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## CARNIVAL CANNIBALIZED OR CANNIBAL CARNIVALIZED: Contextualizing the "Cannibal Joke" in Calypso and Literature

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## Congo Man

The Mighty Sparrow first performed “Congo Man” at Queen’s Hall, Port of Spain, Trinidad, early in October 1964 (*Trinidad Guardian* [TG] 5 October 1964). Over four decades since then, he has performed it regularly and recorded it six times (de Four 72). Treating it as a sort of signature tune, Sparrow delights in creating a new version of strange sounds every time he performs it. “Congo Man” has been cited by journalist Debbie Jacob as “Sparrow’s own all-time favourite” (*Sunday Express* [SE] 10 February 1991). An intriguing calypso that only Sparrow can convincingly perform, “Congo Man” has raised questions about the centuries-old encounter between Africa and Europe in arenas of ethnicity, culture, gender and politics; the racial stereotyping that has been an almost timeless aspect of this encounter; the erasure of any clear image of Africa from the minds of diasporan African-ancestored citizens of the New World, and the carnivalesque performance of “Africa” in the transfigurative masquerades of Trinidad and New Orleans.

The plot of “Congo Man” is very simple: two white women traveling through Africa (for what reason the calypso does not say) find themselves in hostile Congolese terrain, deep in the hinterland of the fierce and hungry Baluba, one of whose warriors captures them, cooks one in a big pot and devours the other one raw. The Congo Man, unnamed in the first version of the calypso, but identified by the narrator in subsequent versions as “my big brother Umba” is almost delirious with delight and laughs, giggles, growls, screams, dances round and round his marinating prey, joyfully chanting the refrain: “Ah never eat a white meat yet.” The narrator, a typical “macco” frequently found in barrackyard type calypsos, claims to have witnessed the Congo Man’s performance from his vantage point among the bushes, and proclaims his envy for the Congo Man whom he feels an urge to congratulate because, like him, the narrator “never eat a white meat yet.”

The narrator offers no explanation for his presence in Africa, which seems to be as gratuitous as that of the two white female travelers or adventurers. This paper will seek to locate “Congo Man” within the context of the post-Independence “Congo crisis” and to determine as far as possible where Sparrow stood as a person of African descent observing this ever unfolding catastrophe. Using the metaphor suggested by “Congo Man,” this paper will try to determine from what bushes, from what vantage point in the jungle of his heart does Sparrow gaze on his Congolese brother and double. This paper will be particularly concerned with both “big brother Umba’s” strange ecstatic laughter and the seemingly inexhaustible delight with which Sparrow as narrator/protagonist has over four decades performed Umba’s laughter. Our enquiry points to the conclusion that the grotesquerie of both Umba’s laughter and Sparrow’s enactment of it is inseparable from the reductive spirit of Carnival masquerade, which, unmasked, reveal a horror, the skull beneath the skin-teeth.

## **Historical Background to the Making of “Congo Man”**

In 1966 Sparrow, in an interview with journalist Wayne Brown, explained how “Congo Man” came to be composed:

“The Congo Man” came to me on a subway in New York—just the melody. And the lyrics came from the many activities in Africa at the time. So many nuns and priests were being ambushed and beaten, you know... And I got the idea that this was probably happening there: white people were just traveling through and found themselves in the hands of head hunters, you know, who put them in a pot, had a fire at the bottom, and had a chant. (That’s where the “haw, haw, haw” comes in). Jump up and down and see how the food is cooking, and forbid anybody to fraternize with the meat. (*TG* 2 October 1966)

According to Sparrow “Congo Man” was purely humorous and completely unsuggestive. If even one were to take the calypso on a purely literal plane, one would still be faced with the problem of explaining how such grim circumstances as the killings and cannibalism that were being reported about the Congo, could engender such pure and unsuggestive humor and laughter.

What Sparrow calls “the activities in Africa at the time” was really the tragic disintegration of the Congo in the years after Belgium on the 30th of June 1960, suddenly thrust Independence on the over two hundred ethnic nationalities whose land Belgium had invaded, exploited with barbaric ferocity and left completely unprepared for the challenge of independence and nation-building. Two weeks after he was elected Prime Minister of an independent Congo, Patrice Lumumba was faced with the secession of mineral-rich Katanga and army mutiny. He spent a desperate few months trying to regain the power he had never been allowed to exercise with what remained of his army, but was captured by Mobutu’s troops, handed over to his rival, Tshombe, and executed on January 17, 1961.

Martyred, Lumumba became a greater inspiration to resistance than when he was alive. The Simbas, a ragged guerilla army of youths led by Pierre Mulele, Lumumba’s Minister of Education, developed a reputation for fierce merciless modes of fighting. Reinterpreting the idea of the primitive for the purpose of inspiring terror, they wore war paint, armed themselves with bows and arrows, spears, machetes and sharpened bicycle chains nailed to pieces of wood. They regarded themselves as the true and pure flame of Lumumba’s revolution and viewed the monument that had been set up to him in Stanleyville as a shrine. Advancing United Nations peacekeeping troops destroyed the Lumumba monument in 1964.

Disintegration had set in even before Independence with the departing Belgians, who actively encouraged tribal rivalries that had traditionally existed between such large ethnicities as the Baluba and the Lulula (Lulua). The Belgian strategy was the simple time-honored one of divide and rule. Their interest lay in Katanga, whose mineral wealth in copper, uranium, cobalt, diamonds and gold had replaced the original commodities, ivory and rubber, as the main pillars

upon which the economy of modern Belgium had been erected. Inter-tribal warfare would, it was believed, drain the new nation of the energy and unified focus necessary for controlling its own resources. They were correct, but they did not anticipate that the warring tribes, together with the young lions, the Simbas, would not only destroy each other, but would also direct their energies against the most defenceless among their common enemy, the Belgians. So the Baluba/Lulula holocaust of burnt villages, hacked corpses and raped and cannibalized cadavers spread from being an almost self-contained “sacrificial crisis”—to appropriate René Girard’s term in *Violence and the Sacred*—to becoming a free-for-all of killing in which isolated lumber camps or Christian missionary outposts were as much prey as the thatched rural villages of the Baluba or Lulula. It was at that point that the Congo catastrophe became for Europeans a crisis, and the killings a massacre.

D’Lynn Waldron, foreign correspondent and war photographer for *The New York Herald Tribune*, describes the growing anarchy that ensued even in the months before Independence. At one mission, Baluba villagers “butchered Lulua (sic) women and children for meat” (13). Both groups continued the tradition of King Leopold II’s pacification troops when they chopped off the hands of captured enemies; but they also improved on Leopold’s style by “slaughtering and eating their victims” (Waldron 16).

Some commentators were puzzled at the upsurge of cannibalism that accompanied the dreadful, inter-tribal war. One missionary surmised: “They are fighting a war, so they must have protein. The bodies of their enemies are the only source of protein available” (Waldron 34). Waldron, however, disagreed.

But, as I have seen, the cannibalism in the Congo was also used as a form of terrorism. Very soon there were so many bodies that only the rump roasts were removed and the rest left to rot. Entrepreneurs saw the commercial value of what the warriors left behind and the government had to pass a law that no meat could be sold without some sort of hide attached. (Waldron 34)

Waldron complained that the newspapers in America to which she wired her articles tended to omit her political and economic commentaries and ask for more cannibal stories. But who could blame them when she produced such delicious tit-bits as the last quotation? It was, perhaps, such stories about cannibalism that might have inspired Sparrow’s “Congo Man.” *Time* magazine carried a weekly column on the Congo in which occasionally, as on January 18, 1963, stories of cannibalism occurred. There, however, it was two white men, not women, who were eaten. *Time* reported:

The point was underlined in blood last week in Kasai province, where feuding tribesmen were at one another’s throats over a border dispute. Natives kidnapped and reportedly ate two Belgian lumbermen, then began slaughtering one another in the town of Kakenge. Such gruesome incidents no longer surprised anyone. A Leopoldville newspaper reported

that event as matter-of-factly as it were a baseball-box score. Its headline: KILLED AT KAKENGE—370 LULULAS, TWO BELGIANS, ONE MUSONGE, ONE KANYOKA. (*Time*, January 18, 1963)

Sparrow, no doubt influenced by Spoiler's bed bug, would not for the world be inveigled into eating any hard-arsed male. The particular incident that may have prompted Sparrow to compose "Congo Man" was the January 1964 uprising in Kwilu province, 250 miles east of Leopoldville, where "roving gangs of youths hacked to death three Belgian Roman Catholic priests—one of them bedridden" (*Time*, January 18, 1963). Also attacked in this raid were two white American women, Ruth Hege and Irene Ferrel, both of whom were Baptist missionaries. Ferrel was killed by an arrow, while Hege survived only because her assailants thought that she too had been killed when they saw her lying prostrate, covered with blood but feigning death. Here, then, was a graphic report of two white women who were not just traveling through Africa, but committedly sharing their lives in the perilous and ambiguous adventure of bringing the Christian Word and Western civilization to Sparrow's "big brother Umba" of the Baluba. These Kwilu killings, taking place as they did in the middle of the Carnival and calypso season of 1964 and involving priests and missionaries, provided Sparrow with the connection he was to make later in the year, between the horrible events that were taking place in real life and their grotesquely twisted, carnivalesque mis-representation in the calypso "Congo Man."

