

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

FM-3
Carnaval in Recife.

Recife,
 Pernambuco.

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 366 Madison Avenue,
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Dear Mr. Nolte,

We have just experienced a Recife Carnival, reputedly 'o melhor do mundo'. Although the use of ether was prohibited for the first time this year, the general verdict was that the 1966 Carnival was the best for many years.

When we arrived here well before Christmas, the important date was already Carnival; Christmas as a festival was a comparatively pale affair. Carnival, traditionally a Catholic festival, is still celebrated in some European countries, notably Nice and parts of Germany and Holland, but above all it flourishes in Brazil and Trinidad. The festivities take place on the four days leading up to Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. Every city, town and even village in Brazil celebrates Carnival, but Recife claims to have the best of them all. This may well be true, and it is certainly easy to see why the festival is so popular here. A large town obviously has more available resources than a small one. The Brazilian love of 'movimento' and its magnetic attraction for any sort of crowd gives a large town an immediate advantage. Of these, only Rio de Janeiro and Recife make any claim to the title. The other cities in the South are comparatively new, and have strong foreign elements in them. Carnival in Rio has been immortalised in 'Black Orpheus', but inevitably, for the sake of the film, it was glamourised. Although I have not seen it myself, I am told that apart from the formal 'desfilos' (parades), Carnival in Rio is much more closed than in Recife. It is a far more sophisticated occasion, and the focal points are the middle and upper class social clubs rather than the streets.

Here, at least until recently, the activity in the streets was the greater, and the festival was in every sense, popular. The clubs attracted some, but to enjoy Carnival to the full, one danced with the crowds in the streets. Alas, each year this tradition is dying; the 'movimento e animacao' of the streets is declining, whilst the attendance figures in the social clubs continue to soar. If this trend continues, Recife will no longer be able to justify its claim, and Rio with its greater glamour and sophistication will have greater appeal. From what I saw, the streets were crowded, but disappointingly few people were dancing. The place to dance was, without doubt, the clubs.

In mid-December we visited the largest of the clubs. Already, two months before the event, it was preparing itself for Carnival and decorations were going up. However, other than as a topic of conversation, outward public manifestations at this stage were few. At the beginning of January the 'gritos do Carnaval' started. These are private parties with no special form, but pre-Carnival is regarded as the party giving season. Also, the odd packets of 'maizena' (Indian corn flour) began appearing in car pockets as ammunition. On the official side there was the election of Rei Momo. This figure is the nominal head and symbolic ruler during Carnival, and is of African origin. He may be re-elected year after year, but this year there were about a dozen competitors for the post. The only statutory qualifications are a minimum

weight of one hundred kilos and a minimum height of one and three quarter metres. But on top of this an immense amount of stamina and an extrovert character are required, since Rei Momo is expected to visit all the different parts of Carnival linking them together and acting as general co-ordinator.

By two weeks before Carnival all was nearly ready, and Carnival mood had set in. The radio played nothing but Carnavalesque music, shops were having pre-Carnival sales, and garages were full of cars being repaired and prepared for the now integral part of Carnival, the 'côurso'. Just before the official opening of the celebrations, two huge balls were held, the Masked Ball, and the Municipal Ball. Of the two, the former is considered the smarter but the latter is the larger. These balls constitute the main occasions for the middle and upper classes to wear fancy dress. The lavishness of many of these was staggering, and competitors had even flown up for the occasion from Rio. The talking points subsequently, however, were the number of homosexuals at the Municipal Ball, and the shooting between two State Deputies' sons over a girl at the end of the Masked Ball. Nobody was killed, but an intervenor was seriously injured.

The week before Carnival is really part of Carnival. Although the traditional elements are restricted to four days only, the non-traditional elements are growing, so that the festivities start earlier each year. The 'côurso' started in this week and, continuing everyday until the end, is the part of Carnival whose popularity is growing most rapidly. It consists of a long slow tour made by hundreds of cars, mainly jeeps, around the main streets of Recife. All partaking cars were stripped of inessentials such as roofs and doors, and were crammed to bursting point with Recife youth dressed in their oldest clothes pelting each other with flour and water, and at closer range with axle oil, ground coffee and boot polish. The more unrecognisably dirty the faces were, the better. The cars moved very slowly in first gear and stopped every fifty yards or so. Each time they stopped bottles of beer were passed round the truck and occasionally to friends in neighbouring trucks. A small local fruit, pitomba, a little like a lychee without the distinctive shell, was sold, generally distributed to passers by, and also used as ammunition. The 'côurso' usually started shortly after dark, though during the four days of Carnival itself it started much earlier. By midnight a good many of the drivers were drooped over the wheel, incapable of doing anything except put their foot on the accelerator. The whole event had got more out of hand by this time. There were more bumps and grazes, and one jeep infinitely added to the confusion by attempting to go in the opposite direction from everybody else. All this was taken very tolerantly. Horns were in more or less continuous use anyway, so that other than by shouting it was impossible to express indignation.

