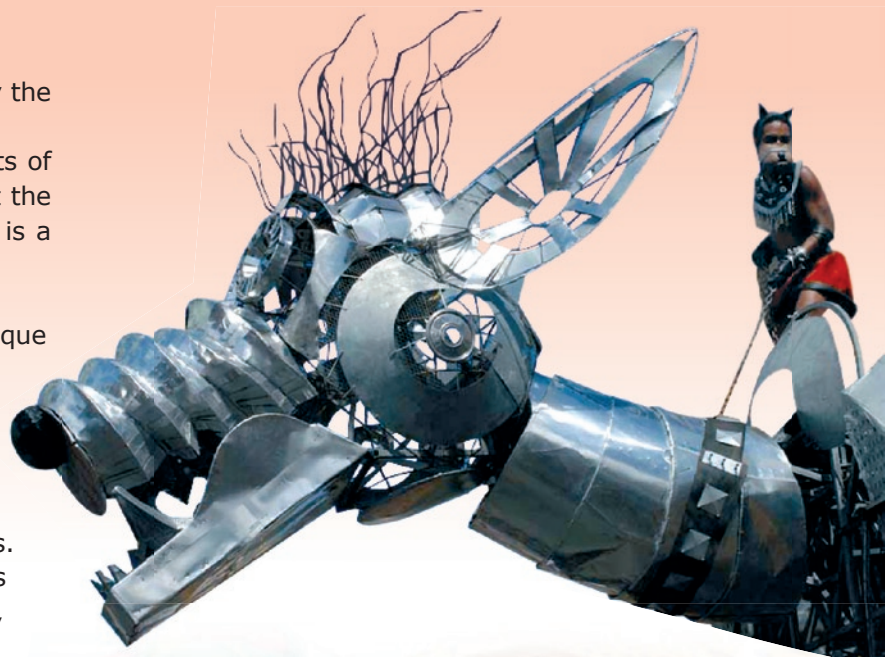
The person turned into a *bwabwa* is chosen by the people and generally is not only nominated as the *bwabwa* but also becomes the subject of a song. This was the case, for example, for Professor Colby in Saint Pierre who announced, amid a blaze of media coverage, that he would take off in a balloon, but whose attempt ended in a pitiful failure. Similarly, in Fort-de-France the different candidates at the municipal and local elections standing against Aimé Césaire were likened to various figures: a fox running amok in the henhouse, Mad Max or King Kong, always



with a popular song chorused at the carnival by the jubilant crowd.

All these elements merge to form the highlights of the Martinique carnival where we discover that the reality – and also the dream – of the carnival is a combination of words, sounds and images.

Traditionally, the celebrations of this Martinique carnival – which owe so much to that of Saint Pierre – started after Twelfth Night. Today, they focus mainly on the few days running up to Mardi Gras and Ash Wednesday. However, as early as January, preparations are already underway to prepare two events. Firstly the *Creole song contest*, which aims to enrich the carnival repertoire. Mazurkas, waltzes and beguines take centre stage and most importantly the best biguine-vidé* is selected which, if deemed good enough, will be adopted by the carnival crowds. The second event is the election of the Carnival Queen and her attendants. Between January and the carnival days, the street bands rehearse round the clock to ensure they are note perfect when the time comes, carnival events take place in some towns and pedagogical events relating to the carnival are organized in schools.



Fat Sunday (Dimanche gras)

The Carnival begins with outings on Saturday to the dances and other zouks which liven up the evening. This forms a sort of warm-up, as it is especially on Carnival Sunday that the event really gets underway. It is the day the *Carnival Queen* makes her appearance on the streets of the town. Accompanied by her attendants she reveals her beauty and grace to the public, as well as the originality of her disguise. The design of this disguise, the imagination and ingenuity it displays can effectively sometimes be a determining factor in the election of the Carnival Queen.



On the same day, the first groups on foot appear, preceded by street bands whose music, costumes and choreography stir up the spectators and carnival participants who follow on behind dancing. The value and the originality of this music lie especially in the quality of the percussionists and the wind instrumentalists, while the clothes owe their beauty to the richness, the colors and the sparkle of the costumes.

