

# The Origins of Carnival-- And the Special Traditions of Dominican *Carnaval*

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In Ancient Greece and Italy, long before the emergence of Christianity, people whom we call pagans today had wild celebrations centered around the winter and spring solstices, and spring and fall equinoxes, celebrations that the people did not want to give up, even after they became Christians. The Catholic Church, therefore, adopted many of the celebrations, overlaying them with Christian meanings. For instance, the wildly licentious feast called Saturnalia, dedicated to Saturn, the god of agriculture, and to the god of wine, Bacchus, a festival that used to be celebrated around the longest night of the year (December 17 under the old calendar), became the Roman Empire's celebration of Christmas on December 25. The licentiousness of the pagan celebration was postponed until the week before Lent began, around the time of the spring equinox. The new springtime celebration came to be called *carnival* or *carnaval* from the Latin words *carnis* ("flesh" or "meat") and *levare* ("to leave off"), because immediately after the carnival festival came the time of Lent, 40 solemn days of penance and sacrifice, which included not eating meat as well as the renunciation of other pleasures of the flesh. Most of the medieval carnival festivals climaxed on Shrove Tuesday, the day before Lent officially began on Ash Wednesday. (In Latin, Shrove Tuesday is *mardis gras*.) Lent ends on Easter Sunday, "Lent" personified in Medieval festival



the most sacred of Christian holy days because it is the day that the crucified Christ was resurrected. Although the word "carnival" originated with this pre-Lenten celebration, the celebratory style of masking, inversion and grotesquerie came to characterize other festivals as well; as a result, some scholars specify the pre-Lenten carnival with the term *carnestolendas*.

As Christianity spread, so too did the celebration of carnival—it spread across Europe and eventually to the Americas, carried there by European conquistadors and colonists. The Europeans who went to the Americas met up with what Christopher Columbus mistakenly dubbed "Indians," believing he'd reached islands off India's shore.



The Indians, too, had their community celebrations. For instance, the Taínos, the natives of Hispaniola and the other islands of the Greater Antilles, held *areitos*, community-wide song and dance celebrations that were enjoyed by young and old, male and female alike. *Areitos* were held to celebrate the planting of their principal crop, yucca, from which they made casabe bread, at harvest time, at marriages and coming of age ceremonies, to celebrate successful hunts, the arrival of visitors, or sometimes just for fun. The dancers wore jewelry on their foreheads, in their ears, and around their necks, and colorful tattoos and painted

designs on their bodies depicting their spiritual guides, their *zemies*. They also wore shell anklets that tinkled like bells as they moved in rhythmic unison across their *bateyes* (“plazas”). Their *caciques* (“chiefs”) wore elaborately carved masks decorated with multi-colored natural woods and gold foil, ostentatious cotton belts decorated with beads, shells, and gold, and cotton capes and “crowns” embroidered with brilliantly colored feathers and gold thread. All the dancers and singers shared ritual food and drink to keep up their strength so they could dance long into the night, while the drummers, flute, maraca and *fotuto* players kept the beat (the *fotuto* is a conch-shell horn). The Taínos’ celebratory customs, like those of the pagans of Europe, added color and rhythm as they merged into the new Christian carnival celebrations.



It was the Africans who contributed the most brilliant colors and lively sounds to carnival festivals in the Americas. Africans were brought to the island of Hispaniola from the early 1500s onward, first as freedmen and then as slaves.



It was customary in many places in Africa for the people to parade around the village, circling it wearing masks and brilliantly colored costumes, singing and dancing all the while, in order to bring good luck to the village. Often, bringing good luck meant first scaring away the spirits of angry dead relatives, hence all the symbols of death associated with today’s carnival parades. Feathers and other natural objects were traditionally used to create and/or decorate costumes and masks in Africa, because the natural objects were believed to lend certain spiritual strengths to the wearer. Natural materials are commonly used to fabricate costumes in the Americas, too, for the same reasons. From various parts of the African continent, the slaves brought with them such varied traditions as stilt-walking, carrying puppets as part of their elaborate costumes, and fighting mock battles with sticks.



Most importantly, perhaps, Africans brought with them a lively variety of musical instruments, dance rhythms, and singing styles—and a stinging sense of humor that they use not just against their leaders, but often to make fun of themselves.

Having fun and making fun of life’s problems are both integral parts of the Dominican Carnival festivities, just as they are in New Orleans’ Mardi Gras, the Brazilian Carnival, and the other colorful Caribbean carnivals of Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad, Grenada, Dominica, Haiti, Cuba, St. Thomas, St. Marten, Belize, Panama, and even in areas of the U.S. and Canada where Caribbean people have migrated.



There are not many surviving historical documents that mention carnival. A few scholars, however, suggest that it was celebrated in Santo Domingo in the first two decades of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, probably in the main plaza fronting the Cathedral and along today’s Calle Las Damas, and later along what has been called El Conde since 1655, the main east-west street of today’s

Colonial Zone. A Spanish traveler's account describes in vivid detail one of the first celebrations of carnival in the New World, a carnival that took place in February of 1520 in honor of the arrival of Fray Bartolomé de las Casas in the city of Concepción de la Vega, in the mountainous interior of the island. Today the city of La Vega is in a slightly different location, but the people cherish its tradition of lively carnivals—they celebrate Carnaval Vegano every Sunday throughout the month of February, as detailed in the regional section, below. (The original city site, known as La Vega Vieja, "Old La Vega," is in ruins, which are preserved and protected by Dominican law under the National Park Service.)