The majority of the cars were jeeps, which are the easiest type of car to strip. Almost every jeep in the city must have taken part judging by the numbers present. Some had been decorated for the occasion with slogans of varying degrees of originality. One had been most effectively covered with palm leaves at the back to form a canopy. Another had a second storey at the back, built of pegboard, to accomodate more people and give them a better view. The remaining cars were all types of saloons, a few pre-war open Fords, which stood up to the test manfully, and the occasional full-sized lorry. These last usually contained at least one band, and from their greater height were very effective in their use of ammunition. The occupants of the cars tended to come from the middle and upper classes, since only they could afford to own a car in the first place, and certainly add years to its life in ten days. The rest of the population, including members of all generations, thronged around the cars, joining in the battle and dancing. The bars had spread themselves right down

the pavements of the main street, selling beer and peanuts. People also wandered around the streets with whisky bottles under their arms, swigging them periodically and offering them to any friend lucky enough to meet them.

There were two unattractive elements. One was the commercialisation in the main square. This was filled with advertisements for 'Guarana', the sweet Brazilian equivalent of Coca Cola, which were mainly in the form of mammoth bottles of the drink surmounted by gyrating clowns. The other was the loud-speakers provided by the Prefeitura, which played canned music in all the main streets. These were far too loud, drowned all the spontaneous bands, and were, moreover, simply plugged into one of the local radio stations. This particular station had a very limited supply of Carnavalesque records which it had already played continuously for the previous month and were beginning to get on people's nerves. The programme also had an extremely high proportion of its time devoted to advertising, so that as soon as a dance got under way it was cut short by some golden voice recommending everybody to take Alka Seltzer.

On the Sunday night the traditional popular Carnival started. This was not an orgy but a spectacle. The various quarters of the city, together with some groups from outside, danced in the main streets in full traditional dress. One after another danced and formed a pageant in front of the official judges and huge crowds of onlookers, of whom disappointingly few were themselves dancing. There are four main types of dance in the Pernambuco Carnival of which three, the caboclinho, the maracatu and the frêvo are indigenous, and the fourth, the samba, comes from Rio de Janeiro. They are all single dances, and properly, are never danced with partners. Throughout the year the groups, known as 'escolas', 'clubes' and 'troças' prepare their costumes and practise their dances. The dresses are extremely lavish when they finally appear, and since the members are nearly all working class, must absorb every spare cruzeiro that they earn during the year. The Prefeitura provides a small subsidy, but it is a negligible amount in comparison with the total cost. There is, however, considerable disparity between the richer and the poorer groups both in size and lavishness.

The form of the caboclinho, which means simply 'little Indian' was the simplest, but was none the less most effective. Under the arclights of the television cameras, which threw the onlookers and surroundings into deep shadow, it was easy to forget that one was not watching genuine Indians in a very different setting. The dancers were almost all men. They wore grass skirts, bone necklaces and had huge feather headdresses which waved in the wind. Keeping them on was a feat in itself. In some cases peacock feathers were used, forming a headdress far richer and larger than any picture of full Indian headdress that I have ever seen. They danced soundlessly barefoot, with anklets of grass, and each carried a small wooden bow and arrow which they clicked to the very marked rhythm of the music. This, similar to a horse cantering and in strict two-time, was entirely dependent on rhythm and had virtually no tune at all. The only other instruments were a pipe and two drums played by the three pipe band which brought up the rear. The dancers entered the arena crouched double over their weapons, looking to right and to left and creeping stealthily forward. After forming two parallel lines they wheeled round forming a circle and, never ceasing their rapid foot movements for an instant, continued the dance weaving in and out, doubled up, but occasionally giving a triumphant leap into the air.