These street bands who practice nearly all year round have progressively reached a level which justifies their invitations to perform not only throughout the Caribbean but all across the world.



The most well-known are *Plastik System Band* seen as the forerunners, *La Bonm*, *Tanbou Bô Kannal*, *La Sauss*, *Gwanaval* and *Matjilpa*. Another band of the same quality must also be mentioned. Called *Moov*, its originality lies in the fact that all its members are women.

The hot and rousing music of these street bands permeates through the groups on foot. A flood of carnival participants in their brightly colored costumes joyfully pours onto the streets, in a





delirious crowd which spurts forward or stops in time to the music and the chants : *Bo fè-a! Lilitte! Bo fè-a!** Everyone cheerfully joins in the chorus as the intense excitement mounts adding to the collective pleasure. Everybody, carried away by this dance, as their bodies become a chant of primitive freshness, can feel at that moment in time a joy of life which the carnival has made possible.

Sunday is also the day where the first *bradjaks* make their appearance. These are old cars, often completely dilapidated, little more than a wreck. They are picked out by small groups of young people who turn them into objects of derision and protest. The cars are sometimes repainted in bright colors and almost always covered in slogans expressing social criticisms aimed at consumer society. They





rarely go unnoticed as the carnival revelers who occupy the seats, the hood and the open trunk, use the car as a drum to tap out the rhythm and are covered in controversial slogans written on the doors and the hood, thereby contributing to the general hullabaloo in honor of Vaval.





Fat Monday (Lundi gras)

Fat Monday starts early in the morning by the pajama *vidé* which brings together the participants of the early morning *vidé* and some late stragglers who leave the zouks and decide to carry on the

party in the streets, to the sounds of the bands specialized in such events. The appropriate costume is of course pajamas, but some men are all too keen to wear a nightdress in the Carnival spirit of



Burlesque wedding, 1970, coll.MRHE

inversion. After the *vidé*, it is traditional to sample the Creole sausage preceded by a *décollage*, ("lift-off") which Dr Rose-Rosette, a leading expert on Martinique punch, describes as such: "*It is the first drop of alcohol absorbed in the morning on an empty stomach. It lifts up the uvula and provokes fluidifying expectorations*" And he specifies that "*the décollage is never washed down with water. It is sometimes followed by a glass of coconut water or a glass of mabi*.*"


After such performances, the carnival participants go and take a rest to prepare for the afternoon's parades and *vidés*.

One of the most important events of Fat Monday is the *burlesque wedding*.

The burlesque wedding is a parade of organized contravention. It derides one of the most eminent institutions of human societies. In reality, such an event highlights above all the conventional and outdated social rules surrounding this institution: it is a fanciful, but lucid vision of the beliefs which are assuaged in marriage.

The description of the burlesque wedding further reveals the symbolism and practice of inversion. Apart from the fact that the groom is, almost always, a woman and the bride a man, there is above all a questioning of the classic values and aesthetics: a crippled or infirm bride, sometimes hideously ugly thanks to the carnival masks, or again symbolic of the aspect of disproportion playing on thinness, size or deformity, indecency of the bride's stomach indicating an advanced pregnancy in spite of her beautiful white dress, questioning *de facto* the moral custom of virginity, a priest preceding the procession reading from the upturned Scripture,





Carnival Queen of the South is presented to the public, as well as the mini-queens aged 5, 6 or 7. The region's street bands lead the carnival participants in the vidés which are described as "déchirés", or "frenzied".

all this expressing parodical inversion. The mayor is left as a caricature of a typical town magistrate. In the procession itself, the guests are equally comical, zany and grotesque. The participants swim in the nuptial waters of the burlesque.

For some years Fat Monday has been the day of the *Carnival in the south* when the towns in the south of Martinique take turns in hosting the carnival. On this day the





Fat Tuesday (Mardi Gras)

Mardi Gras is the day the red devils appear. Devils of all ages have the time of their life. The Big Devil, also called *Papa Diab*, surrounded by little devils all dressed in red is impressive with his formidable mask of mirrors and his horns, symbolizing respectively knowledge and affluence.