The Church encouraged religious celebrations in the Americas, just as it did in the Old World. Research indicates that not only the European monarchs, but local governors and slaveholders, too, tended to encourage free-for-all celebrations like carnival—as long as the celebrations had a religious facade—in order to release the slaves' and poor people's pent up pressures in a non-threatening way. Simply put, allowing the people to have their carnivals kept down both slave rebellions and socio-political rebellions.



Slaveholders encouraged their slaves to “turn the world upside down” during carnival celebrations—that’s the phrase that the Taíno caciques used to describe their ritual “visits” to talk with their spirit guides while in the trance state. During the frequently elaborate carnival parades throughout the colonial Americas, the masters and their white families were on the sidelines watching, while the slaves were in the spotlight. Black beauty and sensuality were openly admired. At carnival time, the music was loud, strong drink flowed like water, poor women dressed in extravagant gowns—or in barely anything—while men dressed up as women and the “dead” came to life. Brazen, loud, drunken, lascivious behavior that would be totally inappropriate at any other time was the norm at carnival for men and women alike--it still is!--partially “hidden” by the elaborate masks that have come, in many ways, to symbolize carnival around the world.



Masking has been popular since the dawn of time in all manner of magical, religious and diversionary performances and celebrations. All three ethnic groups who blended together to become today's Dominicans used masks: the Taíno Indians, Africans, and Spaniards. Together they created a carnival tradition that is one of the most colorful and dynamic in the world, a tradition that has its roots in more than 500 years of history, a living tradition that is still evolving.

### **--Dominican *Carnaval* Traditions--**

Throughout most regions of the Dominican Republic during the long Colonial Era, triumphant events as well as Christian holy days were celebrated with the Baile de las Cintas (the colorful “Ribbon Dance” known in Northern Europe as the May Day or Maypole Dance), bullfights, costumed balls and

carnivals. The elite held elaborate masked balls in “salons,” while the poor held separate street festivals in their individual neighborhoods. It is the street-festival tradition that has survived (or been resurrected) with the most vigor across the Dominican Republic today. Various regions of the country have evolved their own very particular *carnaval* traditions.



The first documented pre-Lenten carnival celebration in the Dominican Republic was held in 1578, but that documentation mentions one held in 1553, according to historian Carlos Esteban Deive. Beginning in 1844, the pre-Lenten carnival celebrations were combined with Dominican Independence Day celebrations, making El Carnaval Dominicano twice as important as carnival is in other countries where it is celebrated. Since the late 1990s, however, the Dominican government and the Catholic Church have tried to separate the two celebrations. On February 27<sup>th</sup>, the anniversary of Dominican Independence Day, there is now a big military parade in the Capital. For several years the national carnival parade took place the following Sunday, along the Malecón of the capital, the wide boulevard that fronts the Caribbean Sea, although in 2004 it was decreed that the national parade would take place in mid-March, to further distinguish between the celebrations of Independence Day and Carnival.



On Carnival Sunday, for the national parade, the Malecón is filled to bursting with onlookers, many of whom join in the fun by dressing up in costume and parading up and down the Malecón themselves. *Comparsas*--which are parade groups comprised of floats and multiple marchers with matching or complementary costumes and masks—as well as bands from dozens of representative cities, towns, and neighborhoods, compete for prizes. The frenzy begins around 3:00 p.m. and lasts late into the evening. The most common Carnival characters you’ll see are the colorfully masked and costumed Diablos (“Devils”) from various regions of the country, each wearing a different style of costume and mask, but all brilliantly colored and adorned with various festive decorations: ribbons and streamers, sequins, buttons, bells and whistles, and mirrors (which the renowned Dominican scholar Dagoberto Tejeda Ortíz suggests are reflections of the past). Nearly all the Diablos carry *vejigas*, dried-out cow bladders, or modern versions made of rubber. In the old days, the Diablos were the “crowd control” officers of the parade, clearing the way through the surge of onlookers with whips or vejigas to make way for the floats. Today they are the main attraction, but they still swing their vejigas, mostly aiming for the buttocks of pretty girls. They say getting hit brings good luck—but it mostly just brings bruises. You’ll want to stay out of their striking distance and must also



watch out for the many Carnaval participants who crack whips or have “duels” with whips. The whips are reminders of the long centuries when the country’s economy was dominated by cattle ranching.