The maracatu is less African than the caboclinho is Indian. It is very much more elaborate with a great many more eclectically drawn figures taking part. The dance is centred around an elected king and queen who are the most lavishly dressed of all the figures. They have a retinue of train bearers and are protected by a huge fringed canopy and parasol. Somewhere behind them comes a most dignified princess being courted by a prince who performs elaborate dances to impress her. The dress of the royal family and the large following of courtiers was basically eighteenth century, although the theme and colours were different for each group. The women wore tight bodices and hooped skirts with layers of petticoats. The men were in long jackets, tight knee breeches and buckled shoes. Many members of both sexes had wigs made of coloured wool. One set were even pale green, piled high on their heads in elaborate waves, very like eighteenth century powdered creations. The standard of design was without exception high, and the choice of colour was never vulgar. Each group had a predominant colour, or two colours, around which all the costumes, not only those of the courtiers, were designed. Generally blue and white or red and white were the most effective, but the most common, and frequently the less rich were pink and green. The most used materials were satin and velvet and ordinary cheap cotton never appeared. The clothes were embellished with sequins, pearls and other jewels for decoration. The crowns of the king and queen themselves could hardly be described as crowns at all, but were enormous headpieces with perhaps a crown at the bottom as a base. On top they had creations of flowers, butterflies or abstract designs. The winning costume was breathtaking, and was based on French dress of the Louis XV period. The whole effect made a Covent Garden chorus look drab. The lasting picture that I have is of black velvet covered in sequins, with headdresses so delicate and high that they appeared more like satellites or halos around the head of the wearer, and it was impossible to imagine how they kept them on to move, let alone to dance.

The only other eighteenth century figure in the maracatu is the standard bearer who is dressed in the same style as the male courtiers. His position is near the front of the procession and he carries an elaborately embroidered standard with the name of the 'clube' or 'traça' and the date of its foundation. Part of the tradition is that the bearer should not only carry the standard but should dance with it, if possible balancing it without using his hands. This demands great skill, and drew warm applause from the onlookers whenever he succeeded in doing so. The whole procession is normally preceded by a symbolic figure representing the name of the group. This again often showed the African origin and was frequently an elephant or lion. Immediately behind them came the most curious figures of the whole display. This was a group of five or six male dancers dressed in thick coloured grass skirts and grass wigs. On their backs they wore a curious instrument made of about seven great cow bells fixed onto coarse hide and carried like a ruc-sack. These looked extremely heavy, and the dancers were bent nearly double under the weight; I was told that they weighed fifteen kilos. They carried in front of them long sticks, also covered in strands of coloured grass, whose purpose, I would guess, is to help the dancers balance. The whole appearance of the figures was grotesque, as they jogged along, doubled up, waving their sticks, with their cow bells clanging on their backs. Finally, circling around them, came one or two Indians complete with full headdresses. The band followed near the back of the parade, wearing either their normal clothes or a simple uniform in the same colours as the courtiers, but never anything elaborate.

The music of the maracatu I did not find as gripping as the others. The instruments used were mainly tin, and none of them were melodic. The rhythm

is much slower and more stately than any of the other dances, and the steps are equally dignified with frequent sweeping arm movements.

The frêvo is the last of the Pernambucan dances, and is the most Brazilian of the three in that its elements are derived from a great many sources. The music is often in the form of a song with words, the frêvo-cansão, which is sung with great gusto by the dancers. Some of the music is old and traditional, but each year a competition for frêvo-cansões is held, and the new ones are absorbed very quickly. The elements derive partly from the polka, the quadrille, the march and the pastoril, but the resulting mixture is quite unlike, and is more compulsive than, any of these. The dance is much looser in form than any the others, and outside the processions is much the most popular of the dances. There is no set 'passo' or step, but any is permitted provided that it fits in with the rhythm. There are a few recognised 'passos' but I never saw any two dancers executing the same step at the same time. Traditionally 'passistas' in the streets danced with umbrellas to balance themselves, but there were disappointingly few around, and certainly no sea of umbrellas as we had been led to believe.

The theme of the costumes ranged from Imperial China to King Solomon's court, or in other words, any subject that gave scope for lavish robes and rich colours. There are virtually no prescribed figures except for the standard bearer who, as in the maracatu, dances with everybody else, at times not even holding the standard with his hands. The band was dressed in a uniform, simple but gay, and marched in the middle of the dancers. It was proportionately much larger than for the other dances, and consisted almost entirely of tin instruments, both blown and struck. In addition to orthodox instruments it used all kinds of drums and gongs made from saucepans and other household implements, and was consequently exceedingly loud.