### **Congo Man "Cannibalizes" Carnival 1965**

One person in Trinidad who had good reason to connect "Congo Man" to lurid news reports on the Congo crisis, was schoolteacher Valda Sampson who in mid-February 1965 invited Sparrow to Mount Lambert Roman Catholic primary school to perform "Congo Man" to an audience of school children and old age pensioners, many of whom entered into the festive spirit of the calypso and sang along with Sparrow. Ms. Sampson, founder and patron of an arm of the Red Cross, the Verbena Junior Red Cross Link, thought she was performing an act of charity by hosting the event. She was, however, bitterly condemned in the Press by the Roman Catholic Archbishop, Count Finbar Ryan, for bringing Sparrow to school "to teach children filthy songs" (Sampson 9). The Catholic Teachers Association "probed" the Mount Lambert incident (*TG* 24 February 1965). Several schools decided to boycott a Junior Calypso King competition that Sparrow was sponsoring, and to stage, instead, their own in-house competitions (Sampson 9). On top of all this, the Director of the Junior Red Cross wrote Sampson a letter condemning her and her effort (5 20 December 1984: 9).

Recalling the incident nearly twenty years later, Sampson simultaneously exonerated herself and unmasked what she thought to be the real source of "Congo Man" and the unstated reason for the rancorous Roman Catholic reaction to the song. She wrote:

A few days later, on a visit to the Red House, I spied a copy of *Time Magazine* and chose to read an article titled "Massacre in the Congo." According to the

article, cannibals had eaten two nuns and two priests in the Congo in Africa. I could only come to the conclusion that Sparrow, apparently better read than many people, was relating in his own inimitable style, a true story. There was nothing filthy about the calypso... unless, as in the words of another ditty, it was “de vice in dey own head.” (Sampson 9)

Sampson was both right and wrong. Sparrow’s calypso had indeed been a reaction to several news reports since 1960 about cannibalism in the Congo, including those in early 1964 about attacks on nuns and priests, such as the *Time* report on the January 1964 uprising in Kwilu province. But the *Time* magazine that Sampson had discovered in the Red House with the front-page headline, “The Congo Massacre” (not “Massacre in the Congo”) was dated 4 December 1964 (Vol. 84, No. 23), while Sparrow’s first performance of “Congo Man” had happened two months earlier in October 1964. By the second week of January 1965, the calypso had been played so many times on the radio that a tough San Fernando audience, claiming to have grown tired of both “Congo Man” and “Get to Hell Outa Here,” booed Sparrow when he performed in January 1965 (*TG* 4 January 1965).

Such negative responses as the Roman Catholic and San Fernando ones were, ironically, testimony of the degree to which “Congo Man” had captured the imagination of the Trinidad public, with its simple graphic lyrics, its easy sing-along chorus, and the opportunity it offered for mime and role-playing. “Congo Man” was a performance piece that had grown out of two contexts that were widely familiar to mas-playing Trinidadians. First there was the context of the whole wide/white world of cannibal jokes, jungle movies set in Africa or Haiti, and cartoons such as the well-known one of the cannibal who was looking forward to his second taste of the clergy. Secondly, there was the specific performance context of the Trinidad Carnival, which was replete with portrayals of wild, savage men, warriors, Warrahoons, headhunters, devils of all hues and varieties, monsters of the folkloric and cinematic imagination and Ju Ju warriors. Besides this Sparrow had erupted on the calypso scene at precisely the same time that the great mas’ designer George Bailey had generated an interest in rendering picturesque carnivalesque representations of “Africa” and other “exotic” places. Bailey produced *Back to Africa* in 1957, the same year as King Fighter’s calypso of the same name. Bailey continued with *The Relics of Egypt* (1959), reflecting the then current trend in pan-Africanist discourse to explore linkages between Egyptian civilization and those of Sub-Saharan Africans both in the eastern and western regions of the continent. Dennis Williams’s novel *Other Leopards* (1963) is a neglected but important illumination of the anguish and complexity of relocating the hybridized diasporan in either ancestral or contemporary post colonial African spaces.

Masqueraders in San Fernando Carnival 1964 presented *The Glamour and Horror of Africa* as if to summarize the ambivalence that current events in the Congo and many other parts of Africa had reopened in schizophrenic diasporan consciousnesses. Walcott’s celebrated “A Far Cry from Africa” (*Collected Poems* 17-18) was, in the early 1960’s, the most powerfully articulated poetic expression of this ambivalence. *The Glamour and the Horror of Africa*

featured among the characters, a gigantic gorilla, first cousin, no doubt, to Mighty Joe Young or King Kong. George Bailey crowned his late 1950's achievements with *Somewhere in New Guinea* (1962) in which he included individual masqueraders such as the witchdoctor and the magician. Bailey's last great production would be *Brightest Africa* (1969). This however was long after the "Congo Man" and, like the Stanleyville Massacre of December 1964, could not have influenced its making.

Interest in Africa was certainly awakened by Dr. Eric Williams's 1964 tour of eleven African states, which virtually coincided with some of the grim events described above (for example, the Kwilu uprising that had occurred only a fortnight before Williams and his touring party set out for Africa). The objective of Williams's tour was, according to him, to form "a political bridge between the West and Africa, mindful too... of how dangerous a bridge can be if it is not soundly constructed and properly maintained" (*TG* 16 February 1964). President Tubman of Liberia generously showered his nation's highest honors and titles on both Williams and his twelve-member entourage. Williams was awarded "The Grand Band of the Star of Africa," Liberia's oldest title, while tour members Lee, Halsey McShine, Kamaluddin Mohammed, Isabel Teshea, Ellis Clarke and others, all became Grand Commanders of the Order of African Redemption (*TG* 25 February 1964).

Sparrow in "Get to Hell Outa Here" (1965) did not seem to be particularly inspired by Williams's attempt to build a bridge across the Middle Passage. Sharing a skepticism that was in fact, quite widespread in Trinidad, he referred to the tour as Williams's "African Safari." One, indeed, speculates that it was his irreverent portrait of Williams in "Get to Hell Outa Here," much more than the crowd's tiredness with "Congo Man," that earned Sparrow the boos he received in San Fernando when he presented both songs there in January 1965. Lord Blakie in "The Doctor Ent Deh" (1965) ungenerously viewed the tour of Africa as Williams's attempt to escape from the growing social chaos in Trinidad, particularly in Williams's own South East Port of Spain ghetto constituency. The safari was, according to Blakie, a dereliction of the responsibility to govern that as a leader Williams had undertaken.

While Williams was touring Africa, his then young Minister of Finance ANR Robinson was publishing every week in the *Trinidad Guardian* a series of articles on Africa entitled "The New Frontier and the New Africa." Published on Fridays between January and February 1964, Robinson's articles endeavored to present Africa in a new light to readers who had only been offered glimpses of the horror of African peoples, politics and society. Like George Bailey's carnival productions then, Robinson's articles sought to counter traditionally negative stereotypes about Africa and Africans by suggesting the possibilities that were realizable if the rest of the world were to approach Africa with an unbiased gaze. When Robinson mentioned the Congo it was in relation to what the Cubists had been able to derive from the sculpture of the Basonge, Balege and Ababua, as well as the "round sculpture" in the Western and Southern Congo (*TG* 17 January 1964).

“Congo Man” was inspired neither by Williams’s historical voyage of reconnection, nor Robinson’s effort to relocate African civilizations within the congress and discourse of all “otherworld” civilizations. Its relationship to pan-Africanist consciousness, to what Naipaul, quoting John Hearne, termed in *The Middle Passage* “the sentimental camaraderie of skin” (83), was at best ambivalent, oblique and skeptical. Sparrow in 1964, despite the moving sentimentality of “Slave” (1963) and “Martin Luther King for President” (1964) seemed to feel no real commitment to African causes, Africans or Africanity. In his 1966 interview with Wayne Brown, Sparrow denied any notion that he as a diaspora African ought to demonstrate some sort of loyalty to African roots: “I’m not aware of any roots in Africa. I know where my ancestors came from, but I don’t see why I should go BACK to Africa when I’ve never BEEN there. ‘Back to Africa’ should be for those who WERE in Africa” (*TG* 2 October 1966). This was standard diasporan ideology at the time. One might compare Louise Bennett’s poem, “Back to Africa,” with its scathing lines: “Yuh haffe come from somewhere first / Before yuh go back deh!” (214).

This sentiment was irrefutable in its straightforward, honest literalness, and even such masters of double-meanings and indirectness as calypsonians could be plain and literal when it suited them. Yet this near total denial of linkages to Africa also reflected the colonizer’s success in erasing both memory and consciousness of Africa from African-ancestored diasporans. It was this obliteration of the past along with Caucasian control, dissemination and manipulation of stereotypical images of Africa and Africans at home and abroad that had made Sparrow indifferent to African sensitivity in his appropriation of the Cannibal/Monster stereotype for the purpose of subversive laughter.

Carole Boyce Davies observed in 1985, when the issue of the meaning of “Congo Man” was clearly still not settled, that critics had taken two basic positions on the calypso:

Discussion of this calypso is best summarised in the positions taken by Gordon Rohlehr and Lloyd Brown. Gordon Rohlehr sees it as “the most disturbing example of the ‘phallic calypso’” which Sparrow has projected throughout his career, especially since it was the recreation of an actual rape of some Belgian nuns in 1964. He adds that it is an excellent indicator of the West Indian’s cultural limbo

for Sparrow has used the white man’s stereotype of the African, which reveals his divorce from the African, to make a deep and serious joke against the whites, which reveals his alienation from the whites. But in so doing, he reveals a deep psychic need within the West Indian to prove his manhood through a fulfilled phallic vengeance for ancestral rape; which proves his alienation from himself.

