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**THE  
BIG  
DRUM  
DANCE  
OF  
CARRIACOU**



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DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

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CONGO  
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MOKO  
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CHAMBA  
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HALLECCORD  
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HALLECCORD  
DAMA

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE



# THE BIG DRUM DANCE OF CARRIACOU

## INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY ANDREW C. PEARSE

Carriacou, the home of the Big Drum Dance, is a small island lying in the Grenadines which stretch from Grenada to St. Vincent in the Windward Islands of the British West Indies.

It is no more than 3 x 5 miles, rising to over 1,000 feet, rather dry and eroded, with several good anchorages, and a population of about 8,000 people living together in some 14 villages. With the exception of the village at Windward, the people are predominantly of African origin, and are mainly self-employed, families usually owning 4 - 5 acres of land, or having a share in a fishing boat or a schooner. The land produces cotton as a cash crop, peanuts, corn and ground provisions. Most people have small stock as well. Formerly a sugar island, the collapse of the price of sugar at the end of the 19th Century led to the settlement of the people on freehold land, so that the last two generations have lived in a small rural society with very few social distinctions.

The music of Carriacou is varied. Characteristic of the West Indies as a whole is the singing of hymns at wakes, usually alternating between a slow powerful dirge and a highly rhythmic style. The older families still hold Quadrille or Reel Engage dances with violin, tambourine, drum and triangle. Modern dancing is accompanied by combinations playing a version of the Trinidad Calypso style. Carnival, too, has its own songs, and at Christmas the serenading players of string instruments usually have the accompaniment of a Ba or one-note bamboo pipe bass. Sea shanties accompany the launching of schooners.

But the most characteristic and important is the music of the Big Drum Dance. On the

one hand, it has been traditional amongst Carriacouans to maintain their original nationhood, traced patrilineally, as a system of classification in the society. Even today, Carriacouans will tell you of what African nations they are. On the other hand, they have retained a vivid sense of the continuing power of their deceased ancestors and the Big Drum Dance is given for them, as a sign of respect, and as a means of ensuring safety from their disfavour. It is in most cases a family affair, a typical exception being a group of fishermen who give one annually as a joint concern.

The occasions for this festival are (a) on the eve of the marriage of a son or daughter, (b) at a Stone Feast i.e. the raising of a tombstone to a deceased member of the family, (c) at the launching of a schooner, or to initiate any similar critical undertaking, (d) in case of ill-health, or ill-fortune, usually instigated by a friend or relative who dreams of the subject's ancestor, and who reports that the ancestor's appearance expressed or implied a desire for the festival.

The dance itself is planned well in advance; three drummers and a group of singers are asked to participate, and verbal invitations are issued to relations and friends. Food for the guests, -- meat, corn, provisions, plantains and bread, is prepared, and a special cooking made for the "parents' plate" -- a table set aside, and containing a small quantity of all the different articles of consumption of the older generation, including cigarettes and tobacco. The dance is held in the yard, which is usually the living space between the house, the outside kitchen, and the large bee-hive like oven, and it is open on the fourth side. This open side is where the three drummers sit, facing into the yard.



The Dance itself has three elements, all of which serve to accentuate consciousness of the past, of the living of the older generations which was going on when today's grown ups were children, and before that in the very same yard. In the best room of the house, carefully guarded from marauders, is the parents' plate during the course of the night. Secondly, there are ritualistic elements in the dance, such as the calling of the ancestors by beating a hoe with a spoon to the Cromanti opening song, the libations made by the members of the family, the "free-ring" for the spirit dancers, the "Beg Pardon" Dance, in which the family kneel, and sing "Si mwê mérite, pini mwê, si mwê ba mérite, padoné mwê" - "if I deserve it punish me, if I don't deserve it, pardon me". The third aspect is the "international" setting; following a certain order of precedence, the dances of 10 nations are played and appropriately an experienced member or members dance to the music of their own people. This does not of course imply that the Congo or Temné or Arada items are necessarily a pure survival of the music of those nations, but undoubtedly at some stage in the history of the festival Africans of these different nations or collections of nations connoted by these names have attempted to pass on to the mixed groups of singers and dancers in Carriacou some items of their own music, and have danced as these strangers played it for them.

