



Carnival Masks

Art of the Dominican Republic

Rebecca Hinson

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Dedicated to Brianna Janelle Garcia & Joselin Lopez Garcia

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Characters of carnivals in the Dominican Republic don amazing masks. Each one plays a part on outdoor stages of village squares and in parades of the Independence Carnival, the Restoration Carnival, the Rebel Slave Carnival, and other carnivals that are held each year, mostly from February to April. Through parody, they reveal the trials, triumphs, and joys of the nation.



Catholic colonists brought the tradition of carnival from Spain. There, during the forty days of Lent, consumption of meat was forbidden. Godly worship, reverent prayer, and silent meditation were observed. So, prior to Lent, carnival (meaning “farewell meat”) became a time of feasting, merry-making, and parades full of naughty masquerading Diablo Cojuelos (devils). The world was turned upside down.



In the Spanish colony, additional topsy-turvy characters emerged to join the Diablo Cojuelo. Farm animals ruled farmers, men became women, and wild animals stalked human hunters.

Some scholars say the Spanish Diablo Cojuelo originated from a 1264 order by Pope Urban IV to create a dramatic Corpus Christi procession in which good defeated evil. Other scholars say the Diablo Cojuelo arose from the pages of Castilian



seventeenth century literary satire. Said to be one of the first angels to rise in celestial rebellion, he was the first to fall into the underworld, where his brothers landed on him, injuring his leg. Wearing horns, jingle bells, and mirrors, he limps around town, flailing a vejiga (inflated animal bladder).

In the Dominican city of Santiago, various neighborhoods have distinctive devil masks. To make the Los Pepines mask (seen above), a clay



papier-mâché mold is formed for the face structure. An adhesive made of yuca starch & lime juice is used to apply layers of paper to the mold and to two animal horns. After drying, the paper horns are attached to the paper face, and holes are cut for the eyes and mouth. After sanding, enamel paint is applied. Foam is glued inside the mask to fit it to the wearer's face. Plastic bands are added to hold the mask onto the face.



A similar mask is made in the La Joya neighborhood. Joyeros have multiple spikes attached to two large horns, and a longer pointed snout. The mask of the Pueblo Nuevo neighborhood substitutes flowers for spikes. Local artisans are challenged every few years to create unique designs for rivaling neighborhoods.



The city of Puerto Plata's version of the Diablo Cajuelo (derived from Cojuelo) is the Taimáscaru. With the face of a Taíno zemi (deity or ancestral spirit), they wear jingle and cow bells to replace negative energies with positive ones. African handkerchiefs dance on their sleeves, opening doors to the spirit world. Shells link them to the bordering sea.



The city of Salcedo's version of Diablo Cajuelo is the large-horned Macarao. With the head of an African animal, mythical giant, or Spanish Moor, they flail vejigas to eliminate negative forces. To symbolize the triumph of life over death, wearers traditionally destroy their vejigas and costumes at the end of the festival, preparing new ones the following year.



The province of Elías Piña's version of Diablo Cajuelo is made of cardboard, hair, feathers, and cotton. After spring celebrations on Good Friday, wearers return to their land where they burn their masks, spreading the ashes throughout the fields to honor the earth's fertility.



Traditional vejigas are dried cow bladders cured with ash, lime, and salt. The exteriors are covered with cloth. Modern vejigas are made of synthetic rubber. Inflated, they are used by devils to strike the bottoms of other demons and noisy spectators.



The Taíno appear covered in black and white, mud, or multiple splattered colors, wearing loincloths. In 1492, Christopher Columbus claimed the island for the Spanish, enslaving the Taíno natives. At the end of the Dominican Restoration War in 1865, after the defeat of the Spanish by island nationalists, the Spanish army withdrew from the country. Regaining their independence, Dominicans embraced their indigenous roots.