

Whither 'ol' time' Christmas?

Whether you believed in it or not, you could not have helped being caught up in the festivities and excitement of 'ol' time' Christmas in Jamaica.

It was an era when the hospitality and the generosity of the Jamaican people were at their peak, and the Christmas breeze embraced and caressed you, softening your heart, filling it with good cheer. Among the merriment, there was the widespread giving and sharing of food and drink. The notion of 'nyamming' and drinking to your heart's content overrode the desire for expensive gifts and toys which many poor people could not afford. It was about living for the moment. But to learn of what Christmas was like in Jamaica over the years, let's take a stroll down the Yuletide memory lane. Christmas Eve was a day to look forward to, the most-anticipated day of the year. Children, and even some adults, could not sleep. Ironically, some, overwhelmed by the occasion, could not eat. New shoes, clothes and hairstyles, new curtains, bright plastic flowers, Grand Market visits, gungo and tripe soup, fruitcakes and puddings, roast beef, rice and peas, sorrel laced with rum and ginger that burned every taste bud, Christmas carols from audio cassettes, radios and stereos - for those who could afford them - were the must-haves and must-dos, and the expectations were high. The air was filled with sounds of celebration and revelry. This sort of festivity has been around since the days of slavery when enslaved Africans were sometimes given three days off to relax and unwind. It must have been such a relief for those benighted people who worked all year round in the sun and rain, and lived in subhuman conditions. And boy did they throw a party. James Walvin, in his book, *Black Ivory*, says, "Christmas was preceded by lengthy preparations, clothes, often elaborate costumes, were especially made, food set aside and time devoted to the necessary preparations. It was a noisy, colourful, exuberant holiday. Slaves split into their tribes or local grouping, paraded through the local town or property, singing and dancing and playing music." But that was not the end. They met at certain points where, for hours, they would indulge in the most elaborate of celebrations in carefree abandon. Dressed in finery that belied the terrible state of their existence, "most danced and sang, others were 'in a constant state of intoxication' for the whole of Christmas". Walvin says Lady Nugent, the wife of the governor, wrote in her 1801 diary of Jamaica that, "Christmas Day! All night the music of Tom-Tom (drums) etc. Rise early and the whole town and house bore the appearance of a masquerade". On the 26th, she writes, "The same wild scenes acting over and over again". But it was John Canoe, more than anyone else, who stood out in these slave parades. "John Canoe," Walvin writes, "was the most striking in Jamaica. Lines and processions of singing and dancing slaves were led by John Canoe himself, in the most elaborate of disguises, dancing and leading the procession ... making fun of bystanders (especially the whites) and generally clowning his way through the day. "His clothing was bizarre and colourful, baggy clothes tied by red tape, blue velvet waistcoat lavishly embroidered, his sleeves bordered by strips of metal which jingled as he walked. His long-tailed coat was similarly edged with bells and mounted by elaborate epaulettes. On his head he wore an enormous cocked hat, from which conflicting masks hung at the front and back. The whole colourful scene was rounded off by an eye-catching item pinned to his rear." Yet the celebrations of the Africans were significantly scaled down when European Christian denominations took root in the minds of the spirited Africans who knew nothing about Christmas before their arrival in Jamaica. The Europeans who were not enthusiastic about the ways in which Africans celebrated the season were to contain the merriment with their religious teachings and practices. Over time, Christmas took on a more sacred aura, despite pockets of retention of the traditional celebrations. The communal eating and drinking, and sharing continued way after the abolition of slavery, into the 1970s, when John Canoe marches were still a staple at Christmas time in some places, as well as Christmas tree lighting, fee-fees (fifes), frilly cone-shaped paper Christmas hats and masks, 'blow-blows', plastic whistles, firecrackers, starlight, toy guns and cars, marbles, jacks, dolls, water guns, crown-and-anchor boards, rope candies, etc. Since the mid 1980s, the spirit of togetherness of the Jamaican Christmas has been slowly fading and this has been heightened by the proliferation of American television images through videos. Internet and cellphone technologies, too, have not helped in preserving the traditional values of the Jamaican Christmas. Things and times, even some people's religious perspective on Christmas, have certainly changed. And while it might not be possible to bring back some of the images, sights and sounds of the Jamaican Christmas of yesteryear, what about the warm Jamaican hospitality of people cooking and baking to share? What about the visits to the country or town to meet and greet friends and loved ones? Every elderly person could tell you about the joy they experienced at Christmas time even though they were poor. But they were rich in spirit and generous with the little they had.

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