A particular festival, therefore, opens with the casual beating of a Bélè dance to warm up, after which three or four Cromanti items are played, and then a whole sequence of dances. Those described as "nation dances" are:

Cromanti  
Arada  
Chamba  
Manding  
Congo  
Banda  
Ibo, Jig-Ibo and Scotch Ibo  
Temné  
Moko Yégéyéyé and Moko Bange

Most of these dances are for a single dancer, or for two women and a man, as the Banda.

There is a second group of dances which are not associated with particular nations, but which are long standing parts of the Big Drum Dance:

Old Bongo  
Hallecord  
Bélè Kawé  
Gwâ Bélè

Old Kalenda  
Juba

These "old creole" dances, with the nation dances, provide the items for two sequences of dances between about 8 p.m. and midnight, when it is usual for a "Beg Pardon Cromanti", or a "Midnight Manding" to be played. After midnight, the old creole dances continue to be used, along with the more recent accretions, which are regarded as more frivolous, such as:

Chattam  
Lora  
Cariso  
Chirrup  
Piké  
Chiffone  
Man Bongo  
Trinidad Kalenda

The music is made by voices, three drums played with the hands and numerous chac-chacs or maracas. Usually the singer or chantwell opens and sings verse and chorus. Next the fule drums, which simply beat the measure, come in under the voice, the chorus answers the sing, and then the sharp eccentric beat of the kupé or cutter enters. In the oldest and newest songs the melody is simple, and on the beat, but it is typical of many of the old creole songs that the solo voice, and sometimes the chorus, moves in a subtle counterpoint, following verbal phrasing, so that it may seem disassociated from the beat. And the chac-chac following and played by the singers has an odd inconsequentiality about it. The steps of the dancers and the phrases played by the cutter interact, sometimes one, sometimes another leading. The movement is towards a general climax of rhythmic intensity, in which melody and words become quite secondary. During a single item several dancers may succeed one another and the end comes when the dancer who has raised the intensity to its highest stops the drum by touching it.

Creole patois, the language of St. Lucia, Dominica, Martinique, part of Carriacou, Guedeloupe, part of Trinidad, and Haiti, is after Spanish the most widely spoken language in the West Indies. The present orthography is based on the Laubach phonemic system. Each letter has one sound only. All sounds are as in English, except:

a (as in bar)  
i (as ee in need)  
g (as in get)  
j (as s in measure)



u (as o in move)  
 ó (as in not)  
 é (as a in day)  
 è (as in let)

Nasalization is indicated by the *ã*, *ẽ*, and *õ*. French spellings are avoided to stress Creole's existence as an independent language no more "broken French" than French is "broken Latin."

SIDE I, Band 1: CROMANTI. A Big Drum Dance usually opens with a warming up piece such as *Grã Bele*. This is followed by the music proper to the "nation" of the giver of the feast, during which members of the family wet the ring, the man of the household sprinkling rum, and the woman water. Thus the ancestral "yard" is blessed and prepared for the ancestors. It sometimes happens that the present yard is not the site of the old parents' home, in which case the first part of the feast is held on that part of the domain where their yard was, usually marked by the ruined cornerstones or "pillar-trees". After the wetting of the ring, the solemn opening takes place, the drum being accompanied by the head of a hoe beaten with a spoon. The purpose of this is to call up the spirits of the ancestors. Two or three different items may be used, the present one carrying the words:

Pa Beni, oh - abadino

All members of the family dance while this is being played. It is followed immediately by another Cromanti usually called a Free Ring, that is to say, the ring is left open for the spirits of the ancestors to dance from time to time. In the old days people used to see them. You know of their arrival because the music becomes "brisk". Misfortune is said to have come on those who carelessly or presumptuously danced in a free ring. Sometimes a Spirit may take non-human form appearance, such as a crab or a bird.

SIDE I, Band 2: CROMANTI. There are eight Cromanti songs. One is specifically used as a "beg pardon" - "Okú, okú-é", done usually at midnight when the spirits are specially active. Another, "Amba da bié, o, " is for a mimed stick fight. The item in this selection is:

Ina, é. Ina oh,  
 Ina, é, mama nu  
 Salamani-o

Presumably Ina was a Cromanti ancestor since she is addressed as Mama nu or our mother. This song is usually sung towards morning, when the dance is becoming slack and the spirits

are supposed to be leaving. The *foule* beat of the dance is:

SIDE I, Band 3: ARADA. This is one of three or four Arada items, appropriate to the so-called Arada nation, originally from Dahomey. Cult practices of this people are known by name in many parts of the New World. The music of the Radas in Port of Spain has one element at least in common with this, namely the fast compelling 6/8 measure.