The schools of samba, coming from Rio, are the only popular non-indigenous dance. They tended to be the largest and the richest of the groups. To begin with I found them the most interesting and picturesque of the dances, but towards the end the huge parades lasted too long and were at times almost tedious. The central figure is the master of ceremonies who presents each dancer to the judges, and generally supervises the event. His was by far the most arduous task of the evening, as he was in the limelight, dancing the whole time for the duration of the parade which was twenty minutes or more. A large proportion of the dancers were children, and as the master of ceremonies presented and encouraged each, not one ever showed signs of losing his patience or temper, but behaved the whole time rather like a genial paternal impresario. The procession was headed by the cart bearing the symbol of the school and often a small child who then descended to dance with the master of ceremonies. There seemed to be a competition as to who could produce the smallest child, which ended in disaster when an infant of about eighteen months, completely bewildered by the whole occasion, was knocked down by another dancer and burst into tears. His father leapt out of his place in the line, picked the child up, and continued dancing with the child in his arms. Behind the child came three or four adult men, and row upon row of children filing past in twos and threes, all completely at home with the rhythm and dancing very unselfconsciously, and with their short skirts were more interesting to watch than the adults. The latter followed, also in great numbers, until the procession was finally brought to an end by three or four young men, even more energetic than the others, turning somersaults, dancing on their hands and performing acrobatic feats.

The costumes had no set theme, but they were invariably in only two colours. The winners formed a pageant of 'The World' in red and white, with two or three dancers representing each of the major countries in its traditional dress. The materials used were amongst the most expensive of all, and, except for the winner and one other, the sambas tended to be more impressive for their size and richness rather than for their imagination. The enormous band, in simple uniforms, brought up the rear, blowing and striking every conceivable instrument both orthodox and unorthodox. The music had little in common with the ballroom samba, and had a very much more compulsive rhythm. The steps were very quick, controlled and neat, hopping very rapidly from one foot to the other in very small steps. To move forward rapidly the dancers leapt with long strides rather than danced.

The streets through which the parades passed were packed. In the train of the dancers there was always a motley following of friends and relatives. Immediately behind these the ranks closed and the whole street was filled with one huge, swaying, undulating wave of humanity. Those nearer the parade were dancing, whilst those further off were being pushed against each other, first in one direction and then in the other, by the dancers. There was a choice of either fighting one's way to the front and seeing the display, albeit in considerable discomfort, or standing further back and seeing very little but being shoved around less.

This was the way to see and join in à la Recifense. One night we went as tourists and sat up in the grandstand near the judges looking down on the dancers. Admittedly the view was very much better, but being surrounded by Americans with periscopes and cine-cameras, it was impossible to enter into the spirit of the occasion in the same way. The evening's proceedings opened with Rei Momo appearing in his regal costume, standing in the back of a jeep and being driven slowly down the main street under the glare of television arclights, both of local companies and of a German company. He stopped under the judges stand, was presented with a microphone, and addressed his various audiences. This was the only time in the four days that I actually saw Rei Momo: whether it was chance that I missed him, or whether he was simply not being very active, I do not know. In either case, he seemed to lack a certain extrovert jollity that was required, and was rather too like a mayor opening the town bazaar.

After an interval of half an hour, the evening's display finally started at about nine o'clock and continued without a break until about three-thirty. As soon as one group had passed, the next followed. By the end I was almost numb, and too dazzled to be able to appreciate the finer points in the spectacle. During the first few parades the television reporters followed the dancers, trying to hold their microphones close to the performers, and give them, already no doubt out of breath, inaudible interviews. The microphone wires became more and more entangled as the interviewers leapt from one dancer to another, and one waited for the catastrophe when a dancer tripped over one of the wires. Fortunately the apparently inevitable never occurred, and after an hour or so the interviewers retreated to the side lines to give their own running commentaries in comparative safety.

Two of the outstanding displays of the evening were not competing for the cups. One was an extremely lavish frêvo presented by a drink factory in Olinda, a neighbouring town. Had it been eligible to compete, it would certainly have won the class for the frêvo. The other was a unique presentation by one of the towns in the interior, and consisted of a still display, on a cart, of the

Mayan civilisation. The procession was heralded by policemen on motor cycles. Then came a tractor pulling the cart itself, which was a huge erection, lavishly decorated, with the local beauties posing in bikinis, lit by strip lights. It was definitely a display of the 1960's, and one that drew warm applause from the audience, but it did not seem to me to fit with the rest of Carnival. Immediately behind the magnificent cart came four men holding the electric wires joining the lighting to the large and noisy electric motor that followed. The bathos of the motor after the sophistication of the display itself was extreme and very Brazilian. The only untoward incident of the evening very nearly occurred when one of the escorting motor cycles burst into flames, threatening the cart itself. But for the prompt action of another policeman in grabbing the fire extinguisher from a nearby jeep, the whole display might well have ended in disaster.