Lloyd Brown provides another excellent analysis, seeing “Congo Man” as an important reversal of the stereotypes of Africans created by whites, an expropriation of the “grinning Beast mask” for ironic ends.



The Congo Man is an object of ridicule, not as an African reality, but as an image which White Westerners have about Africans and other blacks: Africans are savages, and all Black men have an insatiable bestial appetite for White women. Hence the song's laughter becomes an important satiric weapon that is typical of the calypsonian's irony. The animal sounds of expectation reproduce White myths about Black sexuality... the Black man's desire-hate for the White woman, as an object of sexual craving and racial "revenge" is dramatized by the sadistic fulfilment implied by the cannibal motif. (Davies 73-74)

This essay, by tracing "Congo Man" to its several possible sources, reinforced Rohlehr's 1970 observation about Sparrow's alienation from the African. Sparrow himself had in 1966 proclaimed his disconnection from, or more precisely, his sense of never having been tangibly connected to Africa. Sparrow's entry into and laughter through and at the Cannibal stereotype was, as I hope to show, even more complex and certainly more ambiguous and ambivalent than Brown allows.

Derek Walcott, in reviewing the first night of Sparrow's 1965 Original Young Brigade, commented on "some odd cannibal jokes" that had been given or that had appeared in some of the calypsos. "Congo Man" apparently was not the only calypso in 1965 on the cannibal theme. One surmises that its relatively early release in the first week of October 1964 might have triggered a few other calypsos on the same theme: a normal tendency in the Calypso where sudden song cycles can spring up on any current popular theme. "Congo Man" had effectively "cannibalized" the 1965 Carnival. Walcott recorded that:

Dougl's [calypso] had a terrible one [joke] about child-eating and Sparrow, following Killer, delivered the virtuoso piece of the evening, one which I feared for, but which had just the right tent flavour of dubious taste, "Congo Man." Doing superb imitations of orchestra instruments, drumbeats and jungle noises, miming, growling, leaping and howling like a Congo cannibal, Sparrow demonstrated again that as a performer he is unsurpassable. In fact, he is now better than the songs he sings. It's a problem the finest artists face. There are moments in their career when they are superior to the material they have to hand. ("Efficient Birdie" *TG* 6 January 1965)

The performance, the play was the thing whether the role demanded the tear-jerking lamentation of the "Slave" (1963) or the grotesque laughter and demoniac shrieks of "Congo Man." Beyond the moment and occasion of the performance itself, Sparrow, as we have seen, claimed to have no concept of or responsibility to Africa, that "land so far." Thus the Congo crisis with its relay of coups d'état and massacres, was relevant only as a source for the performance of grotesque humor, in a way that resembled how the phenomenal history of the Zulu nation became in early twentieth-century New Orleans, reduced to the Mardi Gras blackface minstrel krewe, Zulu.

The carnivalesque representation of history cannot be read outside of the context of carnival performance; and carnival performance generally has its own purposes and clusters of coded meanings. In the case of Zulu, this purpose was the satirical reduction of the white supremacist krewe, Rex. In the case of “Congo Man,” it was the pouring of scornful laughter on everyone and everything: universal Caucasian supremacism, the white man’s “god complex:” local Trinidadian black and white racial prejudice, a so far unexplored dimension of “Congo Man.”

It was also the self-vindication and self-celebration of Sparrow as “king,” and this kingship must be located in the context of Carnival and the conventions that determined the bestowal of kingship and the acclamation of the king. Such acclamation was visible in the number of headhunter masquerades played in 1965 and the popularity of “Congo Man” at parties and on the radio. Sparrow himself was fully aware of the power of “Congo Man” as a performance piece and the affinity of this calypso to masquerade. Michael Anthony records that in 1965: “The Mighty Sparrow, whose popular calypso *Congo Man*, must have inspired the band *Chiefs of Africa*, was appearing in the band as Congo Man, a fierce head-hunter in that colourful band led by Big Sarge of Tunapuna (312-313). Sparrow, who had lost both the Calypso Monarch and the Road March competitions in 1964 (to Bomber and Kitchener respectively) was illustrating with “Congo Man” where his immense powers lay; and though he would win neither the monarchy nor the Road March in 1965, “Congo Man” was undoubtedly the most startlingly, original and memorable calypso of that and many a year.

The *Sunday Guardian* of February 21, 1965 published a photograph of two Ol Mas characters that had won a prize in their division at the Ol Mas Competition of Tranquillity Tennis Club, Port of Spain, held on February 19, 1965. The masqueraders were both light complexioned and the caption of the photograph read: “The Congo Man is about to achieve his ambition—eating a piece of white meat. He is seen dropping his captured white meat into the pot during “Ole Mas” competition at Tranquillity Tennis Club, Port of Spain” (*SG* 21 February 1965). Ten days earlier, a similar, most likely the same mas had won the first prize in the couples’ section at the Ol Mas Competition of the Arima Tennis Club. This apparently white Trinidadian couple, the man painted with streaks of black grease jab jab style, the woman masked, was described as depicting “the popular theme, ‘Ah never eat a white meat yet’” (*TG* 9 February 1965). Caucasian laughter here was probably of the same order as that of the French Creole planter-class males, who in pre-emancipation times played Jab Molassie, a masquerade that simultaneously caricatured, demonized, empowered and reduced to manageable proportions the figure of the rebellious field slave. Played blackface by white players, Congo Man was neutralized and robbed of the menace he still represented—masquerade notwithstanding—to Caucasian Trinidad.

Two commentators were not at all amused at the popularity of “Congo Man” and the cannibal-headhunter theme it had stimulated in the 1965 Carnival season. One wrote sarcastically “commending” the local TV station for broadcasting a Sparrow performance of the song and “congratulating” the radio stations for playing it, and RCA recording company for the

recording and proposed worldwide dissemination of “Congo Man.” The writer who termed himself or herself a “Free Thinker” noted that time had been when such a calypso would have elicited a flood of condemnatory letters to the Press from citizens who believed: “That the country was on the threshold of hell. Nowadays, I notice that nothing happens. Hooray! And congrats to TTT for breaking new ground” (*TG* 18 February 1965). L. Milne from Maracas Valley commended “Freethinker” and added his or her drop of sarcasm to the discourse:

Something tells me that if Sparrow entered politics he would be elected to the highest office in the land. Anyone who can command so much adulation for singing “Congo Man” can surely get away with anything, especially since his type of “Art” is aided and abetted by our radio and television stations. I reel with shame. (*TG* 25 February 1965)

There was in this discussion a delicate silence as to the source of such intense shame and rage as “Congo Man” had inspired in these two commentators. The only commentator who in 1965 came close to unmasking the calypso’s real theme was Clifford Sealey a true freethinker and proprietor of The Book Shop. In a letter answering “Free Thinker” he came out against that critic’s implied recommendation that censorship be directed against calypsos (as had and would no doubt have happened three decades earlier). Sealey wrote:

With the third implication that “Congo Man” is objectionable, I cannot agree; and I would invite him to reconsider his opinion. For, without stating its object, this song brings into the open an often alleged longing of the black man, objectifies it, enacts it, ridicules it, depriving it thereby of its warping potential. This calls for an amazing degree of self-distancing on the part of both the artist and the responding audience, which in Trinidad includes both races.

Finally, the fact that “Congo Man” produces this cathartic effect, as can be witnessed at any jump-up this year, places it in my opinion far above the indisputably brilliant essays of James Baldwin as a contributor to the relaxation of racial tension. (*TG* 23 February 1965)

Sealey’s letter to the editor identifies “Congo Man” as enactment and the demolition through ridicule of a traditional and damaging stereotype; the nightmare that white colonizers since Prospero had engendered of the African male as oversexed monster hungering for a taste of “admired Miranda,” trying every trick in order to “tup” the white ewe, Desdemona. Sealey locates the calypso squarely within the then current dialectic of black/white race relations, involving African American authors such as James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Eldridge Cleaver, and radical humorists such as Dick Gregory. By challenging and deconstructing traditional stereotypes and attitudes, this dialectic had by the mid-1960’s already transformed the ways in which black and white inter-racial desire was to be discussed in the future.

Sealey had unmasked the implied and unnamable theme of “Congo Man” and its subversive intent and method. Sparrow, according to Sealey, was really exploding the cannibal/monster stereotype by entering and wearing it as his mask. Beyond this, he was exploring the metaphorical possibilities of the cannibal fable through which the act of “eating” becomes either the sexual act itself or the act of oral stimulation. For, despite Sparrow’s statement that “Congo Man” was simply a humorous song, one that should be taken on a purely literal plane, he knew very well that a society nurtured on *double entendre* and the coded visual vocabulary of carnival masquerade, would read the calypso as metaphor and explore the range of its possible meanings and social implications.

Sparrow had, through performance, “carnivalized” the Cannibal. Anyone attending a performance of “Congo Man” in 1965 would automatically have recognized its affinity to masquerade and the question it posed about the relationship between Sparrow (who, via performance, transformed himself into or entered and was possessed by the persona of the cannibal)—and the Congo Man—(whose joyous “eating” of white meat the calypsonian claims he has never experienced himself, despite all his travels and travails, his trips and traps).