Derika - si mwê tuvé-i (if I find him)  
 Derika - mama  
 Derika - gâ bwa (high woods)  
 Derika - wayo  
 Dahomey

SIDE I, Band 4: CONGO. As with the other older nation dances, no one can give a satisfactory explanation of the meaning of the words:

Anti Koro - you na yeri, oh (You do not hear)

Koro Koro  
 Anti Koro - you na yeri, oh  
 Anti Koro

Thunder roll - you na yeri, oh  
 Lightening flash "  
 Day and night "

SIDE I, Band 5: TEMNÉ. This is a corrupt and half forgotten version of a song about the embarrassments of two Temné girls, Jeanie and Zabette, in trying to speak patois correctly soon after their arrival from Africa.

Ah, ha, ha, coumâ u fé, u fé, Zabette Lundy  
 Ai, Jimmy Lundy, Zabette Lundy, (indi)

In the song from which this seems to have come the girls walk past a cross-roads, where the assembled men greet them with various remarks. The girls do not understand what is said, and pass with their heads in the air. One of the men explains that the greeting was friendly. Reassured, they reply: Dende wa kuna ma bini wana meaning Demî, demî mwê vîni ouè u meaning Tomorrow I am coming to see you.

SIDE I, Band 6: MOKO. According to tradition there are two types of Moko, Moko Bangé and Moko Yégéyéyé. The former are town people and their dance is a "bakra" (white people) dance, meaning that everybody dances in the ring together, instead of in ones and twos as in the other nation dances. The latter are country people, and more backward. The item in this selection is Moko Yégéyéyé:



U mwê, oh u mwê,  
U mwê ba filé, mama, (My hoe is not sharp,  
mama)  
U mwe ba filé, aya

This may refer to impotence.

SIDE I, Band 7: CHAMBA. Quite a number of Carriacouans still claim to be Chambas (probably a people of Eastern Nigeria) including the late Member of the Legislative Council of Grenada who represented Carriacou. In addition to the two or three items for the dance of the Chambas, there is an item for Scotch-Chamba, as indeed for Scotch-Congo and Scotch-Ibo. The words of the song recorded here are:

O Yé - Anansi-o  
O Ho - Anansi-o  
O Yé - Anansi-o  
Anansi-o Kumarié

Pang Baria breko breko, pang baria  
Pang baria breko breko, pang baria  
Anansi-o Kumario

Anansi is the name of the spider hero in Ashanti tales.

SIDE I, Band 8: CHAMBA.

Ai - o, Kanjurio  
Ai - o, Kô sa u fè (You do it like this)  
Kanbera

SIDE I, Band 9: JUBA. Juba is not regarded as a nation dance, but as an old Creole dance. The name is certainly used widely in the New World, and is mentioned by Maud Cuney-Hare in her "Negro Musicians" as having been popular in Georgia and South Carolina during the Nineteenth Century. In Carriacou it has a slow off-beat 6/8 rhythm, and is danced by two women whose movements "match", and whose miming sometimes has the appearance of a controversy between two hens. The words imply the former use of the word "Juba" to mean a dancing party, organized in the traditional manner under the authority of an appointed "Queen":

Wè di, oh  
Wè di la wen Baby, mwe malad oh  
Wè di la wen Juba, mwe bobo  
Wè di métwès mwê etc.

Send and tell "Queen"  
Baby I am sick  
Send and tell "Queen"  
Baby of the Juba  
Send and tell "Queen"  
Baby my mistress I am ill....

