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Carnival: The Party of All Parties

Carnival is a word that when heard by most brings one thing to mind, a giant party. For others the word has more religious meaning behind it than just partying. Every year people get together in countries across the world to celebrate Carnival. While it varies from place to place the purpose of it is worldwide. This extravagant event marks the beginning of Lent and allows people to come together for one last blow out before the time of fasting starts. Dancing, singing, drinking, and other activities spread across cities engulfing all who are around it. One city in particular known for this event is Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. Carnival has grown over the years into an event known across the globe and has become the party of all parties. Some questions arise though. Such as how did this event start? How does it differ from earlier Carnivals and how did dance become so involved with the event? Rio de Janeiro's Carnival has strong roots tied to both religion but also dance. The samba is extremely influential over this event and its influence has grown over the years along with the party.

First off we must see why Carnival even exists. Carnival was started as the last big blow out before Lent started. Lent is a religious festival that last for forty days. It begins forty days before Easter on Ash Wednesday and is a time for people to reflect on what they have done wrong over the last year. During this period individuals usually give up of fast something during this time period. One example is chocolate being given up for these forty days. The reason behind this event is to allow followers to reflect on Jesus' time in the desert with no food while being tempted by the devil. With such a long period

of fasting taking place the idea of one last party or celebration came to fruition. The idea was to both celebrate the upcoming religious festival while also getting any last urges out before Ash Wednesday. The event of Carnival is celebrated worldwide but is especially known for in Rio de Janeiro.

The celebration of Carnival dates back to the Portuguese who brought the event to Brazil during their time settlement. Over the years the event quickly changed and became filled with more Brazilian traditions. The official Rio Carnival website credits the black slaves with inspiring much of the traditions seen today. "They would paint their faces and dress up in their masters' clothes. Slaves were able to be free for three days."¹ This time of celebration quickly became important to the slave community as they most seek that outlet to express themselves. Even today the event credits the black community for being important to the event. "Nowadays the black communities of the favelas are the most involved groups in all the carnival preparations and they are the ones for whom the Rio Carnival means most, too."² Groups like the slaves helped mold Rio's carnival into a very different but special event that is known throughout the world. This event is something that anyone and everyone can get involved with. Why has carnival become such a big and popular event though? According to Roberto Da Matta this can be tied to the social classes seen throughout Brazil.

Roberto Da Matta has studied both Carnival in Rio as well as Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Da Matta sees Brazil's social order broken into sectors. An individual can be within many sectors but acts very differently throughout each area. They may act one way for his bosses or more upper class. Another way with his family and finally an even

¹ www.rio-carnival.net/. The Rio Carnival Guide. Viewed on May 30, 2007

² www.rio-carnival.net/.

different way while on the street in front of equals. This is where carnival becomes so important. This amazing four day event allows these social orders to be broken down and formed into one “carnavalesque Chaos” as Da Matta puts it. Carnival doesn’t create factions but rather brings everyone together in this time of song, dance, and love. Da Matta then compares this to that of Mardi Gras to show how different carnival is from any other event in the world. Mardi Gras is seen differently as it does create the social differences. The upper class is in charge of setting up events such as balls as well as the floats so important to the parades. In Rio this is very different as the everyday person can and does get involved and is welcome within these different areas. Another areas studied between the two events is the overall setup. Da Matta says that Mardi Gras is broken into different parts with balls and events marking the beginning and the parades and overall chaos in the latter. This also differs from the celebrated Rio Carnival. “In Rio de Janeiro, Carnival is compact and events occur simultaneously. There are no gradations from balls to parades; instead they take place daily, simultaneously.”³ Da Matta feels there is no high point to Carnival that a person has to see. Instead the entire event is full of excitement and begins and ends when the individual decides. This is why carnival has developed into the incredible event seen today. Again Da Matta sees Carnival as a movement towards an egalitarian utopia where everyone is equal to celebrate the upcoming religious holiday.

Carnival is filled with religion as well as social changes. But what exactly does a person see while at the event? Also how did the event mold into the dancing celebration of today? This has to do with the strong tie between Carnival and the samba. The samba

³ Da Matta, Roberto. An Interpretation of “Carnival”. Center for Twentieth Century Studies. Vol. 11, No 4. 1983

has roots going back to Africa. As slaves were brought from Africa to all parts of the world they also brought their traditions. One of these traditions was that of dance and movement. African tribes have ritual dances for many things like celebration or to ward off evil. These traditions formed into many different types of dance depending on the part of the world. In Brazil as the Portuguese imported slaves the samba was born. As the years passed the samba developed into a way for people to express themselves both inside and outside of their social class. With the slave community becoming so heavily involved with the event of Carnival the samba also became intertwined with the celebrations. As Carnival grew the samba became a city wide thing in Rio. People would dance and sing and play instruments while marching and parading throughout the city. The samba was a key to the entire city of Rio becoming involved with the event. Instead of celebrating in one specific area people could now use these samba parades to encompass the entire city.