I envy the Congo man  
 Ah wish ah coulda go and shake ‘e han  
 All you know how much trap I set  
 Until ah sweat  
 But ah never eat a white meat yet

“Congo Man” is narrated and performed in the tradition of the African folktale, in which the narrator/calypsonian plays all the characters, changes gesture and tone of voice as the tale demands, interrupts narrative flow with songs and choruses. In some performances of Afro-Caribbean folk tales, the narrator might repeat the “crick crack” formula in the middle of the tale. Sparrow as narrator becomes, yet is not the Congo Man. The narrator becomes, yet is not the Congo Man. The narrator identifies himself as a voyeur, “peeping through the bushes to see what’s taking place.” In short, he behaves as generations of calypso narrators have behaved: as a “macco,” a watcher, a person always on the scene to witness someone else’s private affairs.

Yet, as folk narrator, he must “become” the Congo Man and be able to reproduce his war-whoops, yodels, primal screams, gurgles, giggles, belches, anticipatory lip-smackings, joyfully orgasmic feeding frenzy. In the process of “becoming” the Congo Man, the narrator claims to envy him his good fortune and superior skill as a hunter. This confession of envy is contradicted by his statement in the 1967 and 1988 remakes of “Congo Man,” that he would never have eaten the women, had they strayed into his domain, but rather he would have “sent them home to their husbands”—a statement that he expects no one to believe, no more than he expects them to believe that he too “never eat a white meat yet.” In the 1965 recording, the original, a chorus of voices proclaims the narrator a liar, when he declares his innocence of having eaten white meat; but he defends his honor and integrity to the very end with: “Who lie? Who lie? Is who all you

calling a liar?" A denial that is meant to enhance his image as a sort of globetrotting Casanova, a global village ram willing, ready and able to serve a world of women as in his early calypso "Sailing Boat Experience."

"Congo Man" cannot be adequately read outside of its initial and, afterwards, its constantly changing contexts of performance. The original 1965 version had already established enormous distance between the actual events taking place in the Congo and Sparrow's reduction of them to a bizarre celebration of his own elaborately denied conquest and consumption of the much desired, white meat. Subsequent recorded versions seem to be more formulaic performance pieces with the introductory, "Ooday, ooday oo," repeated in chorus by a singalong audience within the body of the song. The naming of the Congo Man, Big Brother Umba of the Baluba, is new. It is not meant to signal any knowledge of Baluba distress, but to provide a frame for the comic enactment of what in its origin was tragedy. The insertion of the chant, "yabba dabba, doo," that is, the Stone Age caveman jabber of Fred Flintstone, jokey Caucasian cartoon version of the African headhunter, allows the listener not only to measure African primitivity against its European counterpart, but to observe the mergence of both primitivities into one globalized and hybridized chorus of screams, giggles, belches and ecstatic laughter. Later versions of the song were popular as party songs, and though totally dislocated from the original socio-political context, evoked bitter and trenchant commentary from black nationalists angry at what they saw as Sparrow's shallowness and disrespect for Africa and Africans.

### **The Skull Beneath the Skin-teeth**

The type of humor that so startles the listener to "Congo Man" has had a long history in literature. It is a variant of modes such as "black" (no pun intended) comedy or grotesque comedy, of laughter that grows out of usually other people's pain. What is it about the cannibal or the idea of cannibalism that inspires such strange mirth?

One thinks of the famous "A Modest Proposal" of Swift, who suggested that the best way to convert the homelessness, destitution and wanton fertility of overpopulated Ireland into a profit, was to breed and father babies for butchery and human consumption. Literal cannibalism, Swift declared, was a reasonable and, properly managed, could become a profitable substitute for the metaphorical cannibalism of an aristocracy of imperial landlords who were, so to speak, devouring the human and material resources of the country.

The Stanleyville massacre of November 1964 with its reports of Belgians chopped to death and Congolese cannibalism, evoked two distinctly different types of response from the British Press: the pathetic and factual and the grotesquely satirical. One example of the factual was this news report of 25 November 1964:

The survivors of the Stanleyville massacre, their ordeal made plain in their haggard faces, flew into Brussels today. The welfare workers waiting to care for

them wept at the sight of orphaned children and husbandless wives, and Princess Paola wept with them.

Princess Paola, in a mink coat with fur-lined knee-length boots, wiped tears from her eyes as a priest, who was wrapped in a blanket against the cold, told her husband, Prince Albert of his experiences. Later she mixed with women evacuees at a Red Cross coffee stall and kissed some of them on the cheek. She was in tears again when she left them. (*The Birmingham Post* 25 November 1964)

No hint of satire here, though anyone who had read *Heart of Darkness*, *King Leopold's Soliloquy*, or Roger Casement's reports on the atrocities perpetrated in the Congo towards the end of the nineteenth century by Belgian King Leopold II's genocidal administrators, might have felt that the Stanleyville massacre was no more than the inevitable end of a horrible beginning, many atrocities before; history's grim judgment passed on Leopold's hypocritical *mission civilatrice*.

One example of the grotesquely satirical response was a cartoon that appeared in England a few days after Stanleyville (24 November 1964; the author recalls that he was in England at the time working on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and while he has a copy of the cartoon, he does not have the name of the publication). This cartoon took the form of a diptych on the left half of which an English boy was soliciting donations from passers-by for his Guy Fawkes effigy with the traditional entreaty: "A copper for the Guy." The drawing on the right depicted a black cannibal headhunter alongside a huge bubbling pot, entreating passers-by for "A guy for the copper."

It was hugely funny, but coming when it did, raised in my mind many questions as to its meaning beyond its magnificent play on words. Guy Fawkes Day, is celebrated on November 5 each year by the burning in effigy of Guy Fawkes, master-mind of the November 1605 Gunpowder Plot to blow up the British House of Parliament. Reduced now to a straw-filled bobolee, Guy Fawkes was a warning that civilized society did and does not tolerate subversive anarchy. It was the opposite with the Congolese cannibal who, as a still untamed and unappropriated Neanderthal, was a living menace to civilization, not a distant or symbolic threat.

This hilarious representation of the cannibal caused me to revisit *Heart of Darkness*, which is one of the places that cannibals appear in Conrad's work. The thirty able-bodied sailors and woodcutters, who accompany Marlow and four other white men up the dark serpentine river, are eaters of human flesh. Recruited at the Company's Outer Station close to the river's mouth, they are eight hundred miles from home and as unfamiliar with the deep hinterland as the Europeans. Having, according to Marlow's surmise, no sense of time, they have entered into contracts to work for six months. No one assumes responsibility for feeding them, and the dead hippopotamus they brought with them has gone rotten and has had to be thrown overboard. They seem to eat nothing except "some stuff like half-cooked dough, of a dirty lavender colour, they

kept wrapped in leaves” (42), and would, if they could, capture, kill and eat any of their black bretheren howling in the bushes on the banks of the fog-bound river. They are very angry and perhaps on the verge of mutiny when Marlow dumps overboard the body of his dead African steersman, killed by a spear hurled from the bank of the Congo.

What I am calling Marlow’s “cannibal joke” concerns his two reactions to being on the same boat with men he believes to be cannibals. The first is unstated, but constantly hinted in his several references to his crew. He talks about their well-muscled physiques slowly degenerating because of starvation; he mentions their gleaming eyes, and he is clearly a worried man. The second reaction is openly stated: Why don’t these desperately hungry cannibals attack, kill and eat the most easily available prey, the white men? With a wry, self-directed jest he surmises that the white men must look too “unwholesome” to serve as prey for thirty hungry cannibals. Marlow also hopes—attributing this feeling to his encroaching illness and sense of being involved in a dream sensation—that *he* does not appear to be so “unappetizing,” and that the cannibals have not placed him in the same category as his despicable Belgian fellow travelers. In other words, Marlow is worried that he might be eaten and even more worried that he has not been!

Giving more serious consideration to this bizarre circumstance, Marlow moves beyond the stereotype to surmise that these Congo men may have developed a moral code of honor and restraint far superior to that of their European employers and civilizers of the master race. The cannibals’ allegiance to this code is more powerful than “the devilry of lingering starvation, its exasperating torment, its black thoughts, its somber and brooding ferocity” (42). If we locate these words—“devilry,” “torment,” “black thoughts,” “somber and brooding ferocity”—within the patterned imagery and tonal rhetoric of the novel, we will recognize that Conrad has attributed to hunger and its absolute dimension starvation, the same qualities he accords the African (and Malaysian) forests, and that stereotypically menacing primitive man, the cannibal. Yet this crew of thirty cannibals has confounded the accepted stereotype and shamed the “othering” eye of “civilized” man, so that in the end both the constructs of “cannibal,” civilized man’s ultimate Other and “civilization” are interrogated. The cannibal joke here, then, has been employed unconventionally, to subvert the complacency and self-ignorance and to unmask the hypocrisy beneath King Leopold’s *mission civilatrice*.

Lurking at the edges of Caribbean discourse, cannibalism has historically been attributed to native Caribbean peoples by Columbus and other conquistadores needing a moral excuse for the atrocities of conquest. The cannibal is an inalienable part of colonizing mythologies, perhaps since time began. He provided Roman imperialism with justification for the persecution of the early Christian communities. Seventeen centuries later, he provided Robinson Crusoe with the moral justification he needed for gunning down Friday’s captors. That is, he provided British imperialism with the same excuse that Columbus’s Caribs had bestowed centuries before on Spanish imperialism. As America declared her right to hegemony in the Western hemisphere, her

writers of pulp fiction and her film makers recognized the need to reconstruct the cannibal in the image of whomsoever could lay claim to prior occupancy of invaded territory.

