

The *Comparsa*: A Havana Carnival's Cultural, Ethnic and Community Expression

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This year's Havana carnival started on August 8th, with a week of krewe parades and carnival floats, according to the initial news. The event is even more interesting because it is so far from the original traditional carnival, and very artificial in and of itself. The loss of any cultural context reveals a divorce between the carnival and any sort of ethnic or community expression.

The Havana carnival began around 1760, possibly when the black *cabildos* became accustomed to visiting the Captain General at his palace every January 6th (Day of the Epiphany), our traditional Three Kings Day. As each *cabildo* arrived, its leader would rise to salute the maximum colonial authority and receive a small gift (a sum of money) as a sort of a Christmas bonus. The participants dressed in their typical costumes and danced to the rhythm of drums as they made their way to the Plaza de Armas. León Beauvallet, a chronicler for a beautiful French actress during her voyage around America notes in the book *Rachel in the New World: a trip to the United States and Cuba* (New York, 1856).

"The Black Carnival. It is a very interesting and peculiar Havana festivity. Beginning at dawn, all the city's slaves are free, by law, till the next morning. If some slaveowner tries to force



The Marqueses of Atarés



El Alacrán

his slaves to work, they immediately go to see the Commissioner, who fines the owner a considerable sum. . . From morning till four o'clock, thousands of them passed on the street, shrieking all their native songs while playing maracas, pots and drums."¹

From these myriad street parades was born a more organized form of celebration, inspired, perhaps, by the different dance organizations that participated: the *comparsas*. From one of the capital city's oldest neighborhoods, El Cerro, came two of the most historic *comparsas*, El Alacrán and Los Marqueses de Atarés. They are not the only ones, but they are the oldest examples we have.

The El Alacrán *comparsa* debuted in 1908. It was created in the Los Carretones *solar* [tenement house], and is famous because some of its participants dressed up like traditional figures such as Rosa La China, María la O, Cecilia Valdés, and María Belén Chacón. This event also included 45 pairs of dancers, 14 lantern bearers and a float shaped like a slave barracks. The dancers wield a machete or hack they hit the pavement with to mark their peculiar rhythm and beat.

The choreography is complemented by a performance of the death of the *alacrán* [scorpion], based on a pantomimed dance: the death of a snake. During the *comparsa* a 'godfather' ceremoniously baptizes the lanterns some days before they start the feast. Traditionally, there was also a meal of beef foot soup and root vegetables: the 'godfather' sprayed the lanterns with beer to bring good luck to the group. The fact the participants in this *comparsa* maintained ties as a brotherhood and mutual aid society, the "Agrupación Azules Tradicionales" [The Traditional Blue Group], which was finally dissolved in 1963.

The Los Marqueses de Atarés *comparsa* emerged in 1937, by means of the initiative of residents of El Cerro who collected money from people's homes, and got enough together

to start it. Its 'godmother' was María Galarraga de Sánchez, mother of poet Gustavo Sánchez Galarraga. She offered \$200 dollars and a carriage for the first event. Since then, it has been one of Havana's most outstanding, traditional *comparsas*.

These and other *comparsas* (Los Negros Curros, Las Bolleras, Las Jardineras, etc.) are linked to black and *mestizo* associations in neighborhoods, *barrio* social networks and workplaces. After the changes that were imposed after 1959, the closure of all the black recreational and mutual aid societies reduced the presence of traditional elements in the *comparsas*, despite the fact their promoters were still transmitters of traditional culture to future generations.

One of the *comparsas* was run by the State (by cultural or administrative branches), a different relationship between the *comparsa* as a community, artistic and cultural expression and its dependence on rules and decisions foreign to that tradition were established.

Today in Havana, carnivals have practically no real cultural, artistic or social relevance. The space in which they take place has been reduced to a few hundred meters from the Malecón, and due to alcohol consumption and socio-cultural differences among the thousands of participants, the kind of disruptions that do occur seem more apropos a city of two million inhabitants.

Instability and the changed dates of their celebration demand a return of the carnival to its origins, with its authentic significance and cultural dimension. Upon losing its ethnic and community roots, the carnival in Havana has lost its identity and authenticity.

Note:

1- Eguren, Gustavo. *La Fidelísima*. Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1986: 290-291.