You can find carnival celebrations in various locations of the country throughout the month of February and carnivalesque celebrations all over the Dominican Republic at different times of the year, not just near the spring equinox. There are carnivals for the August 12<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the country’s second independence day, which is called the Day of the Restoration (when the Republic was restored in 1865 after a brief, disastrous return to being a colony of Spain); for the feast of Corpus Christi, generally celebrated in May or June on the Thursday after the Feast Day of the Holy Spirit; during *Semana Santa*, the Holy Week that concludes on Easter Sunday; and for the *fiestas patronales*, feast-day celebrations held by each city and town to honor their patron saints. Dominican Ga-Gá, an incredibly dynamic, carnivalesque dance with heavy magico-religious as well as heavy sexual overtones, is celebrated after each successful sugarcane harvest and throughout *Semana Santa*, which ends the Lenten period. (There are two types of Ga-Gá, both of which celebrate the earth’s and the people’s fertility, and both of which feature beloved troops of brilliantly costumed characters, most representing various African gods, goddesses, and tribal chieftains). In all of the wide variety of carnival and carnivalesque celebrations across the Dominican Republic, however, merengue’s hypnotic rhythms and simple steps provide the throbbing heartbeat for the convulsive mass of celebrants, like samba does in Brazil.

### **--Regional Carnival Traditions in the Dominican Republic--**

#### ***La Vega***

The first fully documented carnival in the Americas took place in La Vega in February of 1520, when the Spaniards dressed up in a re-enactment of the triumph of the Christians over the Moors. Today, the city of La Vega (relocated a few miles away from the original site after an earthquake in 1562) has the reputation of having the most colorful and lively carnival in the entire Dominican Republic—often this is attributed to the arrival of Cuban artists beginning in 1897, refugees from the Civil and Spanish-American wars. *Veganos* celebrate carnival every Sunday afternoon throughout the entire month of February; a well organized affair that is coordinated by the Unión del Carnaval Vegano. Carnival Vegano attracts many tourists, both regional and international. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the most popular carnival character in La Vega was a snake, but for the past 100 years it’s been the fierce Diablo Cojuelo, literally the “Limping Devil”—some say the characters got their name because they used to pretend they were too lame to catch anyone, while others say it is in





imitation of the pain and torture that the devil causes people. The Diablos Cojuelos are costumed in brilliantly colored, fantastically decorated satin and taffeta, and their masks are true works of art: huge papier maché creations of snarling medieval devil faces, complete with huge ears, goat-like beards and open mouths with long sharp teeth which, in the past, were real cows' teeth, but more recently are made of resin. In the past couple of years there has been a visible influence from science-fiction movies reflected in the masks. While you are watching the Diablos Cojuelos dance their way up and around the

city square, beware the snap and crack of their *vejigas*!



Pedro Antonio Valdez tells a very credible story of the origins of the popular carnival character Roba la Gallina in his book *Historia del Carnaval Vegano*, saying that it originated in La Vega, whereas most folklorists say the character originated in San Cristobal. He says that in 1822, during the early Haitian Occupation of the country, a woman in La Vega complained to Governor Plácido Le Brun that a soldier had stolen one of her hens. The governor ordered the thief caught, covered with honey and chicken feathers, and beaten with a stick as he was paraded through the streets of La Vega to the rhythm of beating drums. Today's carnival character Roba la Gallina is a man dressed as a woman, with exaggeratedly large breasts and buttocks, and usually carrying a large purse and tattered umbrella. (See San Cristobal section.)



### **Santiago**

Santiago is the second largest city in the Dominican Republic, located in the heart of the Cibao, the vast interior of the country dominated by mountains and fertile valleys. Carnival has been a bi-annual event here since 1867, for residents of Santiago not only celebrate carnival for February's pre-Lenten and Independence celebrations, but also for the Day of the Restoration, August 12 (the Republic's second independence day), because most of the battles of the Restoration were fought in and around Santiago. Two neighborhoods in particular, La Joya and Los Pepines, compete to see which can present the most colorful, noisiest spectacles. The Diablos of Santiago's carnivals are also called Lechones because it was traditional in Santiago's past to eat a lot of roast pork, *lechón*, at carnival time.



The two traditional kinds of carnival characters in Santiago are the Lechones from La Joya, known as Joyeros, and those from Los Pepines, the Pepineros. Both wear brilliant costumes combining two or three colors of silk, taffeta, and satin, decorated with mirrored disks, sequins, beads

and jingle bells, and they wear long satin-covered belts called *morcillas* coiled around their waists. Both also wear fantastic papier maché masks with “duck billed” mouths and fierce horns (called *chifles*). The horns of the Pepineros are smooth, whereas the horns of the Joyeros are covered with hundreds of little spines. A new style of mask has recently evolved in the neighborhood called Pueblo Nuevo with horns covered with cone-like flowers instead of spikes. Some other modern Santiago masks feature hands, bird heads and other fantastic forms at the tips of the horns. All the Lechones of Santiago, however, carry snap-and-crack vejigas, so watch out!



Another popular carnival character, who now can be found in many parts of the country, was originated in Santiago: Nicolás Den Den—a fat dancing bear, often symbolized as fur-tattered and dusty, chained to his human master. The character developed out of one of the favorite shows from the traveling circuses that used to pass through the area entertaining the folk of the Cibao. (Anthropologist Juan Rodríguez has found documentation of the same carnival character in Germany at least two centuries earlier.)



