Rosemarie Kuru Jagessar Queen of Carnival 2010: Who is the “real” winner?

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The Trinidad and Tobago Dimanche Gras celebration came to a close on Carnival Sunday night February 14th 2010 with the announcement of the winners of the Kings and Queens of Carnival and the Calypso monarch. Rosemarie Kuru Jagessar’s portrayal Wakanisha-The sacred water-The sacred water bearer earned her the Carnival Queen 2010. I imagined the Jagessar family whose mas’ making activities began more than 30 years ago saying, “This victory was long in coming!”

Indeed the “real” winner was the Jagessar family’s persistence, commitment to traditional Indian mas’, and their love of the art form. Quite often, I argue in my dissertation (Fournillier, 2005), there is an emphasis on the final product, and on what some might term the negative aspects of the Carnival mas’. Little attention is paid to the learning/teaching practices of men, women, and sometimes entire families behind the scenes who “make it happen” annually.
In this paper, I reflect on the knowledge I gained from working as a “native” ethnographer collecting data for my dissertation during Carnival 2005. Stories like the ones the Jagessar’s shared with me are intended to provoke policy makers to realize the importance of supporting members of the community who in significant ways contribute to the country’s goals and visions for a “better T&T, but who are often unnoticed and unsung.

As a Trinidadian who was born and grew up in Port of Spain finding my way in San Fernando was not easy. But based on the information given by members of the mas’ making community, I intuitively felt that it might be worth the while. I was told that I could not study mas’ making without going to visit the Jagessar’s. I therefore visited the Jagessar family at their mas’ camp in Gransaul Street, San Fernando and their home around the corner during the 2005 Carnival season. The physical space, the atmosphere in the mas’ camp, and informal nature of the proceedings in the camp in no way prepared me as the ethnographer for the wealth of knowledge that I gained from: (1) spending quality time in the camp observing the mas’ makers at work, (2) doing formal and informal interviews with Rose and Lionel, (3) observing them in the savannah mounting the costume, and (3) sharing a meal and visiting with them in their home as they proudly displayed the photographs and the trophies of the many portrayals over the years.

Rose during our final interview wisely proclaimed and finally saw it come to pass: “You could place 16th in the preliminaries and 10th in the semifinals and still come out the winner”.

The space in which I found the Jagessar’s producing in Carnival 2005 supported Ken Critchlow’s view that:

*The mas’ camps that are made public, and I have nothing against them, that is the Woodbrook mas’ camps, those are the ones that are emphasized. But there are other mas’ camps that you should see. ....students who are entering into the practice they must see.*

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1 This paper focuses on the Jagessar family who are just one of many who do this type of work.
2 See figure 1
nising that. It is ok…the ordinary person don’t necessarily have to see that …but if you really learning about it you have to know that it is not only the high places but also the low places and very often in the low places you find ideas that have been born and that you are responsible, well let’s say, to give it... to breathe some life into it, to harness and make it flourish.

Working on the outside of the galvanized shed

Putting the finishing touches
Some 35 years ago long before Rose and Lionel became husband and wife, Lionel’s brother affirmed “you ain’t need me no more” when he came home and saw the work that Rose and Lionel did on a buffalo that they made. Unable to wait for his brother who was the teacher, Lionel and Rose embarked on doing what they were observing Lionel’s brother do so many
times. And according to Lionel it all happened the day his older brother came home and said:

“Who do that?” Lionel replied, “I bend a hat, I try a ting”. His brother replied” You going good, you going good”. If his brother said it was good then it was good. But the time would come when his brother having seen Lionel’s work on a bending a hat said” Ah ah, wait nuh, who do this? Hear what happen, you don’t need me, And he just tuned he back and he went he way {laughter} You don’t need me again”. (Personal Interview, February 2005)

And so began he mas’ making career building costumes for friends. Rose too watched and learned and gained confidence from the the brother who according to Lionel “doh give credit easy and if he say Rose do good, then bet your bottom dollar it good”. It is Lionel’s bother, the master teacher that provided the two people who were not husband and wife at the time, the confidence to believe in themselves and to believe they could do it.

It was not easy for them but they persisted and Lionel learned from observing other mas’ makers when they came to participate in competitions. He saw the materials they were using and the differences in his designs and the others. However, key to his learning was Peter Minshall’s criticism of his costume design. Lionel and Rose agreed that this critique was the turning point in their mas’ making. Minshall’s criticism of their work which he called “a ball of feathers” and his statement in the news papers that “If it leave to us, mas wouldn’t reach any place” opened their eyes and pushed them to change the way in which they made mas’. Lionel agreed with Peter Minshall’s statement . “Yes. I say, wait nuh, we really making a ball of feathers boy. And then we start to project from the costume and that is how we reach the finals for the first time” (Personal Interview February, 2005).

Lionel and Rose were learning from mas’ persons like Minshall and their friends who were advising that they could not stay with authentic Indians and needed to go to fancy. The materials
were changing and costume design was developing. Their children who began to learn by
performing the task of picking out feathers, eventually made the mas’ more precise and created
stencils that were not “half-way” like those Lionel and his “crazy and drunk” friends made.
Lionel and Rose gave credit to their children who grew up in the camp and started working
behind their parents back and adding other materials that pushed them to move to fancy Indian
mas’. Lionel proudly stated:

_I must say all my children are artistic. They could draw and then and I say when he (Larry)
started working on their mother and my costume is when we started making it into the finals. He
started cutting design...Larry just fall in and he start to make stencil and them better too.
Because we used to do a kind of half way stencil and we still getting it done whatever, Until they
start to measure and make them more precise and look a different way. The costume start to
look different._

Rose, though petite, discovered that she could carry the weight of a costume across the stage.
She was always determined to excel in everything she did. And, what started off as fun and
continued to be fun became exciting as she placed second in the national competition. Rose was
propelled and did not want to stop. Lionel junior took over as king of the band but Rose
continued as Queen. Indeed their ability to do everything from design, to wire bending, and
decorating, saved them thousands of dollars and allowed them to continue to participate in the
competition annually.

Lionel was forced to move from having everything in his head to using the notes his son
provided him with daily and from which he worked. Lionel admitted:

_It took the strain off me and his mother. And the thing he will do, he will make
notes of everything he supposed to do. He will make notes and he will leave th
e job for me during the day. He will go to work and he will say ok chek this
and do sand so . I never use to do it like that I used to use my head along and I
never use to make notes. The notes the we used to take was like the
measurements. But we never used to make notes about the job itself. How many
jobs you have to do._
A mas’ camp appears to be a casual place because of the social interactions, lots of chat, drinking, smoking, and loud calypso, and chutney soca music. There is however within this social framework, a structure that allows for cooperative learning and mutual engagement in tasks. There is the opportunity for persons who need confidence builders to grow and learn and develop as designers, mas’ makers, decorators, and mas’ players. Families learn from each other and carry on the tradition. Men and women learn by observing, experimenting, trial and error and responding to the criticisms of their fellow mas’ makers, designers, and the audience. Rose Kuru Jagessar was acclaimed Carnival Queen and followed in the footsteps of a Carnival Queen from the southland Esther Theodore. And she rightly deserves the acclamation. But, let us not forget how she arrived there and the teaching practices that she and Lionel embodied as they worked alongside his brother and other, observed the practices of other mas’ makers, and passed on the traditions to their children. These mas’ making spaces that some call “the perfect school” and others refer to as high and low, need to be studied and explored in ways that are unique to our community and our culture because “We bright” in our own unique ways!