The carnival goes, dressed in red, the color of the day, take part in the *vidés*, giving rise to a red tide which floods the streets of the town, always preceded by the street bands who provide the tempo, singing the song created in Saint-Pierre which the crowds of today still chorus : *Diab-la ka mandé an ti manmay !* The devil demands that a



child be sacrificed in payment for his participation and the crowd acts as a messenger of his request.

The poet Aimé Césaire explained, in an interview, how much the sacred Martinique native had been hidden and ignored. *"The illustration of what I am saying came to me suddenly one day, in Casamance, with André Malraux. We had organized a sort of big festival, quite traditional, and suddenly appearing around the bend of a path was a big mask. I was frozen to the spot and I said to the Senegalese man standing next to me : "But how is it you have this*

mask too?" *He said "What do you mean, how is it we have it too? But it's our mask!" I said "Yes, but it also exists in the West Indies! It exists in Martinique! I recognize what they call in Martinique "the Mardi Gras devil". It's a mask with bovid horns, a large red cloak studded with little mirrors side by side, an ox's tail. He rushes into the crowd and scares the children, a sort of sacred terror takes possession of the crowd of West Indians when he appears. So I asked the guide, "But, what does it represent for you?" He replied : "It's the mask worn by the initiated!" And he explained the symbolism of this*





mask, the bovid horns are a bit like the horns of affluence, they are the symbol of wealth, and the constellation of mirrors is the symbol of knowledge. In other words, when you are initiated, you are rich, completely rich, you are materially rich, and what's more, you are spiritually rich. That is then the symbolism of this mask."

It is undoubtedly these surviving customs which, unconsciously, stimulate between Good and Evil the festive faith of *Mardi Gras*.

Devil, Fort-de-France, 1960, private coll.







Ash Wednesday (Mercredi des cendres)

Ash Wednesday is the day of the she-devils or *guiablasses*, based on an old Martinique myth which tells of a very big and very beautiful woman walking alone along a road one day at noon. Dressed in black, she seduces a man who stops to speak to her. She leads him to a secluded place and then reveals in the morning her hideous face and her goat's hoof. Too late, she pushes the man off the top of the cliff to his death. In this woman who

mysteriously appears from nowhere, there is an unresolved enigma and the enigma is inspiring.

Between games of life and death, liberties and convulsions, pleasure and fright, desertion and presence in the face of destiny, the carnival presents the She-devil or *Guiablesse* on Ash Wednesday, making the Martinique carnival the only one to include the devil and continue its celebrations on




the day of ashes, which marks in other countries the beginning of Lent. This tradition has established itself and it is undoubtedly the day when the vidés are the most popular and the most spirited. Knowing that the festival is short-lived makes it all the more irresistible.

The end of the Carnival is drawing nearer. All the street bands are out in force. For this last time, the clothes are appropriate and simple: the carnival participants and spectators are dressed in black and white, on the head, a white handkerchief or napkin, faces are smeared with flour to make them white, sometimes one side is black the other side is white, lips are black, stockings are black and white. The

shoes, usually trainers have one white side, one black side, probably in reference to the odd feet of the She-Devil, one human foot and one goat's hoof. An immense black and white river flows through the streets which are full of songs suitable for the occasion: "*Magré lavi-a red, Vaval ka kité nou!*" Yes, despite the harshness of life, King Vaval, giving his last performance, is preparing to leave us.

At dusk, many people accompany the deceased on his last annual journey. King Vaval has a lot of children, many wives, concubines and mistresses, at least according to the traditional funeral announcement broadcast by the radio stations every Ash Wednesday, very early in the morning and





repeated throughout the day. Vaval's wives – often men dressed as women – become mourners, cries ring out, cries of feigned pain, songs of sadness and final hullabaloo.

The body of Vaval is burnt on the beach and his ashes scattered over the sea. Everyone then hurries to the final parties of the Carnival in mourning dress, to dance and sing the praises of Vaval.