The late Tomás Morel ascertained that the tradition of dressing up as Los Indios (“The Indians”) began in Santiago during 1917-24 as a protest against the “enslavement” of Dominicans by the U.S. military. The slogan they chanted was, “Death before enslavement.” Today Los Indios (without the chant) are popular carnival characters around the country.



Santiago’s carnival traditions were dying out as the city modernized in the 1960s. However, Tomás Morel is credited with reviving them by starting up mask and costume competitions which continue to this day. His son, Tomás Morel, Jr., has continued the tradition and maintains a fascinatingly eclectic Museo Folklórico (“Folklore Museum”) dedicated to carnival in Santiago and to other traditions of the folk of the Cibao. In 2004, a brand new tradition may be starting. A Carnaval del Cibao was scheduled to show off the best comparsas from the central region of the country. Most of the carnival activities in Santiago, which are celebrated every Sunday throughout the month of February but gain momentum as the end of the month approaches, take place around the city’s distinctive Heroes of the Restoration Monument, which was constructed during the Trujillo Era. Before that, they were celebrated in Plaza Fernando Valerio on the day before Ash Wednesday (during the Trujillo Era, Plaza Valerio was known as Plaza Ramfis, for Trujillo’s elder son).



## Cotui

Carnaval celebrants from Cotui, a city in the Cibao, have two very distinctive characters. One is called a Platanus. The Platanuses cover themselves with leaves from plantain trees, wear masks made out of large painted gourds, and carry the snap-and-crack vejigas. The other kind of unique carnival character is called a Papelus (*papel* means “paper”). Papeluses traditionally wear costumes made of old shredded paper with gourd masks and, like Platanuses, carry vejigas. In the past, Papeluses made their costumes out of the used tracing paper in which merchants wrapped sugar and other goods purchased at the local stores. As newspapers became more widespread, they began to use it instead. As the participants became more affluent, many switched to colored crepe paper or the colored paper used to make kites. Today, because of the cheapness and ready availability of colored plastic bags, many use them instead, but are still called Papeluses. The gourd masks of both characters used to be worn plain, but most of them today are painted. The costumes of both Platanuses and Papeluses are throwbacks to the ancient “world upside down” concept of carnival—in this case, garbage becomes high fashion. Today, residents of all ages from Cotui arrive for carnival wearing a wide variety of homemade or made-in-a-school-project papelus costumes, but some of the comparsas that compete in the parade have taken the tradition to the level of high art.



Dagoberto Tejeda Ortiz has written about Cotui’s other distinctive carnival characters. They include El Mediodía (“Noon”), who is a man dressed as a woman with “her” face painted in the patriotic Dominican colors of red, white and blue. El Mediodía goes about poetically satirizing the food and sweets vendors of the city. In Cotui, notes Tejeda, you can also find General Cocotico, who wears “armor” made out of the large leaf stem of the royal palm, a product called *yagua* from which the very poor often build houses or semi-waterproof roofs; La Litera (“The Litter”) and Muerte con su Perplegía (“Death in all its Perplexity”); and Culebra y las Siete Pecados (“The Snake and the Seven Sins”).

Cotui’s carnival, which has been held on February 27 since the 1950s, is a real people’s carnival—hardly any of the thousands of onlookers who press into the street fronting the viewing stand at the central park are in normal attire. Almost all are in some kind of costume or have at least painted their faces or hair to add to the color of the celebration.



## Bonao

Bonao is another city in the fertile Cibao. Its residents are extremely artistic—the famous Dominican painter Bidó is from Bonao. They were famous in the past for dressing up as crocodiles, snakes, and bees at carnival time.



These characters have merged together to become the fantastical Macarao of Bonao (the term “Macarao” means “big mask”), a devil character similar to, yet distinctive from, the Diablo Cojuelo of its nearby neighbor, La Vega. The comparsa members change their costumes and masks every year, but instead of burning them, which is traditional in many regions of the Dominican Republic, they give them to poor children of the town and surrounding region to use the following year. The Trapuses are another type of

carnaval character that is distinctively from Bonao. Trapuses’ costumes are made of long multi-colored strips of rags (the Spanish word for “rag” is *trapo*); they are made in a manner similar to the cloth “rugs” (often used as seat covers) that are sold along the Autopista Duarte. Some Trapuses wear Macarao masks with their costume, while others simply paint their faces or wear individually crafted cloth masks. Each costume is handmade and unique. Some Bonao carnival participants have also adopted the technique used by Cotui residents of wearing costumes made of long strips cut from colored plastic bags; they are called Papeluses. One of the strangest groups in Bonao can only be called The Mudmen. It’s a group of 15 or so young men in swim trunks and river shoes who have covered themselves from head to foot in golden-colored mud,



perhaps inspired by the nearby Falconbridge gold mine. Today there is a year-round organization called the Comité Organizador del Carnaval de Bonao that is dedicated to improving and expanding the celebrations in the hopes that the city can reap some of the tourism success that La Vega has had at carnival time. Let’s hope it works, for the people of Bonao are among the friendliest on the island and certainly know how to show guests a good time.