As the both the samba and Carnival grew escolas de samba's began to form. These samba schools or clubs compete each year with one another at Carnival. According to Alison Raphael the samba has strong roots within the slum community. "The urban samba originally emerged from the slums of turn-of-the-century Rio de Janeiro. Its beginnings lay in the rhythmic drumbeats that traditionally accompanied African religious ceremonies brought to Brazil by African slaves."⁴ The samba became an outlet for the slum communities to mingle with and experience new lifestyles. One popular dancer in the 70's described the sambas importance. "The samba was our family, our Sunday stroll, our movies, our lover. It was all we really knew of happiness there on the

⁴ Raphael, Alison. "From Popular Culture to Microenterprise: The History of Brazilian Samba Schools." Latin American Music Review. Vol. 11, No 1. 1990

morro.”⁵ As the slum communities embraced the samba it was not as popular with the white upper class communities. Poor people would use this dance as an expressive form and were looked down upon by the upper class. It would take many years of challenges before the samba would become more accepted throughout the country. Eventually it would become a key element in the Brazilian culture. During earlier carnivals the poorer classes were not as welcome and actually formed their own neighborhood carnivals full of samba influence. This would change around the 1920’s as the samba schools opened.

As the samba schools developed they have become one of the highlights of Carnival. . “As legend has it, they called themselves a “Samba School” because their headquarters was located across the dirt lane from the neighborhood primary school and because they were proud to proclaim that they were the teachers of samba.”⁶ Samba schools have turned into a year long endeavor. These schools train the entire year for Carnival. Over the year the choreography is developed and all participants are involved. Once Carnival comes around the schools then compete against each other in the organized parade that takes place. These schools have caused some people to feel that Carnival has moved away from its roots and created something far different from the original intention of Carnival. The birth of the samba schools marked a change in Carnival. The parades were more like Mardi Gras at first as they were run by the rich white community. The samba schools allowed the black community to become more involved and eventually take more control of Carnival. As these schools began to open Government of Rio saw this as an opportunity. The government offered legitimacy to the schools under certain rules. The schools had to get a parade permit which meant more

⁵ Raphael, Alison. “From Popular Culture to Microenterprise: The History of Brazilian Samba Schools.”

⁶ Raphael, Alison.

money for the city and also the schools had to base the theme for their parade around a Brazilian figure from history. Through these dealings the schools were now becoming official entities and the government was seeing positive feedback as well. This marked the beginning of the dominance by the Samba Schools that can be seen today. These newly created schools were now becoming symbols of pride for the people. They represented the working class black community and not only gave people opportunities to participate in Carnival but created more jobs. People were needed to help run the schools and even carpenters were given work. As the schools grew new buildings were needed.

Now the Samba Schools were more organized. They were given government subsidies and used parade themes that praised the history of Brazil. Author Alison Raphael feels one of the main reasons for this acceptance by the government was the move of the capital to Brasilia. Raphael says this caused Rio's income to shift more to tourism. Since Carnival is such a large tourist attraction the Rio officials saw the Samba Schools as something that could not only draw in more tourists but also bring in money from the schools themselves. The starting of the schools has caused some involved with samba before the schools to feel that the Carnival atmosphere has drastically changed. In the earlier days people got together and danced and partied in whatever they could find. Raphael talked with some of these older individuals who feel that people were more united back in the earlier days. With the schools being more state connected these elders see the samba parades as more money making ventures than celebration. By being part of a winning Samba School a person can make money through different ventures like advertising and can also be more accepted in the upper classes of Rio. One thing though

can not be denied. With the emergence of the Samba Schools the event known as Carnival grows larger every year.

Carnival is one of the largest celebrations in the world. It is a multi day event that encompasses the entire city. Once the event starts every day is full of excitement and grandeur. It has everything from balls, to street bands and parties even samba schools for all ages. This all culminates in the extravagant parade that takes place in the Sambodromo. As the parades grew over the years the city of Rio decided to relieve the congestion in the downtown area by building the Sambodromo. This specially built parade ground has grandstands even box seats for the amazing parades that take place. The area can seat up to 70, 000 people which according to the Carnival website is already becoming too small for the popular parade events. This event truly is a party atmosphere from beginning to end. While some areas are more geared towards adults like the parades which tend to feature dancers in provocative clothing there still are features for the entire family. The street parties and bands are filled with a fun party atmosphere and even the youngsters who hope to be in the samba parades someday can take the classes offered. Rio's Carnival flows with Brazilian culture. The food, music, and dance reflect the culture and people that put on this over the top event each year. This allows Carnival to not only celebrate the upcoming religious holidays but gives visitors the chance to experience a wide variety of what Brazil has to offer.

When a religious holiday calls for fasting an item for forty days what is the logical thing to do? Have a huge blow out before the holiday starts. This is the essence of Carnival. The people of all ages and classes come together to not only celebrate the holiday but also to celebrate Brazil's culture and past. It's an event filled with music,

dance, food, and drink. The Rio carnival has grown into a party that is known throughout the world. It's tightly connected to both the historic slave community and to those in the slums. It's an event that gives pride to all the people not just the upper class. As time passes Carnival will most likely continue to grow and become even more ingrained in Rio de Janeiro's society. It has gone from a gather of united communities to a city wide party. Carnival has become the party of all parties.

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