The Characters of Carnival in Martinique

Caroline Zié-loli

20th century, coll. MRHE

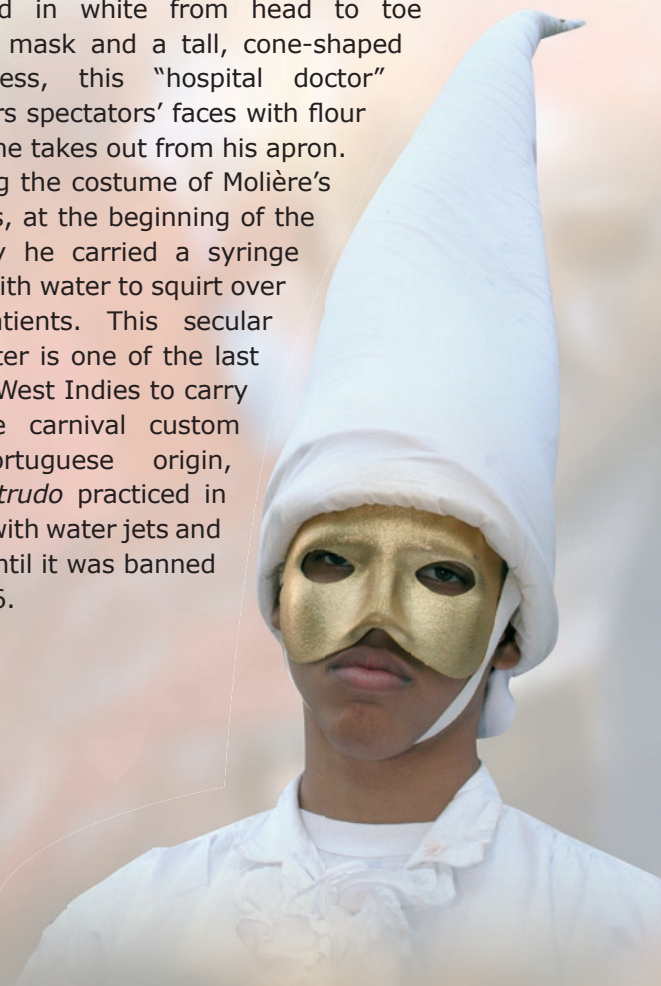


A hybrid figure made up of a woman carrying a man on her back, the Caroline is a traditional character of the Martinique carnival. Suffering from a pronounced squint, *zié-loli* in Creole, she is the image of a loving and devoted wife, carrying on her back her husband who is too drunk to get himself home.

Mèdsin Lopital



Dressed in white from head to toe with a mask and a tall, cone-shaped headdress, this "hospital doctor" powders spectators' faces with flour which he takes out from his apron. Evoking the costume of Molière's doctors, at the beginning of the century he carried a syringe filled with water to squirt over his patients. This secular character is one of the last in the West Indies to carry on the carnival custom of Portuguese origin, the *entrudo* practiced in Brazil with water jets and flour until it was banned in 1856.



Brossé Kléré

Rarely seen nowadays, these *young shoe shiners*, their heads covered in old stockings making them unrecognizable ran through Fort-de-France during the *Carnival Days* in search of shoes to shine and the chance to earn some centimes.

Filé Kouto



Fort-de-France, 1970, coll. MRHE

Carnivals in the past were an opportunity for these *knife grinders* with their portable grindstones to earn a few extra centimes. In parallel to the *vidé*, knives, cutlasses and other sharp tools were sharpened under the porches in a commercial transaction transformed into a real artistic performance.

Matelots Saoûls

In the port towns of Saint-Pierre and Fort-de-France it was quite common to see sailors out for a good time merry, drunk or staggering around a street corner or around the bars of *La Transat*, a district of Fort-de-France near the port. First appearing at the beginning of the 19th century, the figure of the drunken sailor, an object of derision for the islanders, soon integrated the Martinique Carnival.



Moko Zombi

The *Moko Zombi* was thought to have been introduced or reintroduced to Martinique, after the First World War. Arising from numerous ritual masquerades on stilts by the people of West Africa, the *Moko Zombi*, believed in some islands to chase away evil wherever he goes, is said to be the legacy of the Efik of Old Calabar (south-east Nigeria) of whom the inhabitants called *Mocoe* or *Moko* had the reputation of being cannibals at the time of slavery.