## Salcedo

Salcedo, also in the Cibao, has what Manuela Féliz calls “one of the greatest carnivals [of the Dominican Republic] in terms of color and tradition.” The principal character is a Diablo known as a Macarao (as in Bonao), whose masks represent various types of animals, the most typical being an elephant—



the masks are notable for their multiple teeth. The Macaraos' costumes are made of contrasting colors of crepe paper streamers. On the last day of Carnival, after the celebration has ended, notes Féliz, the participants tear up the multicolored paper in a ritual that is symbolic of change from the old to the new as well as of death, birth and life. The following year they must all make new costumes. Note that Salcedo was the hometown of the

Hermanas Mirabal, the sisters who were assassinated by order of Trujillo because they were among those who wanted to overthrow his dictatorship.

### ***Puerto Plata***



Residents of Puerto Plata say their carnival is a synthesis of all aspects of Dominican culture because it blends Medieval European pageantry with Taíno and African elements. The central figures are a kind of Diablo called Taimácaros, whose costumes are “body masks” representing the various Taíno “gods.” Others dress as Medieval Spaniards, but their multicolored belts covered with shells are representative of both Africa and the sea. Juan Rodríguez has noted another unique carnival character in Puerto Plata that may become traditional there, the Pituses (the word “pito” is “whistle”), whose costumes feature hundreds of colorful sewn-on whistles.



### ***Samaná***

Samaná has a unique cultural history, for it was first settled by English-speaking freed slaves from the United States. Although



residents are heavily Protestant (the African Methodist Evangelical Church is the most representative denomination), they have celebrated carnival with zest since Titito Balbuena and his sons Diógenes and Danilo encouraged it in the early 1920s. The people of Samaná call their parade Olí-Olí, which is a dramatic comedy re-enacting the slaves of Africa. In addition to “negroes” painted glossy black (including a “chief” elevated above all the others on a “throne” carried by pole bearers) and other dancers dressed as Taíno Indians, the most typical carnival character of Samaná is a Diablo whose mask sports horns with

three spikes and who wears a costume with bat wings. The bat wings are said to represent the Taíno heritage of the island—to the Taínos, bats were the most potent symbols of the spirit world. Today, due to the popularity of the area as a tourist mecca from mid-January to mid-March, when the humpback whales can be seen in the Bay of Samaná, the newest symbol of carnival in Samaná is the whale.



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### **Rio San Juan**

Residents of this coastal town, famous for its Gri-Gri Lagoon dominated by tall, stilt-rooted mangroves and a wide variety of birds, only began to celebrate what they call Carnavarengue (a cross between “carnaval” and “merengue”) in 1996, encouraged by graduates from the School of Design at Altos de Chavón, notes Angel Caba Fuentes. The colorful costumes and masks reflect the town’s dependence upon and appreciation for the sea. Carnavarengue adds another dimension to Río San Juan’s attraction as a tourist mecca. Unfortunately, the concept of carnival as a participatory celebration of the pueblo’s unity has been lost in the commercialization of the effort; Carnavarengue is a show staged upon a platform set up in the lagoon’s boat launching area.



### **Azua**

Residents of Azua really get into carnival. They celebrate it in February as a pre-Lenten and Independence Day celebration, on August 12<sup>th</sup> for Restoration Day, in September for their *fiesta patronal* in honor of the Virgin Mary de los Remedios, and also on March 19<sup>th</sup> of every year to celebrate the victorious Battle of Azua, one of the crowning battles of the War for Independence against the Republic of Haiti. The principle character of their carnival is the colorful and fierce Diablo Cojuelo, but they are also famous for their colorful Los Indios (“Indians”).



### **San José de Ocoa**

Carnaval was resurrected in 2000 in San José de Ocoa, and Juan Rodríguez was there to document it. From the beginning, he says, it was very dynamic and creative, with many participants showing up in multicolored

Papelus-style costumes with higuero masks and others with the flowing ribbon “hair” masks characteristic of their not-so-distant neighbors in Barahona and Cabral.

### ***Elías Piña***

This frontier region on the border between the Dominican Republic and the Republic of Haiti is famous for its colorful, sensual-but-humorous Ga-Gá dancing, with a huge cast of costumed characters. The Ga-Gá of this region is very different from its counterpart of the same name that evolved around San Pedro de Macoris. Ga-Gá is celebrated throughout Easter Week. In the past, residents of Elías Piña ritually went to the mountains and burned their Ga-Gá masks as a fertility rite on the Saturday of Holy Week, so they had to make them anew for the following year. Residents of Elías Piña celebrate the traditional February carnival with Ga-Gá, too, but at that time the Ga-Gá characters are joined by the Diablos de los Llanos (“Devils of the Plains”), today more frequently called Máscaras del Diablo (“Devil Masks”), who dress in colorful costumes, carry whips, and wear masks made of cardboard decorated with natural materials, most typically feathers, but they also use hair, burrs, etc. Manuela Féliz, a Dominican traditional dance specialist, notes that other regional masks include those called Tifuas and Cocoricamo, which are made out of natural materials such as charcoal, asphalt, gourds, and cow skulls.



