

## **Carnival in Lagos**

To the visitor, Lagos can seem a bit scary: fifteen million or more people crammed into one place amidst chaotic traffic. However, with a good guide and a sense of adventure, one can quickly sample the cultural currents rippling beneath the surface. One such cultural event is Fanti, the carnival that takes place four times a year on Lagos Island. Fanti is the Mardi Gras of Lagos; a Brazilian style celebration of life and community. Having lived in Nigeria for over a year, I decided it was time to experience Fanti for myself.

I arranged for a Lagos Islander friend to show our party around. Yemi arrived in a beaten-up old Mercedes and a pair of cool spectacles. As we made our way there, he gave us some historical context. Fanti takes place in the area where Brazilians with Nigerian ancestry settled after gaining freedom from slavery, around 150 years ago. The Brazilian returnees were known locally as the Aguda. They brought with them a vibrant culture that survives to this day in the architecture, cuisine and folklore of the Brazilian quarter. Surnames such as Domingo, Da Costa, Da Rocha, Vera Cruz and Da Silva mean many Nigerians can trace their roots back to African slaves who had been shipped to Brazil. The Agudas' religious worship was a blend of traditional Yoruba belief and Catholicism, similar to that found to this day in Trinidad, Cuba and the province of Bahia in Brazil. The surprising fact is that Fanti itself is a relatively recent invention. The original idea for a street carnival in the area emerged in the 1940's when some telephony workers from the Caribbean decided a big party would brighten the place up. After a few events the carnival died out, only to be revived in the 1970's. Today's bash is growing bigger by the year and has now started to attract corporate sponsorship.

After navigating through a few narrow streets we managed to park the car, with the help of some obliging Area Boys. A pre-party vibe hung in the air. Bunting criss-crossed the streets and men fiddled with speaker wires. Others sat in plastic chairs under marquees, waiting for the carnival to crank into gear. We sat in a makeshift bar and surveyed the scene. Okada drivers (motorbike taxis) weaved in and out of the crowd, making music with their horns as sexy young Islanders sashayed about in their latest threads. A quartet of drummers surrounded our table, banging out a polyrhythmic tapestry of sound. Yemi listened closely to the sing-song tones of the talking drum, decoding the sounds into Yoruba phrases and then translating into English for my

benefit. It turned out the drummer was praising Yemi's children, the immensity of his future wealth etc. Yemi 'dashed' him an appropriate amount of naira and the band was off again, in search of another customer to praise.

Sensing we were not quite in the right place, Yemi led us off into the crowd. We trekked past decrepit, crumbling buildings exuding charm, reminding me of the old town in Havana. As many of the returnees were master-builders, carpenters and masons, the Aguda created a distinct style of architecture which can still be seen today around the Campos Square district - houses with shuttered balconies and elaborate carvings on stucco façades, giving the neighbourhood character and atmosphere. I kept thinking that with a dash of paint and a bit of a clean-up, the Brazilian Quarter could be a real tourist attraction on Fanti day.

Suddenly, we caught a flash of colour, the noise of a band and crowds down a side street. Seconds later and we were in the thick of one of the carnival troupes. Each area of the Island has its own Fanti group. Yemi explained that in years gone by the troupes would often end up fighting as one group moved into another's patch. These days, the fighting is a memory; everyone simply dancing and smiling to the drummers rhythms. We fell into the wake of the band. Up ahead, two trumpeters spitted out a tune to the crowds lining the streets. The dancers were dressed in red, with the men dolled up in wigs and dresses and the Carnival Queen at the head. I moved up close to take some photos and was suddenly surrounded by the group, with the trumpeter blowing notes into my face and faces full of joy and laughter all around. It felt like New Orleans, Notting Hill and Rio rolled into one. A few more notes and they were off again, whooping and bounding into the next street. Soon enough, the light started to fade and we decided to take our leave. From the energy of the crowds, it looked like the party would be carrying on deep into the night.