SIDE I, Band 10: BONGO. A song from the days of slavery, this commemorates an incident which is now legendary of a slave husband and wife in Carriacou who were sold individually and without their children to Trinidad and to Haiti (or Antigua). These are the words as sung:

Pléwé mwê Lidé, Pléwé Maiwaz, oh  
Hélé mwê, Lidé, hélé oh, Maiwaz  
Hélé pu nu alé

Weep for me, Lidé, weep, Maiwaz  
Lament for me, Lidé, lament Maiwaz  
Lament for our going

(Hélé is used of bawling, that is, wailing  
noisily - and sometimes merely conventionally  
- at funerals)

Dimâsh pwoshî bâtma-la-vol-a Haishi  
Vâdi ya bâtmâ-la-vol-a kité, oh, Maiwaz

Sunday next, the schooner sails for Haiti  
Friday the schooner leaves Haiti

Further words not sung on this record are:

Sa ki kôtâ mwê, kôsolé yish mwê ba mwê  
Sa ki kôtâ mwê, kôsolé Zabette ba mwê  
Sa ki émê mwê, kôsolé Walter ba mwê

Whoever loves me, console my children for me  
Whoever loves me, console Zabette for me  
Whoever loves me, console Walter for me.

SIDE I, Band 11: BÉLÈ KAWÉ. Bèlè is a generic term for a certain type of creole dance, and Bèlè Kawé is so called because in dancing the skirts are held up on each side in a manner similar to the "Kawé" or "Carrè", a defensive position in stick fighting.

The song is the complaint of a woman whose compeers have turned against her:

Dandi é yé, alé mādé jida, - yé  
Sa mwê fé yé  
Sa mwê fe zot, oh,  
Ai, Sese, mwê ka méné, ka mwê nâ wéjimâ  
Jida hai mwê, oh, jida trahi  
mwê, jida ba vlé wè mwê

Dandi, go and ask that Judas  
What I have done to them  
What I have done to you all  
Ai, Sister, when I am in the gang, I am leading  
Judas hates me, betrays me, won't see me.

"Jida" (Judas) is translated into creole English as hypocrite and means a false friend who damages you behind your back.



SIDE II, Band 1: **BÉLÈ KAWÉ**. Like many others this song is about some incident that took place at a Big Drum Dance, and opens with the name of the "Queen" of that particular dance:

La Wên Matulé  
 Zo ba tan wéjimâ béle?  
 Zo ba tan ladjé lévé?  
 Ladjé lévé, oh.  
 Ladjé pwâ mwê nâ gwâ chimî  
 (na wéjimâ: sung in error)

"Queen Matulé"  
 You all didn't hear about  
 The gang's bele dance?  
 You all didn't hear how war break out?  
 War caught up with me on the road.

SIDE II, Band 2: **HALLECORDER**. The name of this dance also seems to be derived from the manner of holding the skirt, which is like "hauling a cord", or to the movement in the art of top-spinning called Hallecord. The dance is much beloved by the middle-age women, and the songs which accompany it are among the most beautiful.

Sylvie ka mandé ki le mwê wivé dâ l'Abbé  
 L'Abbé tombo mwê yé  
 Ai, Sésé, mwê tini Mama Mary lakai mwê yé,  
 Ai, mézami, mwê tini yish sâ Papa pu gadé  
 L'abbé tôbo mwê yé.

Sylvie asked me when I reached Grenville  
 Grenville is my tomb  
 Yes, sister, I have mother Mary at home,  
 My friends, I have fatherless children to  
 look after  
 Grenville is my tomb.

According to the singer, Rachel John, the real significance of the song is a parable. A woman with her children, but without husband, home or property, came to Grenville to seek shelter and support. The people called her a stranger and turned her away. She claimed she had a right there because everybody acquires a right to the small portion of earth in which they are buried.

SIDE II, Band 3: **GWÂ BÉLÈ**. This is a dance for two couples with some of the elements of the Quadrille in it. It has a bouncing movement, with two jumps on the left then two on the right foot, accompanied by a fast 8-quavers-in-a-bar beat, with the fôule beating the first two of each four. The song is about how Capt. Dessbart heard about the loss of his schooner "Avenger" off Kick'em Jennie, a rock between Grenada and Carriacou where two strong currents meet.

Capt. Dessbart, ai-o  
 U ba tan Venja kulé  
 U ban tan Veja néyé  
 Vanja kulé bai Kick'em Jennie, oh.

Capt. Dessbart, do you hear that  
 'Venger is sunk, is drowned, near  
 Kick'em Jennie.

SIDE II, Band 4: **HALLECORDER**.