### ***Montecristi***



Montecristi has one of the most original carnivals in the entire country, according to Manuela Féliz. Here the Diablero is known by the name of El Toro (“The Bull”), who traditionally wears a flattened animal mask—not necessarily that of a cow or bull—that has been painted with a distinctive polka-dot design. El Toro’s costume has thick padding to protect him during his confrontations with Los Civiles (“The Civilians”), who dress in normal street clothing. Los Civiles carry whips of the same kind used to drive cattle in the countryside—during carnival, they use the whips to drive off Los Toros, who try to wrestle them to the ground. The winner is El Toro who can take the most severe lashings without giving up or the combatant from either side who can tumble his opponent. The “combat” gives a unique macho dimension to Montecristi’s carnival celebrations.

## **Cabral and Barahona**

Throughout this southwestern region of the Dominican Republic, carnival is mostly celebrated on the Friday, Saturday, and Sunday of Easter Week and the following Monday. The custom is attributed to a Spanish priest named Juan



de Luna more than 100 years ago. The principle character is a Diablo called a Cachúa because his fierce papier maché mask has little spikes all over it and is

covered with long, flowing, multi-colored strands of crepe paper “hair” that often cover the face, hanging down past the chin. The most popular Cachúa masks are patterned after animals typical of the region, such as crocodiles and

water birds, as well as bulls, oxen, and pigs— Pedro Muamba Tujibikile notes that the animal costumes are reflections of the enslaved past of the participants’ ancestors, African slaves who were made to work like beasts. Half of the Cachúas’ costumes are made with distinctive printed fabric and they sport wide “bat wing” sleeves and capes; many participants wear a cloth hood under their masks. The late

Fradique Lizardo noted that it was also customary for participants to wear women’s dresses with their masks, or long flowing pants, and to carry a mallet covered with chicken-feathers. The carnival celebrations in this region are very active and loud as ancient *mangulina* music plays while the Cachúas leapfrog over one another in the street and hold “duels” with their whips--onlookers compare the sound of the cracking whips to fireworks. On the Monday after Easter, at the end of the carnival celebrations, the Cachúas all join together in the cemetery to “beat up” a straw figure of Judas in a ritual re-enactment that blames him for all the licentiousness that took place during carnival. Then they burn Judas and scatter his ashes in the fields—which Dagoberto Tejeda Ortiz notes is part of an ancient fertility ritual. Tejeda also points out that residual fears from the Trujillo Era have crept into the celebrations, for participants often chant, “*Jua, Jua, Jua, lo mataron por calié*” as they burn the Judas figure. This is a reference to the dreaded Calié, Trujillo’s black-clad squad of assassins.



## **San Pedro de Macoris**

The *cocolos* of this region (descendants of freed Protestant slaves who came to the island seeking work in the sugar-cane industries that sprouted up in the late 1800s and early 1900s) are known for their carnival *comparsas* known as Alí Babá, whose participants wear colorful Arabic costumes and perform well



synchronized dance movements. The region is also famous for a variety of colorful carnivalesque dances—most notably Momise and Guloya—with multiple characters symbolic of the region’s past history. Both Momise

and Guloya are full-blown musical “performances” done to the beat of kettle drums, bass drums, steel drums and flutes. Finally, San Pedro is home to a uniquely Dominican variety of Ga-Gá, another kind of carnivalesque dance performance with multiple characters. Ga-gá is a sensuous celebration of fertility, performed to the mesmerizing rhythm of palos (tall African drums) and the strident sound of fotutos (conch-shell and bamboo horns). Ga-Gá is performed primarily during Easter Holy Week and at the end of the sugar-cane harvest.



### **San Cristobal**

Situated very near the Capital, the celebrations of San Cristobal are similar to those of Santo Domingo, with one distinction, their well deserved reputation for biting political satire. Traditionally held on February 27, the parade begins with loud, colorful groups marching up multiple streets from the various neighborhoods to converge around the city’s Living Stones Monument Park, where the people and a jury, together, judge



which of the local comparsas and costumed individuals will win the year’s prizes. The beloved carnival figures of El Hombre en Zancos (“The Man on Stilts”), El Doctor (“The Doctor”), and Roba la Gallina were all created in San Cristobal. All have become popular carnival characters in the Capital and other locations around the country, too. El Doctor traditionally wears glasses made of wire and dried orange rinds, carries a medical case, and scurries about trying to

“cure” women among the onlookers; Roba la Gallina is a man dressed in woman’s clothes—“she” carries a huge purse, a tattered umbrella, wears very brightly colored clothes, and has exaggerated breasts and buttocks. Roba la Gallina goes from *colmado* to *colmado* (small mom-and-pop neighborhood stores) begging for food and drink, which she



shares with her followers so the merriment of carnival can continue. The most famous Roba de Gallina of all time was “Pipi,” Sergio de Jesús Rosario. (See section on La Vega for Pedro Antonio Valdez’s version of the origins of Roba la Gallina.)