Leasa Farrar Fortune, commenting on *la mission civilatrice* American style, says of voodoo novels and movies: “They contained all the necessary elements for box office success: cannibalism, hapless black people, zombies and witch doctors, death, spirit possession, and helpless white women to be saved by the virile white male” (“Hollywood’s Haiti” qtd. in Paddington). Such stereotypes, implanted in the consciousness of cinema-loving West Indians, are joyously and scathingly dissolved in Sparrow’s “Congo Man,” where the white hero does not appear in the nick of time, and the women are eaten by a cannibal who inverts the hierarchy of who laughs and who is laughed at.

In 1965, the year when “Congo Man” cannibalized the Trinidad Carnival, Derek Walcott in “Crusoe’s Journal” sardonically contemplated the ambiguous effect of Crusoe’s imposition of language and religion on Friday, the cannibal he has converted to Christianity after having saved him from being eaten by his own cannibal kind.

like Cristofer he bears  
in speech mnemonic as a missionary’s  
the Word to savages,  
its shape an earthen, water-bearing vessel’s  
whose sprinkling alters us  
into good Fridays who recite his praise  
parroting our master’s  
style and voice, we make his language ours  
converted cannibals  
we learn with him to eat the flesh of Christ  
(*The Castaway and Other Poems* 51)

Walcott’s cannibal quip has had a long history, though its immediate predecessor in modern literature may be found in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. There, Leopold Bloom the Jewish protagonist wanders into a church at communion time and comically meditates on Christian liturgy and practice: “Shut your eyes and open your mouth. What? Corpus. Body. Corpse. Good idea the Latin. Stupefies them first. Hospice for the dying. They don’t seem to chew it, only swallow it down. Rum idea: eating bits of a corpse why the cannibals cotton to it” (Joyce 99). Bloom sardonically surmises that the success of Christian imperialism, *la mission civilatrice*, in converting cannibal nations must be due to the affinity that the cannibals recognize between the symbolic Christian practice of “eating bits of a corpse” and their own literal and ritualistic consumption of human flesh to gain possession of, or be possessed by the power and spiritual energy of the slain foe. Joyce’s sardonic, wry, jibing humor marks and mocks that uneasy border where cannibalism and divinized human sacrifice overlap. Walcott’s musing laughter arises out of his ironic recognition that “Friday’s progeny” have mastered Crusoe’s imposed language and



religion to such an extent, that they are simultaneously more articulate and more pious than their former masters and teachers. The wryly comic result of *la mission civilatrice* is illustrated when Friday or Caliban/cannibal becomes more “civilized” than Crusoe/Prospero and displays a sort of postcolonial subaltern triumphalism by flaunting his learning in his teacher’s face.

The deeper and primary source of Walcott’s cannibal joke, however, lies in the origins of Christianity itself: that era when Christians were regarded as the ultimate barbarians in a crisis-ridden and decadent Roman Empire. Psycho-historian Norman Cohn states in *Europe’s Inner Demons*, that it was widely believed that Christians in the first and second centuries A.D. were subversive and indulged in promiscuous and incestuous orgies, infanticide and cannibalism. Such notions were according to Cohn: “widespread both in geographical and in the social sense. Christian apologists referred to them as flourishing in all the main areas where Christians were to be found—north Africa, Asia Minor, Rome itself; and not only amongst the unlettered populace, either” (3).

Such accusations, fuelled both by the Christians’ belief in the apocalyptic destruction of the kingdom of this world and the coming of a divine ruler, and by pagan confusion at the Eucharistic practice of eating the body (bread) and drinking the blood (wine) of Christ, provided Romans with moral and political justification for the persecution, torture and in some cases massacre of Christian communities.

Of particular interest is the connection that existed in the minds of highly civilized Europeans, between politically subversive intent, cannibalism and sexual promiscuity—a connection, according to historian Livy, which was clearly illustrated in the socially threatening behavior of the Bacchanalia. Cohn concludes that:

by Livy’s time—that is to say, on the eve of the Christian era—erotic orgies of a more or less perverted kind belonged to the stereotype of a revolutionary conspiracy against the state. Directed against the Christians, the accusation of holding such orgies points precisely in the same direction as the accusation of cannibalism. By assimilating the Christian *Agape* to the Bacchanalia the pagan Romans were, once again, labeling Christians as ruthless conspirators, dedicated to overthrowing the state and seizing power for themselves. (11)

Warnings against cannibal and Carnival share a common source. Transport Crusoe backwards in time two millennia and he becomes Friday or Caliban or Congo man, stereotypically hungry, oversexed, bacchanalian, carnivorous, subversive: civilization’s ultimate Other and somber Shadow, and a useful excuse for justifying imperialist wars of pacification and humanization such as the Belgian intervention that had reduced the Congo to such sad dereliction.

### Antecedent, Ancestor, Archetype

Curiously, one of the first songs remembered and recorded from old French Creole Trinidad mocked at the confusion that surrounded the Christian ritual of “eating the body” and “drinking the blood” of a sacrificed victim who is simultaneously human and divine. This song which was also connected with Carnival and which played harshly with the cannibal stereotype, was the archetype and ancestor of Sparrow’s “Congo Man.” I am not saying that Sparrow, (or whoever else might have been responsible for the lyrics and concept of “Congo Man”) was aware of the older song, but that certain texts, ideas and types of performance become archetypal, inscribe themselves in a society, and finally achieve permanence via the commemorative process of masquerade. Trinidad, it turns out, has been making mas and creating subversive picong out of the cannibal/savage stereotype and the Euro-Christian civilization/pacification mission from the island’s foundation as a theatre for the interface or confrontation of European, Native Caribbean and African tribes.

The ancestral song in question went this way:

Pain nous ka mangé  
 C’est viande beké  
 Di vin nous ka boué  
 C’est sang beké  
 Hé St. Domingo  
 Songe St. Domingo

This translates:

The bread we eat  
 Is white man’s flesh  
 The wine we drink  
 Is the white man’s blood  
 Hé St. Domingo  
 Remember St. Domingo

This song, cited in 1805 as evidence of a slave plot to murder “all the whites and free coloured inhabitants” of the island in a revolt that was being planned on the Shand estate, might have been little more than the battle-cry of one of the Convois or Régiments, as the African dance societies used to be called at that time (Cowley 12-14; Joseph 229-230).

The Governor and planters, however, sitting in their Supreme Tribunal, interpreted the song as damning evidence that African (that is, Africans “liberated” from non-British slave ships who, according to Dom Basil Mathews, were reconstructing replicas of their lost communities) and French Negroes (that is, creolized black Trinidadians born in the Caribbean) had been contemplating “the destruction of all the white men, and the dishonour of all the white women of

the island” (Cowley 12). Four slaves were executed, others tortured and mutilated, in a manner that in the *Time* reports of the Congo massacres 160 years later, would be termed “savage,” “barbaric,” and “uncivilized,” but which had for countless centuries been standard practice in all the great civilizations of the world. The fortunate few of the alleged insurrectionists were merely flogged and banished from Trinidad.

Cannibal war-song or Caliban’s aboriginal road march, “Pain nous ka mangé” contains a number of familiar masquerade or carnivalesque features. It ritualizes the confrontation of two socially unequal antagonists. One protagonist is Caucasian, authoritarian, Christian, Catholic, established, endowed by the 1783 Cedula with property in proportion to the degrees of whiteness and wealth in cash or chattel slaves he had brought to Trinidad. This protagonist is empowered to impose his text and image, his religion, his vision of this world and the next, on a savage, subservient black Other. The Other(ed) protagonist is an alliance of African and black Creole Trinidadian. Implicit in the text of “Pain nous ka mangé” is his felt resentment at and firm rejection of the image of the African as Monster and Cannibal. Such resentment, however, is conveyed via an apparent “acceptance” by the black subaltern of the very image of the cannibal and blood-drinking savage that his Caucasian owner and tormentor constructed and imposed on the African. Indeed, this ‘acceptance’ of stereotype which is a denial of stereotype must also have informed the regression of modern Congolese groups like the Simbas to traditional weapons, war-paint and atavistic rituals such as cannibalism.

The song-text of “Pain nous ka mangé” also harshly rejects and mocks *the white man’s “cannibalism,”* (as suggested by the flesh-eating and blood-drinking metaphors of the Eucharist) and valorizes and acclaims the African-Caribbean equivalent of this metaphorical cannibalism: Haitian-style revolution. There is a bitter racial baiting here; a vicious picong, a mocking laughter at the familiar nightmares of slaves in revolt as in Haiti or Fedon’s Grenada ten years earlier; the possibility of retaliatory rape, murder, “gastronomical transgression” (Davis) and violence equal in every degree to what Caucasians had habitually visited on Africans in the Caribbean. One recognizes the vocabulary of threat and the technique of grotesque caricature that are common to all forms of male-versus-male rhetorical discourse that were later to become enshrined in the Trinidad Carnival. The style and aesthetic of inter-racial encounter were being established and inscribed in that Christmas/Carnival season of 1805-1806, one hundred and sixty years before Sparrow became, with “Congo Man,” the medium for a commemoration and reincarnation through performance, of that founding aesthetic.