My chief regret was that 'Carnaval das ruas' - the street Carnival - was becoming divided into two. There were the dancers in the processions, and there were the onlookers who danced very little. Disappointingly few of the latter were in fancy dress. A few recognised the occasion by wearing Hawaiian necklaces of cloth or paper flowers, or a symbolic Indian headdress of one feather on a band and some sticking plaster on the cheeks, but very little imagination was shown by any. Apart from the canned music on the loudspeakers, there was no permanent band, but only the music of each procession as it passed, and the sporadic improvised band, usually in a lorry. We had been led to believe that the whole of the city centre was alive with dancing. Alas, this was not so. There was never any time when everybody was dancing together, and there seemed to me to be little common spirit linking people together. People were happy, but as individuals rather than as a mass. I have a sad feeling that the impromptu Carnival in the streets is dying, though the 'blocos' and 'clubes' will surely continue. In other words, Carnival in Recife will be more like Carnival in Rio.

The place to dance now is the social clubs. These are institutions much loved by the Brazilians and have no English equivalent. There are in Recife perhaps nine or ten of them with subtle distinctions in class and type. All the year round they provide bars, restaurants, tennis and other sports, and have occasional dances. Some are attached to institutions like the Bank of Brazil and the army, others are basically sports clubs such as the Iate (yacht) and the Athletic, and some have no special affiliations and are among the most popular, notably the International, the Portuguese and the British Country Club. This last has mainly Brazilian members now, but retains the tradition of afternoon tea, and I am told it is definitely 'snob' to be seen taking tea in the club. The tone and size of each club is different, some being quieter and more exclusive than others, but in almost all the highlight of the year is Carnival. This is also their chief way of raising money. Membership of the clubs is very much more expensive at this time of year, and moreover it often costs almost as much to take in a guest. One club, not necessarily the most expensive, charged \$50 for each guest. This admittedly only applied to men, as women were always allowed in free. On top of this, it was necessary to buy a table since there were no general places for sitting. Cost is, however, no apparent deterrent, and every year the attendance figures rise.

Easily the largest and the most popular of the clubs is the International. Others are more exclusive and sophisticated, and possibly have better bands, but to see Carnival at its best everybody recommended this one. We spent the last night of Carnival there. Dancing only started at about eleven o'clock, and did not liven up until well after midnight. This club alone had over fifteen thousand people checked in at the gates that night. Over the four nights

it sold 1,900 bottles of whisky, 1,500 bottles of rum, 100,000 long drinks, and 190,000 sandwiches; and 10,000 bottles and glasses were broken. The entire fifteen thousand spent the whole night 'pulando'. This is a mixture of hopping and jumping and is a much closer description of the movement than dancing. It is not pure coincidence that the word for a flea is a 'pulga'. The huge and apparently tireless band played without a break the entire night. In fact, there were relays of players, but the effect was continuous. Much the most popular and frequent dance was the frêvo whose words were also sung raucously by the dancers. The only other music was that of the samba.

The main floor of the club was packed with a solid mass of dripping bodies jammed shoulder to shoulder, throwing themselves in all directions but miraculously not kicking each other. It was impossible to extricate oneself rapidly, and the safest position, in order to avoid acute claustrophobia, was near the edge. However the dancers were not confined to the floor. All around it were tables, several thousand of them in all, and around the tables, on top of them and on the countless chairs were more dancers. These only partially succeeded in avoiding the piles of glasses and half empty bottles lying on the tables. Finally, outside in the gardens there were yet more, so thick that there was hardly room to sit down without the risk of being trodden upon. The participants came singly, with partners, or in groups, but one of the striking features was the predominance of girls. This did not seem to matter, as people danced equally happily alone, with partners, in threes or in large circles. Nobody felt left out in the way that they would at a formal dance. All Brazilian formalities were abandoned and couples were dancing together without any introduction which would, apparently, be unheard of at other times. The bar carried on a flourishing trade throughout the night, mainly in beer and spirits, but what was drunk was rapidly absorbed and turned into energy. Although people were happy, few could have been described as drunk. Dress was casual, with few fancy dresses. I saw only two men in anything other than a shirt and trousers, and they were both in long Edwardian striped bathing dresses. More girls were dressed up, but most were unimaginative, and the vast majority of those present were in matching shirts and trousers. Very few were in dresses of any sort. The predominant age group was about eighteen to twenty-five, but older people, although in a minority, were being equally energetic.

Dawn came, the sun rose, and yet the dancing continued unabated, and with no visible reduction in numbers. Finally after seven o'clock, the band left its stand and marched, still playing, into the square in front of the Club. The mesmerized crowds, still dancing, followed their Pied Piper, and only when the band stopped playing half an hour later did people disperse and Carnival come to an end. After more than four days of living a Carnavalesque life, dancing by night and wandering about numbly by day, it had become a habit, and it seemed natural that it should continue. However, Wednesday was a day of reckoning, even if it came only in the form of a hang-over and universal bad temper.

Yours sincerely,

Fanny Mitchell.

Fanny Mitchell.