

Festivals and Celebrations

Introduction:

Persons who contributed to the Festivals and Celebrations

- Amerindians, especially in Belize.
- Europeans (Spanish, French and English)
- Africans
- East Indians (especially in Trinidad and Guyana)
- Chinese

Religion also came to play an important role in the selection and practice of festivals and celebrations in the British Caribbean 1838-1938. Chief among these are

1. Christianity
2. African- Christian syncretic religions for example Orisha, Kumina and Revivalism
3. Islam (Muslim)
4. Hinduism

(a) It was not the culture of the masses that was accepted and or widely practiced in the Caribbean

(b) It was the culture of the ruling class- the dominant class that mattered and was therefore approved as appropriate by the colonial authorities, who themselves, belonged to that group or class.

(c) The dominant or ruling class viewed the cultural practices of the masses with scorn and veiled hostility.

(d) The masses faced much opposition when they tried to practice any aspect of their culture that was seen as backward and uncivilized by those who looked through the lens of a colonial upbringing.

(e) To some extent, a curious mixture of European and African festivals and celebrations did take place in the British West Indies, partly out of a 'survival' response to the pressure and opposition and partly because of the fact that the two races were forced to co-exist on the plantations for generations!

(f) Sadly, some amount of culture erosion occurred with the increasing influence of the Americans in the Caribbean, particularly during and after their sojourn at bases here during the Second War.

Yam Festival

As its name suggests this festival is a time of thanksgiving for the yams harvested. In Jamaica in particular, a wide variety of yams were (are) planted by the enslaved people and later on by the peasantry. Examples of these are: yellow yam, white yam and soft yam.



Yam Festival Dancer

To speed up the process neighbors would get together and reap the harvest. The feasting would follow. It was not just yam that they cooked but a variety of other

starchy foods which they served with 'salt ting' such as saltfish or salt pork. A big jug or pan of 'wash' (lemonade) would be on hand to wash down the food. The music and dancing provided a perfect atmosphere for the celebrations and thanksgiving amidst loud laughter and chatter as wishes for a good price for the yam at the market was offered as one would a toast as a wedding. It was a time of unity and fellowship. Those who were religious or cared to do so saved the best of the harvest for the Church Harvest festival.

Harvest Festival

Giving thanks for the harvest is perhaps one of the commonest festivals to be celebrated by a number of people in various cultures. The earliest occupants of the New World, the **Tainos** and the **Mayans** held harvest celebrations. Both groups would pray to the gods for a good harvest. When their prayers were answered they thought it was only fair and right that they should return thanks for the said harvest by giving an offering. This would often take the form of an offering of the best of the crops. This was the same for the other groups that would later control the region: the Spanish, French and English and to a lesser extent the Dutch.

Christians

Let us begin by stating that the **Non-Conformist** Churches as well as the **Catholics** and **Anglicans or Established Churches** were engaged in this practice. There was keen rivalry among the villagers to give the best of the harvest. This included those who were not even regular church goers as well as members. The Church would be decorated with a variety of flowers to transform it into a festive environment. Coconut palms were often used to form arches. These were sometimes plaited so that flowers could fit between them.

Booths, erected by the members would be used to display the variety of produce from the harvest according to its kind. Top of the list would be the **ground provisions**- yams of all sort, cassava, dasheen and so on. Then there was the display of an abundance of **fruits** such as pineapples and naseberries that were so sweet you could smell the pungent flavour from afar off. Even the livestock was on show: goats, chickens, rabbits and even pigs. Coffee, cocoa, ginger and other spices perfumed the air as well.



Yellow Yam



White Yam

One cannot overlook the preparatory process. It provided another opportunity for the people of the villages to work together. For example in the pimento picking and gathering process, some of the owners organized a match to see which team would pick the most. Not there was necessarily a prize for doing so, but the 'competition' added to the excitement and made the work seem lighter. Everyone sang as they worked with a few jokes interjected between the changing of songs.

Of course, there was eating afterwards. What else attracts a crowd more than music and food?

Hindus

According to Laxim and Ajai Mansingh Holi or **Phagwa** is the Hindu festival of coloured waters or harvest celebration. It is however celebrated just before the harvest. Throughout the day, participants move from house to house, singing, dancing and playing their instruments. They are given sweetmeats and other food items by members of the various households that they come in contact with. At the end of the day there is a community gathering in a designated spot or place.



Phagwa

Diwali: Festival of Lights

This festival is celebrated in October. It is one of the highlights of the Indian festive calendar. The festival of Lights celebrates the triumph of good over evil, darkness over light.



Diwali Festival of Lights

According to the myth surrounding this festival, the demon Mahisha Sura, was destroyed by the **goddess Lakshmi** on this day. She is the goddess of prosperity and so during the festival one prays to her for all sort of prosperity: physical, material and spiritual. She is depicted as having four arms. These symbolize the extent of her ability to perform. She is standing on a lotus flower, holding a lotus in one of her back hands and a conch shell in the other.

She radiates

- Peace
- Non-violence
- Truthfulness
- Humility
- Contentment
- Control of senses
- Faith
- Endurance
- Compassion

The demon is not in the sense that Christianity teaches it but is symbolic of the inner evil forces which are destroyed by this goddess. The festival also marks the return of Lord Rama after fourteen years of exile. It is yet another victory of good triumphing over evil

Festive preparations and activities start at least a week before the festival. Before they are decorated with lights, there is much cleaning of homes, offices and farms to be done. One's property must be clean. Lights are strewn on the walls, roofs, driveways and lawns. At least one **diya**, that is, a clay bowl with oil and cotton wick, or an oil lamp is to be found in every room or on nay object which is connected and involved in providing a source of knowledge and income for the family. It is the lady of the home who traditionally lights the diya while the other family members chanted, prayed and gave thanks to the goddess for material and

spiritual prosperity.



Diya

The business places proudly boasted their ***chirag***- the equivalent to the diyas. On the plantations where many Hindus lived and worked, the employer gave permission to hang the lights from the banana and plantain trees. On other plantations such as cocoa plantations arches were set up. The lights were then hung from them. Household gifts are bought by everyone. This is in addition to the gifts that are exchanged among family members, friends and business associates. Of course, special dinner dishes are prepared and served. In the night prayers are performed in every home. Those who were able to do so, gathered at the home of the priest for devotional songs and dancing.