The words to the chant that Roba la Gallina’s followers taunt her with are:

*Roba la Gallina, palo con ella. Tin tin malandrín (o ti ti manatí), ton ton molondrón. A mamá que le mande una cebollita, dile que coja la mas chiquita. A mamá que le mande un grano de ajo, dile que coja el que tiene abajo. El mejor colmado, el de fulano. Muchachos que quieren cuarto.*

Roba la Gallina, hit her with a stick. *Tin tin* rascal (or *ti ti* manatee), *ton ton* okra. Send mama a little onion; tell her to choose the smallest. Send mama a piece of garlic; tell her to choose the one that he has below.\* The best colmado [is] anybody’s. The boys want money.

\*These lines are references to the fact that “she” is a he with a penis and testicles.

Another feature of San Cristobal’s carnival parade is the distinctive comparsa called the “Living Culture and the XXI Divisions.” Begun in 1985, according to Jorge Güigni, each woman in the group represents one of the Dominican pantheon of “voodoo” gods that have been re-symbolized as Christian saints. The women carry crucifixes, Dominican flags, paintings and other tokens of their saints, and march while playing *balsies* and *taboras* (drums), *guayos* (scrapers), tamborines, and maracas.

### Smaller Regional Carnivals

There are other very interesting local carnivals, such as those in the towns of Sánchez, San Francisco de Macorís, Jarabacoa, Mao,



Yerba Buena in Hato Major, and La Joya in Guerra. San Juan de la Maguana and Bánica, too, have some notable carnival traditions, most importantly their popular masks called *tifúas*, which are made of cloth covered with old oil and then adorned with horsehair. Judy Kerman heard and confirmed from several knowledgeable sources that, high up in the mountains of Constanza, the custom

of dressing up as bees for carnival remains as a protest and celebration from the 1917-1924 period of the American “intervention” (which Dominicans call the period of American occupation), when local farmers tipped over their beehives, releasing angry bees in the path of the American soldiers.



## **Santo Domingo**

In the past, carnivals in Santo Domingo were held not only to celebrate holy days and before Lent, but for all special events. The night before, luminaries would be set alight to flicker along all the streets and balconies of today's Colonial Zone (designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1987). On the day of the celebration, all the boats that ferried people across the Ozama River were decorated with brightly colored flowers, and the dominant classes paraded along El Conde, which today is a pedestrian-only street running east-west from Independence Park to the stairs leading down to the Ozama River. Costumed participants, most of them in groups representing their particular *cofradías*—"brotherhoods" connected to particular churches, which included the African *cofradías*—had orange-throwing fights and also threw *ojos de cera* (literally "Wax Eyes," which were eggshells filled with perfumed water and stoppered with wax) at each other and among the onlookers. The costumed groups fought, sang, and danced their way down El Conde. Later that night there would be a formal ball in Las Casas Reales, the mansion near the port, on the southeast corner of the Plaza de Armas that was the home of the Captain General of the island.

Eventually, the parade down El Conde came to be associated with the elite, while the poorer residents of the city, as well as delegations from nearby villages, celebrated their carnival in Enriquillo Park. Carnival was a time when the costumed participants could poke fun at the city's politicians, the military, even priests with impunity, notes Dagoberto Tejeda Ortiz—until the Trujillo Era, that is, when carnival was strictly regulated for just that reason.

Today, Dominicans from all parts of the country have moved to Santo Domingo, the political and economic capital, bringing their regional carnival customs with them, although certain traditions are specifically connected to the Capital. At carnival time, the streets are alive with Diablos Cojuelos of all kinds and ages, vigorously whistling their arrival—and watch out for those vejigas and cracking whips!

The masks of Santo Domingo's Diablo Cojuelos have traditionally taken the form of "diabolic animals" with multiple horns and large sharp teeth—frequently real teeth from cows and pigs. Today, because mask makers incorporate latex, acrylics, and other synthetic materials, the masks are becoming more and more elaborate, although many Santo Domingo Diablos wear no masks at all or wear them tilted up on top of their heads, leaving their faces unencumbered. Their costumes are brilliantly colored with multiple rows of tightly packed ruffles that run straight up the hoods that cover their heads. They sport distinctive ankle-length loincloths that are heavy with bells and other decoration. Dolls or





small stuffed animals, or just dolls' heads sewn all over the front and back of the costumes, are very typical of the Diablo Cojuelos' carnival costumes in the Capital. Like most carnival symbols, the dolls and stuffed animals have inverted and multiple meanings, for they represent the people's sadness over the deaths of all the little Dominican children over the centuries and, at the same time, they celebrate the fertility of the Dominican people—in particular its men.

In addition to the Diablos Cojuelos, in the Capital you will also see many versions of the humorous Roba de Gallina and "her" entourage (see description in the sections on San Cristobal and La Vega), and a whole host of other colorful carnival figures too numerous to detail. They include:

- La Muerte en Yipe ("Death in a Jeep"), doesn't drive a jeep. The Death character at carnival takes a wide variety of forms, but is always recognizable by his skeletal appearance or by the "blood" dripping from his multiple wounds. The name comes from the days when the Death characters used to climb up on the backs of the jeeps that towed the floats during the carnival parades.