“Pain nous ka mangé” raises the same sort of questions as “Congo Man.” Were the 1805 Convois or Régiments—societies, social clubs, social unions—boldly signaling their current intentions to demolish the master race and class, or commemorating and defiantly celebrating the one great example of successful African warriorhood in the New World: the Haitian Revolution? How much of the song was masquerade as E.L. Joseph seemed to believe and how much a serious declaration of an intent to exterminate the planter class? Are we dealing here with play, picong, jibe, threat, the self-glorifying rhetoric of the permanently disempowered, for whom

verbal militancy must compensate for lost warriorhood? The white French and English Creoles, with the memory of Haiti and Grenada ever on their minds, were not going to take any chances. Many of them were first generation refugees from Haiti, Grenada and other parts of the crumbling French empire in the New World. The sadistic severity of their retaliation was meant to be—like the British slow-torturing, hanging, drawing and quartering of the gunpowder plotters two centuries earlier—both just punishment for current offence and pre-emptive warning against any future attempt at revolt.

The nightmare of “another Haiti,” together with the fear of extermination of all white men and dishonor (that is, rape) of all white women by vengeful and monstrous black males, remained a subliminal part of Caucasian consciousness long after Emancipation and has become a sort of vestigial phobia of the newer Indo-Trinidadian bourgeoisie that is in the process of locating and defining itself within the complex of Trinidadian ethnicities (Rohlehr, *A Scuffling of Islands* 281-334). In short, the history of European/African encounter in the New World created, fed on and subsequently required the validating nightmare of the monstrous black male lurking in the bushes just beyond one’s fence. That nightmare needed to be policed and confined to its proper place. White xenophobia in Trinidad, the terror of “another Haiti,” remained alive and well into the twentieth century.

After the waterfront workers’ strike of 1919, right into the 1930’s the white urban elite sought and procured permission to bear arms, as their ancestors used to do, and to organize themselves into vigilante patrols against the impending doom of awakening pan-Africanist consciousness via the heavily-censored Garveyite movement (Rohlehr, *Calypso and Society* 103). The *Trinidad Guardian* reported a conspiracy that involved,

the destruction of organized Government and the elimination of the white population. The propaganda framed by the leaders of the organization is saturated with racial animosity in its most extreme form. Every negro child was to be trained to hate the white man, every device was to be used to irritate the negro people against Europeans. Schemes were drawn up for the establishment of a boycott of white merchants, all these movements having as their essential and avowed object the driving out of the British Government and the creation of a negro republic in Trinidad (“Seditious Publications Act Passed,” *WG* 27 March 1920: 11).

The *Guardian* never released the names of the “conspirators,” men who were plotting nothing more than the establishment of trade links between Africa and the African Diaspora in the Caribbean and America. This Garveyite scheme never materialized; and would not have been allowed to take shape in the atmosphere of paranoia that had, apparently, never quite disappeared since Haiti.

Sparrow's "Congo Man," then, located in the context of Trinidad history, was a revisitation of one of the archetypal themes of colonial encounter. It was a latter-day enactment of a masquerade older than, though reinforced by the Cedula. There is, however, little evidence of the paranoia of 1919 in the 1965 responses to "Congo Man." True, some felt that the uncensored broadcasting of the song signified that the country was on the verge of moral collapse, and predicted imminent hellfire for those involved in the song's promotion. But "Congo Man," unlike "*Pain nous ka mangé*" could not be linked to any obviously subversive political or racial conspiracy to subvert the status quo. It was just a carnival song, and seemed to have registered with even white masqueraders as no more than a weirdly funny performance piece. There is no sense in the conversion of "Congo Man" to Caucasian tennis-club ol' mas, that the players were aware of the extent to which the song's laughter may have been directed at them.

Yet, there can be little doubt that part of "Congo Man's" laughter was focused on the racist absurdities of Trinidad society. Sparrow had in the late fifties become both an example and a victim of such absurdities. In 1957 he married a white American woman, who, according to Melody in "Corbeau Flying High," he initially said was his manager. The marriage facilitated his acquisition of work permits to perform in the US Virgin Islands and mainland USA. Lord Melody, Sparrow's companion in song had, for much the same reason, married an African American (Rohlehr, Interview with Melody).

Whatever the motive for marriage, love or convenience, the twenty-two year old Sparrow had placed himself in a different situation, given the state of inter-racial relationship in a still rigidly colonial Trinidad. Most black/white marriages at the time tended to be Othello/Desdemona affairs between black male professionals—doctors, lawyers, engineers, etc.—and white women from the US, UK, Ireland, and later Canada. Marriages between local white Creole women and local black males were relatively few, regardless of the achievement or social position of the male. No particular excellence of achievement beyond the mere fact of whiteness was ever required of the female.

The marriage of a lower-class, grass-rooted black male to any kind of Caucasian woman, a phenomenon in the metropolis where a whole generation of West Indian and other colonial migrants had by the late 1950's lived for nearly two decades, was an even rarer occurrence in the islands, than that of the upper middle-class black professional and the local white woman. The Growling Tiger in "Let the White People Fight" told the story of a black World War I veteran who returned to Trinidad crippled and with a blue-eyed wife. Unemployed, he resorted to selling bush-rum to earn a living, was caught—one can't run from the police while confined to a wheelchair—and sent to jail where he subsequently died. The white community took care of his wife, one of their own who had, indeed, strayed, but was now redeemed of the social error of a transgressive marriage. Tiger bitterly commented to those British officials and local patriots who were again seeking to recruit a fresh batch of West Indian soldiers to fight in yet another World War.

The boys went to the last war. What did they get?  
 The way they treat them I'll never forget.  
 Cyril lose both legs beneath the knee  
 He got twenty dollars a month. How niggardly!  
 And after those people mash up his life  
 And even saddle him with a blue-eyed wife  
 He sell a pint of rum and they did not fail  
 To give the war veteran six months in jail

Tiger's resolution in this passionately delivered and passionately acclaimed calypso was: "But I going plant provision and fix me affairs / And the white people could fight for a thousand years" (Quevedo 65).

Even in the first decade after Independence such black/white marriages as Cyril's were beset by challenges. Sparrow, the Roaring Lion and Lord Kitchener would all marry Caucasians. All of these marriages failed. Sparrow, our primary concern here, did himself little good by flaunting his American wife in the faces of his colleagues. In "Reply to Melody" (1958), the third calypso in the famous Sparrow/Melody picong series, Sparrow sang taunting Melody: "I marry a wife, you go and marry one too / But your wife ain't have eyes of blue." Clearly indicating his belief that his Caucasian wife was in some way the social or ethnic superior to Melody's black one, even though both women were creatures of convenience. Neither white nor black Trinidad was amused. Sparrow's plaintive cry: "Everybody washing they mouth on me" gives some indication of the real pressure he was receiving from the public at large ("everybody") and his colleagues ("dem calypsonians") along with "some of my friends and family," in particular.

Accusing his critics of "interfering in my private romance" and not giving him a chance to live happily ever after with whomsoever he chose to marry, Sparrow exploded: "But ah love me wife and to hell with everybody." Later in "Reply to Melody," he confessed with unusual and unmasked frankness that all the hatred he had been receiving from his formerly enthusiastic and supportive audience, had left him feeling "miserable:"

What have I done to these people  
 They have me so miserable  
 My poor wife never trouble them  
 They hate me worse than the PNM (Sparrow, *120 Calypso[es]* 21)

Sparrow had opened himself to attack, first by crossing the historically inscribed racial taboos and secondly by boasting about it. Melody, at whom Sparrow's taunt had been directed, retaliated in calypso with the stinging "Corbeau Flying High," a song that pokes harsh ironic fun at the disintegration of Sparrow's marriage. In "Corbeau Flying High" Melody depicted Sparrow as the despised corbeau, the black vulture, who flies high in the brief period of his improbable

marriage to the white bird of passage, but has to descend disconsolately to earth when she flies away from him. Since vultures are by nature attracted to dead meat, Melody's calypso may contain a hidden and vicious derogation of his friend's wife as carrion.

In July 1960 (*TG* 7 July 1960), Sparrow explained the failure of that marriage as having been "because people would not let us love." Later, though, in January 1965, a few days after his first performance of "Congo Man" in the Original Young Brigade Tent at the opening of the tent's 1965 Carnival season, Sparrow accepted all the blame, saying: "In those days I didn't have the understanding I have now" (*TG* 10 January 1965). Interestingly enough, Melody in 1965 sang "Mas" in which he anticipated playing a splendid mas with George Bailey, in the climax of which would be the revelry he would make with his "white woman." The white woman had suddenly established a carnival identity as tourist and accessible Carnival trophy, or as naïve transgressor into native Trinidadian space, needing to be instructed in the ways of masquerading; or as intruder and rival to angry black women fearful of losing their men to these pale-faced antagonists (see "Mas," "Miss Tourist," "Find a Fellar," or "Sock It to Me" by respectively, Melody, Kitchener, Duke and again Kitchener). The white woman as target for the black voyeur and as trophy, makes another appearance in Sparrow's "Toronto Mas" whose chorus ends with, "And all them white woman will be in the street."