Queens



Not part of the Saint Pierre carnival, the Carnival Queens joined the carnival of Fort-de-France after the Second World War and then those of the towns and villages where they are promoted, after election, by *Committees* respectful of traditional Creole dress and the sparkling disguises.



Carnival queens,
1970, coll. MRHE

Malpropres

A popular figure disparaged since the end of the 19th century, today a prominent and characteristic figure of the Martinique carnival, the *malpropre* is a man dressed as a woman, wearing glittering rags or feminine symbols. Sometimes abandoning their traditional *chamber pots* (still firmly held on to by the more implacable), they stroll around, alone, in couples or as part of the *vidés*, with flimsy costumes and salacious voices, keen to amuse the gallery or to revolt the sensitive souls shocked by gestures and attitudes bordering on indecency. Decked out in *rad kabann* (rags) or fine lace for the *makoumè* version, the *malpropre* respects, as far as possible, the colors which change each day of the carnival.



Vaval

The Carnival King, Vaval is cremated on the Fort-de-France jetty at the end of the afternoon on *Ash Wednesday*, after four days of unrestrained vidé, surrounded by tens of thousands of followers, including his many wives, relatives, friends and allies, informed of his funeral through the radio broadcasts made from the early morning. All these mourners accompany him to his last breath.



She-devil

A central figure of Ash Wednesday, the *djablès* (she-devil) is also a legendary figure of the West Indian imagination. The reincarnation (on some islands) of a girl who died a virgin, she makes her appearance at the evening dances as an exceptionally beautiful young woman who seduces her partner and takes him to a secluded spot before breaking his neck. The only way to unmask her is to carefully lift up her long dress which covers her left foot to check if it is the hoof of a mule or a goat. The *she-devils* of *Ash Wednesday* play the role of the weeping merry widows accompanying up to his cremation their lover of four days brandishing a branch from the soursop bush believed to relieve all pains. Dressed in their traditional costume of white scarves over black grand-robés and white petticoats, faces covered in flour topped with a white cone-shaped bonnet, they cry crocodile tears, singing while laughing to *Vaval* of their despair of not being able to bury him every day.



Touloulou

A classic costume of the Creole carnivals of the Americas of the end of the 19th century, from Saint-Pierre to New Orleans, the *touloulou* which continued in Guyana after the eruption where it made its mark on the *fancy-dress balls*, returned to Martinique at the beginning of the 1970s, reintroduced by Berly Glaudon during the wild *Tam Tam* evenings. From its years on the continent, this carnival mask named after a small land crab came back to Martinique bolder and more enterprising. Wearing gloves and concealed behind her eye mask, her costume disguising her from head to toe, the woman is unrecognizable and supreme. It is her who then chooses her dance partner taking him in an arousing and lascivious embrace.

Mariyann Lapo -fig



A cone or dress of dried banana tree leaves fully or partially covering the body of the carnival participant, the costume of *Mariyann lapo-fig* is among the oldest in the Caribbean. A ritual figure of the masquerades of West Africa mixed with that of the *bear* and the *tamer* from European carnivals, she would appear donning the mask of a plantigrade held on a leash by her tamer. Dressed in a costume sometimes made of strips of material, this character was also known in the countryside as *Magrit an ranyon*.



Fort-de-France, 1940, coll. MRHE

Bradjak

Wrecks brought back to life, old rattle traps in a pitiful state covered with various slogans making their way through streets and *vidés*, the *bradjak* appeared at the end of the 1960s and livened up the carnival with their incessant back firing until the dawn of the third millennium. They are slowly being replaced by safer vehicles, with new lines, which attract the attention of the crowds only by the originality of their decor and the undeniable talents of their constructors.



Bradjak, 1972, coll.MRHE

Nèg Gwo Siwo



Traditionally covered in molasses, nowadays by a mixture of oil and coal, the *Nègres Gros-sirop* (Big syrup Negroes) originated a long time ago in some of the secret initiation societies of West Africa.

Devil

A central figure of *Mardi Gras*, the Martinique *red devil* was not part of the carnival at the beginning of the 20th century. Armed with a long fork and always surrounded by children, his mask is covered with mirrors while his costume is covered with bells and coins. His arrival in the carnival seems to be due to the action of Detho Landry, an historical Martinique *Papa djab*, who after the war formed and led the first groups of red devils giving the character its current significance.