Lajâ, ai lajâ, oh  
 Lajâ nom mayé dowé.  
 Si mwê té connèt shimî  
 Domonik, oh -  
 Mwê té ka mayé avâ yé

Married man's money is golden  
 If I had known the way to  
 Dominica  
 I would have been married before them

SIDE II, Band 5: **BONGO**.

Oyo, Mama, Bel Louise oh,  
 Nu kai alé nâ Ginî pu  
 Kotwé pawâ mwê!  
 Lame bawé mwê

We shall go to Africa to meet  
 my parents!  
 The sea bars me

SIDE II, Band 6: **CHIFFONÉ**. Both music and dance are unique. This is a sexual mime, in which the women bunch up their skirts at the front to represent aggressive cod-pieces, and dance round the ring after one another singing:

Fam-la ka chiffoné  
 Chiffon over yonder...  
 Everybody knows  
 Pupa is a woman....

The woman is "bunching up" her skirt  
 In spite of the cod-pieces, don't  
 worry, they are only women!

The singing in this record has a bawdy flavor and there is uproarious laughter all round.

SIDE II, Band 7: **OLD KALENDA**. The word Kalenda has existed a long time in the New World and has been applied to several different dances. The rhythm of the old Kalendas of the Windwards have been taken over for stick-fighting in Trinidad, and carries the same name Kalenda. The dance, which now often incorporates some of the eccentric and violent movements of stick-



fighting, is by a man or a woman, and is a dramatic duel between the drummer and the dancer, in counterpoint. The drumming is extravagant and complex.

Tim bwai oh, ai-oh,  
Mwê vlé maye yô fwa  
Mwê vlé maye yô fwa  
Avâ La Mawi kulé  
Mwê bai Tim bwai laja  
Tim bwai ba vlé mayé  
Mwe vlé bag-la yô fwa  
Avâ Mama mwê mo

Tim Boy  
I want to marry at once  
Before La Marie sinks  
I gave Tim Boy money  
Tim Boy does not want to marry  
I want the ring at once  
Before my mother dies.

**SIDE II, Band 8: STICK-FIGHTING KALENDA.** This is a Trinidad stick-fighting song appropriated to the Big Drum Dance, when it is not, of course, used for stick-fighting. It is an example of the "call and response" type of singing par excellence, with its short short chorus and short varied verses, each one a challenge or cry of bravado.

The chorus "Mwê wivé, Joe Talmana" is simply "Here I am, Joe Talmana" the implication being "I am champion, and I challenge all comers!"

**SIDE II, Band 9: MAN-BONGO.** We have already given examples of the Old Bongo of Carriacou in 3/4 time. Carriacouans going to Trinidad, which they have been doing since 1840, found there a dance for wakes also called Bongo, and accompanied in a simple energetic rhythm by the beating of short pieces of bamboo in 4/4 time. They adopted and modified this dance, playing the stick rhythm on their drums. The words of this are from

Trinidad:

In my own native land  
Mwê (pa sa) Bongo com mwê vlé  
(I am not allowed to Bongo as I like)

This is one of the few songs of protest from amongst this type, and refers to the fact that the Bongo Dance is illegal, that the Patois is proscribed in the Schools, etc.

**SIDE II, Band 10: HALLECORDER.** Several of the Halleccords lament a death. This one is on a mother's death:

Hélé, mwê pléwé  
Lamò sala bulé  
Lamò Mama mwê ka pli bulé

Listen to my cry, I am weeping  
The death of that one burns  
But my mother's death burns more.

**SIDE II, Band 11: DAMA.** Dama seems to be the same dance as Bélè Kawé, or perhaps a special version of it at one time, and is said to have been a figure dance for two couples. This particular tune is a fully extended four-piece form with a contrasted chorus.

Dépi tâ Gawé alé oh  
Dépi tâ Gawé mowi  
Dépi tâ Gawé kité,  
Mama  
Sé li ka di "Bô ju"  
Madam  
Dama, ai Dama (3 times)  
Sé bel plézi pu wè  
Dama

Ever since Garraway went away  
Ever since Garraway died  
Ever since Garraway left  
It is he (or she) who is saying "Good morning, Madam"  
Dama ai Dama  
What a pleasure it is to see the Dama.

HAROLD COURLANDER, General Editor  
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