- The elegant Califé ("Caliph") is a tall Master of Ceremonies who makes jokes in the form of poetic verses that criticize the local political and socio-economic situation. He is dressed formally in top hat, tie and black tails. The original Califé is said to have been a worker from the Villa Juana district of the Capital during the 1940s. The late Fradique Lizardo believed the character to have been modeled after the Baron of the Cemetery (a powerful god in the Dominican voodoo pantheon), but Dagoberto Tejeda Ortiz believes it to be a caricature of an elite aristocrat.



- Los Africanos are representatives of all the slaves who were brought over to work the gold mines and sugarcane plantations of the island. Canaval Africanos darken their skin with charcoal or makeup and traditionally wore plantain-leaf skirts, but recently many have replaced the skirts with loinclothes. Africanos often carry lances and go barefoot. Some now paint their faces in red, white, and blue designs that suggest the Dominican flag, others wear gourd masks, while still others sport wild "Afro" wigs. The costuming is unique and varied.





- Los Tiznaos (literally “The Stained Ones”) are dark and glossy because they paint their faces and bodies with burned motor oil. Many will offer--or threaten--to embrace onlookers, and must be discouraged by a small gift of money.

- Although the original Taíno Indians were often naked, Los Indios in Carnival usually wear loincloths or thick body paint and feathered headpieces. The most famous Carnival Indians are those from the

neighborhood of San Carlos, who act out a drama of the Spaniards and Taínos of the Conquest Era.



- Los Travestis (“The Transvestites”) are also typical of carnival in Santo Domingo as well as in Santiago and other cities of the Dominican Republic. In this paradoxical display, men show off their macho maleness during carnival by dressing up as women. Although this is often confusing to people of other cultures, it is another example of carnival’s world turned upside down. (One stunningly beautiful transvestite took the upside-down turn up yet another notch: When this researcher uttered a spontaneous, “Wow!” upon seeing her, she lifted up her skirt to show that “she” had a very naked, very real, very male penis, eliciting a doubly loud, appreciative “Wow, wow!”) Like Mardi Gras in New Orleans, however, Carnival in Santo Domingo is also a time when real

Dominican transvestites and homosexuals get to strut their stuff. Therefore understanding gender reversals at carnival time as demonstrations of masculinity doesn’t tell the entire story. The whole issue is quite confusing.

- Los Monos de Simonico are a troop of “monkeys” that originated in the neighborhood of Villa Duarte.

- Se Me Muere Rebeca, which literally translates to “Rebecca is Dying (on Me),” is a strange but fascinating character who provides a tantalizing glimpse into the topsy turvy, symbol-filled world of Dominican Carnival. If you can understand the symbolism embedded in the Carnival character Se Me Muere Rebeca, you will understand carnival more completely. The character, who first appeared in the carnival celebrations of the 1940s, is a man dressed as a woman, who wears a life-sized female doll around “her” waist as part of his costume. This is done in commemoration of a woman who once ran through the streets



seeking medical help, crying that her little girl Rebecca was dying. The character is meant to honor and mourn all the children who have died of poverty and illness on the island. But the character has a double twist in the world-upside-down way of Carnival, for the doll “Rebeca,” in this case, refers to the carnival character’s penis, and while she/he jokes that it doesn’t work anymore (“is dying on me”), it really illustrates how virile he is.

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**In 2004, Santo Domingo began to celebrate carnival with a series of city-focused parades on Avenida México in mid to late February. The Capital did not have its own parade from 1983-2003, celebrating instead the National Carnival Parade with *comparsas* from all over the island.**

### **--THE NATIONAL CARNAVAL PARADE--**

The first National Carnival Parade in Santo Domingo was held in 1983 under the direction of Milagros Ortiz Bosch. It has customarily been held at the end of February or in early March. The National Parade takes place along the Malecón, the broad avenue in the Capital that fronts the Caribbean Sea. It often



lasts six hours or more! The *comparsas*—colorful groups of similarly-costumed individuals, frequently with floats, some of which are extremely lavish, and usually accompanied by musicians--come from all over the country and compete for prizes. The judges and VIPs are in viewing stands near the Hotel Jaragua. Throughout the parade, onlookers and participants—frequently it’s hard to distinguish one from the other as costumed onlookers become participants—dance and drink and party, weaving onto the street from the sidelines, with the police and other military types trying to

keep everybody back behind designated lines, usually unsuccessfully. Keep a lookout for the unique plaited hairstyles that onlookers wear at carnival time, among which the most outstanding are the artistic “porcupine” designs made with toothpicks, and for the fabulous face and head painting among the crowds of people. Vendors line the avenue selling food and cold drinks, and toys, and masks. The music is loud and dynamic, and few onlookers can just “stand around”—you have to move to the pulsing beat! Or at least you must step lively to avoid the snap-crackle-ouch! of a Diablo Cojuelo’s vejiga, the crack of a whip, or the reckless groups of young revelers running full tilt through the crowded street.



Dominican Carnival is an absolutely incredible full sensory experience, an immersion into history, national patriotism, communal sharing, tropical rhythms, heat, and sensuality, interwoven with a peculiar brand of humor that is both contagious and lots and lots of fun.

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