Bwabwa

Straw puppet decked out in a costume, then hoisted to the top of a pole, the *bwabwa* paraded at the head of the *vidés* symbolized through caricature, the most unpopular event, incident or individual in the social or political life of the town. Buried or drowned in Saint Pierre, it only arrived in Fort-de-France at the beginning of the 20th century where it is burnt.



To conclude, carnival in Martinique is a complete festival where the body becomes the expression of a lively artistic sensitivity. The rhythm and music, the beauty of the costumes, the derision and the burlesque which are on display, the singularity of the disguises and the traditional figures which are put on show make the carnivals one of the liveliest, warmest and original in the world.



Photo : RC

Some practical advice for taking part in Carnival

Dates

The dates of Carnival vary from one year to another. The carnival days precede Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent, forty days before Easter. Carnival starts the first Sunday after the full moon which follows spring equinox. The carnival days therefore fall sometime between the first of February and mid March.

Carnival sites

Carnival is celebrated across Martinique. The biggest events take place in the capital Fort-de-France, with the central point being the Place de la Savane, but the parades move around town following a safe, well-defined route. The best places to be able to see the show are around Place de la Savane, on the waterfront and on the Boulevard du Général de Gaulle.

Fat Monday, the day of the burlesque weddings, is also the day of the Carnival of the South which takes place in a town selected in advance. School children parade through Fort-de-France on that day.

As for the pajama vidé, the day of which varies from town to town, the biggest are those organized in the towns of Lamentin, Fort-de-France and Schœlcher. The pajama vidés kick off at 4.30 am!

On Ash Wednesday, Vaval is cremated, in most towns and villages, around 6.30pm. In Fort-de-France, the event takes place on the waterfront.

Disguises and costumes

On Fat Sunday, the choice of costume is left to everybody's imagination. For the pajama vidé in general the women wear pajamas while the men put on nightdresses.

On Fat Monday, in keeping with the burlesque wedding theme, the men wear their most beautiful dresses while the women don the oversized suits of the men.

The Pajama Vidé usually follows in the same vein: pajamas for the women and nightdresses for the men.

On *Mardi Gras* (Fat Tuesday), the predominant color is red: people wear red devil costumes, or dress in red from head to toe.

On Ash Wednesday, mourning attire is required: people dress as she-devils (see photo on page 43) or in black and white (for example white top and black skirt) to take part in Vaval's funeral cortege.

The essential accessories for carnival goers:

- comfortable shoes to follow and take part in the *vidés* which usually start around 3pm;
- water to stay hydrated. Street vendors sell refreshments along the routes of the *vidés*. Glass bottles are not allowed along the route. Why not sample (with moderation) the Martinique punch, the best in the world;
- a hat (unless your costume has a headdress) to

protect yourself from the sun;

- cameras and camcorders for a permanent souvenir of the event.

Information

Well ahead of the traditional program of the actual carnival days, numerous events related to carnival are organized from January onwards.

Information is available from the Martinique Tourism Authority and the Tourist Offices and Tourist Information centers in the island's towns.

Small glossary

* *Toufé yen yen* : a popular festive gathering of dancing, whose name refers to the heat and humidity which attracts a certain type of midge - yens yens – agitated rather than dangerous to health.

* *The vidé* is a parade in which dancing and singing are the essential elements. Together with the evening dances it is one of the main activities of the carnival participants, whose costumes vary according to the day of the carnival. The *beguin-vidé* is a musical creation whose words and music are pertinent to the *vidé*.

* *Bo fè-a* is the most famous song of the Martinique

carnival. It is taken from the Saint Pierre repertoire and is defined as a polka-march. A satirical song, it is aimed at a man feared by all, the police warrant officer Lilitte. Forced to resign by the authorities, perhaps because of his political ambitions, he felt he had to kiss his saber before handing it back. It is this symbolic gesture which is recounted and made fun of in the words of this song.

* *The mabi*, an Amerindian word, is a fermented drink, quite bitter, rather like some beers, which is drunk very cold or ice cold. It is made from the bark of a tree which grows in the West Indies, the *bois-mabi*.



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