Given Sparrow's sensitivity about the failure of his first marriage, it is not stretching our interpretation of "Congo Man" to view it as a striking back through laughter at all those people who had placed obstacles in the path of, or viewed as unnatural his black and white love and marriage. "Congo Man," read in the context of Sparrow's failed marriage and dearly bought "understanding" invites his detractors to examine the absurdity of their own prejudices. Insofar as the calypso is a baiting of Trinidad Caucasians, "Congo Man" brings them face to face with their own xenophobia, their nightmare that white ancestral promiscuity has irreversibly contaminated the Caucasian bloodstream. "Congo Man" mischievously confronts this group with deeper and more horrifying levels of transgression as it baits the old archaic rump of ethnic supremacists.

But, it can be argued, the majority of those who would not let Sparrow and his first wife love, were as he indicated in "Dey Washing Dey Mouth," his family, friends and fellow calypsonians: and these were mostly black. What message, under its multi-faceted mask, was "Congo Man" sending to black nationalists who could be as against mixed marriages as any local Brabantio or Iago? Such nationalists, a growing body in that age of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and neo-Garveyism, would have objected to Sparrow's adoption of the cannibal mask whatever the satirical intent behind that action. There really was no room for the Congo man in the constructions of "Black dignity;" and "Black dignity" rather than Black Power would in the late 1960's and early 1970's become the preferred slogan of the black middle class.

"Congo Man," however, was as subversive of this bourgeoisie whose watchwords were respectability and dignity, as it was of the white chauvinists. One feature of Sparrow's self-

representation from the late 1950's into and beyond the mid-1960's, visible in calypsos such as "Mr. Rake and Scrape" (1961) and "The Village Ram" (1964), was as the anti-hero, a totally depraved sexual anarchist whose lusts were insatiable; an imp from the underground; a Casanova of gutter, garbage and la basse. The narrator of "Mr. Rake and Scrape," a sexual scavenger, declares himself "a busy man with no time to lose." He is indiscriminate in his choice of women and will hunt down even the pregnant, the crippled women with "one foot or one hand," the elderly and destitute in the almshouse. No one actually believes the protagonist's outrageous and gross claims. There is a large element of the impish, the mischievous in this persona, and "mischievous," significantly, is the adjective that Sparrow once said to an interviewer best summarizes his character and stage personality (Baksh, *SE* 6 June 91).

"The Village Ram" similarly presents the public with a sexual superhero, albeit reduced to the ramgoat of medieval lust. This persona too is anti-heroic with respect to how "straight" society constructs the hero. But according to the scheme of values of the demi-monde, the village ram is hero. He is a taunter, a flaunter, a teaser; one whose aim is to irritate his opponents or rivals—that is, all other males—with a narrative of his exploits and a boast of his credentials and capabilities. He offers at one point, to help his rivals by doing for them the jobs they are inadequate to perform.

In case of emergency  
 If you ain't able with she  
 And you find yourself in a jam  
 Send for the village ram

The Village Ram is a butcher whose penis is his cleaver, who cuts down "black is white" (that is, indiscriminately). He is a sex-machine who works "day and night" without recess. Three years later, Sparrow's protagonist, unable to perform his sexual boast without medicinal stimulation, recommends to men like himself the use of bois banday (bois bandé), a bark that long before Viagra and all the other substances now available online, used to help aspiring village rams to maintain their ramajay.

Less grim than his successor eight months later, the Congo Man, the Village Ram is still imp; still a maker of mischief with his boast, his false modesty ("I ain't boasting, but ah know ah have durability"), still a performer for the crowd of overawed listeners; a fertility king who somehow represents them all: Osiris resurrected after reassembly, and now perpetually aroused; "a busy man with no time to lose" since he knows that his cycle of potency will not last forever; that the king, inevitably, must die. So the Village Ram has to make the most of each limited time-cycle before his charisma wanes and a new king takes his place, eating his vitals in order to subsume his power.

Sparrow has over the years expended much energy in making the public aware that he is and will always be the king. This has generally meant either defense or reaffirmation of kingship



by means of confronting and defeating in competition all rivals to his throne. This has also meant the constant boasting and celebration of himself as cocksman, phallic warrior or fertility god. “Congo Man,” coming as it did after “Mr. Rake and Scrape” and “The Village Ram,” and before “Cockfight” (1969) and “SaSa Yea” (1969), was part of Sparrow’s effort at reconstructing his image of himself as king. Sparrow’s king was caught between two worlds: the *jamette* demi-monde of fierce, subversive encounter and the bourgeois world of property and respectability, whose hypocrisy he had angrily condemned in “The Outcast” (1964), but towards whose consolidated materialism and celebrity he was steadily moving, by virtue of his very success as a grass-roots entertainer. The king of the demi-monde was, by definition, anti-hero in “straight,” “decent,” bourgeois society. So the Congo Man is society’s ultimate Other, the anti-hero at his most offensive, mischievous and anarchic. Yet, paradoxically, the Congo Man represents society’s suppressed shadow side, its secretly celebrated yet publicly denied sexuality. “Congo Man,” the calypso, probes and severely tests society’s schizophrenia by presenting society with its other side, the cannibal, and by luring the respectable to participate in the Congo Man’s infectious laughter, even as they shudder at the grim origins of that laughter: the horror at the heart of humor, the skull beneath the skin-teeth.

### **Aftermath and After-call**

The “after-call” is a low humming echo that a Guyanese buck-top makes after it has sung its high-pitched, half-crying, half-whistling melody at the beginning of its spinning, circling dance. The several versions of “Congo Man” after 1965 produced an after-call of discourse in the seventies and eighties, in which Sparrow’s representations of Africa and Africans came to be rigorously interrogated. One category of listeners, people who had been deeply affected by Black Power and pan-Africanist ideologies of the late sixties and early seventies, demanded of calypsonians serious reflection and “conscious” well-researched opinion on all issues concerning Africa and Africans at home and abroad. These were usually impatient with the complex, playful, mischievous and anarchic laughter of such a song as “Congo Man,” and despite Sparrow’s espousal of a typically neo-Garveyite creed such as “black economics—that black people support black men in business” (*TG* 8 June 1970), doubted both his sincerity and authenticity as a spokesperson on black people’s affairs.

It is worth noting that apart from the remakes of “Congo Man”—the most significant of these being the 1967 *Spicy Sparrow* and 1988 *Party Classics* versions—virtually all but one of Sparrow’s calypsos about Africa between the 1970’s and the 1990’s have been identified by Winsford “Joker” Devine as his (Devine’s) compositions. These calypsos are “Du Du Yemi” (1978), “Idi Amin” (1978), “Gu Nu Gu” (1979), “Love African Style” (1979), “Isolate South Africa” (1981), “The Witch Doctor” (1990), and “I Owe no Apology” (1991). The only calypso not mentioned by Devine in his 1994 listing of calypsos he had composed for Sparrow (*Sunday Punch* 6 November 1994) was “Invade South Africa” (1985). It is, therefore, problematic to talk about Sparrow’s representation of Africa in the three decades after “Congo Man” (1965), and more correct to speak of the representation of Africa and Africans in calypsos performed by

Sparrow during those three decades into the 1990's when he continually restored "Congo Man" as a "party classic" and his "all-time favourite."

1974, the year before "Du Du Yemi" with its Yoruba chorus and "Idi Amin" that hostile portrait of the Uganda dictator who in the calypso was condemned as a tyrant, terrorist, human rights abuser and venereally diseased sexual predator, was also the year that Sparrow visited Nigeria as part of the Trinidad and Tobago contingent to FESTAC. At FESTAC he was royally welcomed as Eric Williams and his African "Safari" contingent had been welcomed in Liberia thirteen years before, and invested with the title of "Chief OmoWale of Ikoyi" by the Nigerian Government. Major General Danjuma, well-known in Trinidad as the head of the Court Martial team that judged the Trinidad and Tobago army mutineers of 1970, sent Sparrow "an honorary hat and letter," the certificates, as it were, of his chieftainship. Almost a decade later in December 1986, Sparrow returned to Nigeria as part of a contingent of calypsonians and Jamaican reggae singers, who together with popular Nigerian entertainers performed at several concerts, winning enthusiastic responses from the Nigerian public (*The Sun* 12 December 1986).

Yet, such acclaim was sharply questioned by a handful of skeptics back home in Trinidad who criticized Sparrow for "insulting Africans" with calypsos such as "Du Du Yemi" and "Idi Amin." For instance, Modibo Kambon Karamoko of the African Advancement Association stated that: "Most calypsos sung by Sparrow pertaining to Africa and African people, those at home and abroad, have been very negative, degrading, baseless, cultureless, and very insulting (*Express* 15 February 1978). Karamoko argued that Sparrow propagated stereotypes learned from the Western media whose journalists were particularly hostile to "progressive African leaders" among whom he numbered Idi Amin: "one of our courageous brothers on the African soil."

To illustrate his contention that Sparrow had always insulted Africans in his calypsos, Karamoko cited the still popular "Congo Man" in which, he said, "Sparrow was describing the Africans of the Congo as cannibals." Karamoko questioned Sparrow's sincerity and depth of black consciousness, noting that although Sparrow had expressed pride in his African name, Omowale, and the title had been bestowed on him after FESTAC (1977), he had demonstrated no genuine African consciousness in his two 1978 calypsoes. Nor had he a good track record of protest against the atrocities perpetrated by Vorster in Soweto or Ian Smith in Rhodesia. Sparrow, according to Karamoko, had not been truly sensitive either to the fates of black people in the diaspora.

Karamoko's case for the indictment of Sparrow received support from Reuben Cato and Learie Alleyne-Forte. Cato felt that Sparrow's focus on Idi Amin was sadly misplaced: "Vorster and Smith have been murdering and dehumanizing our people for years, but you did not see fit to do a recording of them. In the past month, 4,000 women and children were slain by Ian Smith's forces, where they crossed the border from Southern Rhodesia into Mozambique" (Cato, *Express* 16 January 1978). Like Karamoko, Cato viewed Sparrow as a sort of white man's black man and

a mouthpiece for the white media. Alleyne-Forte, even more openly insulting, complained that Sparrow, whom he had always admired as one of the country's true geniuses along with Kitchener, Eric Williams and V.S. Naipaul, had begun to go "off-key," "basodie and stupid." Sparrow, according to Alleyne-Forte, needed to admit and correct his ignorance of international affairs if he wanted to remain a spokesperson for black people in a more enlightened age.

"If Sparrow say so, is so," then yuh have to do much better than yuh doing at present. Wha yuh have to appreciate, being a man in your position, is that if yuh decide to go out in dat arena of international politics "inna dis ya age" yuh have to start analyzing facts of a wider and more varied source, because yuh catering to a more intelligent and educated black public now. (Alleyne-Forte)

Neither Devine, who penned Sparrow's 1978 calypsoes, nor Sparrow who performed them, bothered to answer these black nationalist critics; though one "Black Brother" of Five Rivers, Diego Martin did undertake the task of refuting "the sentimental hyperbole of Modibo Kambon" (Black Brother, *Express* 22 February 1978). Black Brother argued against any facile dismissal of the so-called white media, since it was the same white media that provided the evidence by which one condemned both Idi Amin and Vorster and Ian Smith. Karamoko was being inconsistent when he accepted and exploited their news reports where they revealed white atrocities, and rejected them where they uncovered black African human rights abuses. Karamoko's African Advancement Association, who were advising Sparrow of the need to protest against Vorster and Ian Smith, had not themselves been loud or sanguine in their praise of calypsos sung by Tobago Crusoe/Crusoe Kid and Cypher that had attacked racist and imperialist policies in South Africa and Rhodesia. Black Brother also noted that while Karamoko and his AAA had jumped to defend the dubious Amin from the scathing irreverence of Sparrow's calypso, they had not protested against the "unjustified personal attacks made on our Prime Minister in calypso song" (Karamoko). Amin deserved to be criticized for both his brutality and his buffoonery, and no pan-Africanist sentimentality should protect him from his just deserts.

This mini-controversy, an after-call of the earlier 1965 wrangle over "Congo Man," signaled a number of things. First of all, the Black Power and Black Consciousness discourses had made the representation of Africa and Africans in Africa and in the African diaspora a deadly serious business. Indeed, leaders and rhetoricians of the 1970 Black Power marches in Trinidad had sought constantly to attack the stereotype of grinning, laughing, devil-may-care, unserious, don't give-a-damn black person, and would, if only they could, have abolished laughter from their movement. Thus, curiously, although Black Power advocates welcomed such political picong as calypsonians like Chalkdust and Relator had begun to direct against Eric Williams and his relay of governments, they could not countenance the anarchic and subversive freedom with which the same political picong could turn inwards and critically unmask such fragile and insecure constructions as Black identity or the African image, or Black dignity, or Black solidarity. In such an age of seriousness, the reductive subtleties of humor tend to be

replaced by a more straightforward literalness, that is impatient with the word-play, masking, mind-play and ambiguity that wit and humor require.

Secondly, the controversy over “Idi Amin” and “Du Du Yemi” seemed to illustrate the truth of Vidia Naipauls’s observation in *The Middle Passage* that “the insecure wish to be heroically portrayed” (68). This meant that in the drive to negate the hostile stereotypes of the colonial era, the new liberated, post-Independence Caribbean person had begun to construct more positive but equally questionable stereotypes, that discouraged scrutiny of a phenomenon or mode of behavior, however unacceptable, on the grounds that such scrutiny might violate a now sacrosanct pan-African solidarity. Thus the phenomenon of African postcolonial tyranny manifest in the monstrous behavior of an Idi Amin, needed not only to be ignored, glossed over and explained away as typically imperialistic white media propaganda, but also to be transformed into the laughable notion of Amin as a progressive African leader and “one of our courageous brothers on the African soil.”

On the other hand, Learie Alleyne-Forte’s contention that the black public had grown more intelligent and better educated, and required of its spokespersons a wider and more varied range of facts than Sparrow/Devine had revealed in “Idi Amin,” was probably true. How true, it would not have been easy to say. Sparrow’s “Congo Man” with its portrayal of what one of my English colleagues in 1966 termed “the ignoble savage,” remained in the seventies and eighties and well into the nineties, far more popular than, say, the Mighty Duke’s post-1970 images of the black diasporan as the much-abused, but still erect and militant warrior, the “manchild of a slave.” If aspects of the society’s black consciousness had changed, other aspects had remained substantially the same. The society moved into the nineties bearing this paradox of change and unchange; of greater intelligence and a wider range of information available about Africa and everywhere else, and yet greater or equal indifference to how the Caribbean people located themselves both within the world of international affairs and with respect to notions of ancestors and identity.

Sparrow/Devine would, between 1981 and 1991, focus on the anti-apartheid campaign and the worthier (than Idi Amin to be sure) figure of Nelson Mandela. This could mean that the unanswered criticisms of Karamoko, Alleyne-Forte and Cato had made some impact on their representation of Africa and African affairs. Maybe. But “Congo Man” continued to be Sparrow’s “all-time favourite,” and the release of yet another updated version in the late 1980’s could still evoke harsh criticism from an offended member of the public. This time the response took the form of the published lyrics of a “counter-calypso” (my term) penned by Vernon Alexander of San Fernando, who in “The Noble Congo Man” condemned Sparrow as “a disgrace” to “we race;” “wicked to [his] people;” “playing the game to get Uncle Sam fame” and “selling his brother for Uncle Sam’s dollar” (*SE* 5 February 1989). Alexander asked Sparrow to burn all recordings of “Congo Man.”

This urge to replace Sparrow's ignoble cannibal by a noble Congo Man has survived; but so has the reality of the Congo basin as a venue of postcolonial chaos, in which the cutlass (inscribed since the late nineteenth century as the tool and weapon with which King Leopold's African police amputated the right hands of men, women and children who rebelled, or did not work hard enough, or could not pay the required taxes) re-merged in the late twentieth century as the genocidal weapon in the inter-tribal wars in Kigali, Rwanda Burundi. In one hundred days, Hutu militants butchered eight hundred thousand Tutsis and liberal Hutus were. The cutlass, and the thousands of corpses floating in the Congo in 1994, have become the living and nightmarish icons of the Congolese millennium. Since 1999 in the Democratic Republic of Congo, according to recent reports on what seems like a recycling of the post-Independence Congolese situation, "ethnic warfare, marked by atrocities including cannibalism, has killed 50,000 people" (*TG* 4 March 2005).

It would be difficult, after all the killings that have taken place in Africa, Viet Nam, Cambodia, the Middle East and the Balkans since the mid 1960's, for one to approach the Congo situation today with the same macabre flippancy that Sparrow employed in 1964 over the then Congo crises. The shift in consciousness in the 1990's was best illustrated not in anything Sparrow sang, but in David Rudder's entire album about Apartheid (*Rudder 1990*) and more particularly in his 1995 composition, "Heaven." "Heaven" regards latter day genocide in the adjoining states of Rwanda and Zaire without the sort of Carnival mask that Sparrow had employed thirty years earlier to negate the horror of current events and convert the Congo crisis into a metaphor or backdrop for his own phallic fantasy. Rudder's "Heaven" presents the Congo region of the 1990's as a landscape of the kind of genocide that he feels is possible in a multi-ethnic Trinidad, fractured into "tribes," competing ethnicities, vestigial castes, and both rigid and fluid class formations. Ruanda and Kigali cease to be thousands of miles away in space and time and consciousness and become the living omens of what is in this era of highly racialized politics, an imminent inter-tribal imbroglio. "Tribal war," Rudder warns his turbulent nation, "is only one dark emotion away," and societies structured like that of Trinidad and Tobago's cannot afford to be complacent about such matters.

In Sparrow's "Congo Man," catastrophe in that land of the distant ancestors served as the backdrop for a grim yet hilarious cannibal joke. In Rudder's "Heaven" catastrophe is presented unmasked, uncarnivalized, with the calypso-lament ending not with the narrator baiting his audience to either confirm or deny rumors of his phallic competence, but with the narrator quoting Kurtz's last words from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, "the horror, the horror." Humor is absent from Rudder's landscape of possibility, not because he is a disciple of the post-1970's Black nationalist commitment to seriousness, dignity and focused, unsmiling warrior hood against the castrating imperialist system, but because he has through contemplation of postcolonial African catastrophe, recognized that genocidal ethnic nationalism usually begins or continues in the power vacuum left by the strategic withdrawal of predatory and authoritarian imperialism. So Rudder in 1995 assumes the mask and rhetoric of the prophet who warns the

nation about the stress-cracks he has observed in the edifice of its human relations, where Sparrow in 1965 mocked subversively at its substantial residues of racism, its bourgeois pretence at respectability, and the schizophrenic ambivalence with which it simultaneously affirmed and denied his kingship.

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