

Cultural Dress and Costume History of the Caribbean



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Churchill Fellow 2012

Winston Churchill Memorial Trust

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank and acknowledge everyone at WCMT and Katie at Diversity Travel for providing me with the opportunity to do this research and helping me organise a mammoth amount of travelling around the Caribbean. I'd also like to thank everyone who helped me along my journey through the Caribbean, from the ministers and directors of culture and their PA's to the cultural custodians and grandmothers who allowed me to speak with them on their front porches.

Acknowledgements and thanks will be listed by Country

Trinidad & Tobago

First of all I would like to thank my interviewees; fashion designer Meiling Esau for speaking with me and allowing me to look around her studio and speak with her interns and staff, Christopher Nathan former lecturer at the university of Trinidad and Tobago and government advisor on the fashion manufacturing industry in Trinidad and Ronald Joseph Press Officer for the Carnival Institute of Trinidad and Tobago.

I would also like to thank the staff at the Tobago Heritage festival Office for all their help in finding the village for the proceeding part of the heritage festival and my friend and fellow teacher Lorraine Neil for accompanying me to the first island of my journey around the Caribbean

Grenada

Mrs Gloria Payne Banfield and Mrs Beverly Steele are the Doyennes of culture and cultural dress in Grenada and they were a great help and wonderful source of information for me. They advise the government on cultural practice and I was very grateful to them for meeting with me and sharing their time and knowledge.

I'd like to thanks to Philip at Mitchells Guest house for making my stay as comfortable as possible.

St Vincent and the Grenadines

Special thanks go out to Duel, Lonye and BVI for allowing me to stay in their home and to Crook for driving me in and out of town.

I would also like to thank Dr Edgar Adams, Dr Adrian Frazer, for the time they spent speaking with me about the history of dress in St Vincent and the attire of the enslaved Africans in these islands. Mr Hugh "Blonde" Raguette and Mr Julian Pollard from the CCD for spending hours speaking with me and giving me copies of their local magazine to read about the carnival costume culture.

British Virgin Islands

I would like to acknowledge the efforts of Brenda Lettsome-Tye Director of culture for the BVI who despite unexpected personal tragedy did all she could to assist me with people to speak to.

Couch Surfers Karon "Mona" Brown and Chrystall Kanuck for allowing me to stay at their homes. A special thank to Chrystall for helping me with my work and doing some investigative journalism for me and to her colleagues at the Bugle Newspaper for allowing me to use their office.

U.S. Virgin Islands

I'd like to thank Joe Breen for letting me stay at his home and giving me a brief history of the islands.

Thank you to Caswil Callender, Alrid Lockhart and Denise Henley-Smith for speaking with me about the costume and dress history on the islands and for providing me with many books and local publications.

Finally a huge thank you to Nicole Petersen at St Thomas Tourism board who really did do her utmost to help me as much as possible.

Turks and Caicos

Thank you to Frank and Pru Watts for renting me their eco cabin and making my stay on Providenciales so pleasant and relaxing.

A very special thanks goes out to Mr David Bowen Director of Culture for TCI who was not only an absolute mine of information but took me around a few of the family islands in the archipelago and introduced me to the local residents.

Bahamas

A very special thanks to Arlene Ferguson director of Educaulture and co host of Junkanoo 242 radio show and her husband Silburt chair of the Junkanoo committee, Pamela Burnside former fashion designer and director of Doongalik Art Gallery and Studios, John Cox associate professor at the College of the Bahamas, chief curator at the National Art Gallery of the Bahamas and host of the Blank Canvas radio show , Jyohann a maintenance man from Colombian Emerald for introducing me to his grandmother and telling about Bahamian life and to his grandmother Pearl who spoke with me about what clothing used to be made out of in times past, artist Antonius Roberts who offered his studios as exhibition space for the project outcomes and all the staff at the Towne Hotel.

Finally my special gratitude go to LIAT Airways who despite being the worst airline I've ever travelled on in my entire life didn't lose or damage my luggage or send it to an island I wasn't going to!

Introduction and Background

The research and information collected on this trip is going towards the development of a dress and adornment institute called the Costume Institute of the African Diaspora (CIAD). The idea for the development of this institute came some 5 years ago whilst setting up my first solo costume exhibition and teaching fashion workshops for children in Southwark.

My first exhibition was about the Orisha's, West African deities who are believed to control personal behaviours, earth elements, occurrences or life events. Very much like the Greek and Roman Gods each Orisha has a different story which includes colours that are indicative to them and the ways they dress.

Through enslavement of West Africans the traditions of the Orisha's has spread and metamorphosised throughout the Caribbean and the Americas. However trying to find accurate information on them was very difficult as the information I did find was often conflicting or incomplete. This caused me to search for a central location where information on costume and dress from Africa or the African Diaspora could be found, I quickly realised no such place existed either physically or online. Cue the start of a lifelong project to discover all the information I could on dress and body adornment from the African Diaspora.

Having worked with young people for over 10 years I really wanted to provide a platform where information about dress, textiles and adornment from Africa and the African Diaspora would be easily accessible and available to be used for classes or workshops. A survey I conducted two years ago amongst 100 ethnically diverse students in inner city London found that the information they received about their own cultural dress was nonexistent and many of them didn't know the correlation between the dress history of their original cultures and the modern fashions many of them were wearing. CIAD is being developed to partly address this issue. The aim of CIAD is to provide a growing resource hub for students, teachers and researchers and to advance the study of costume, clothing and textiles from the African Diaspora.

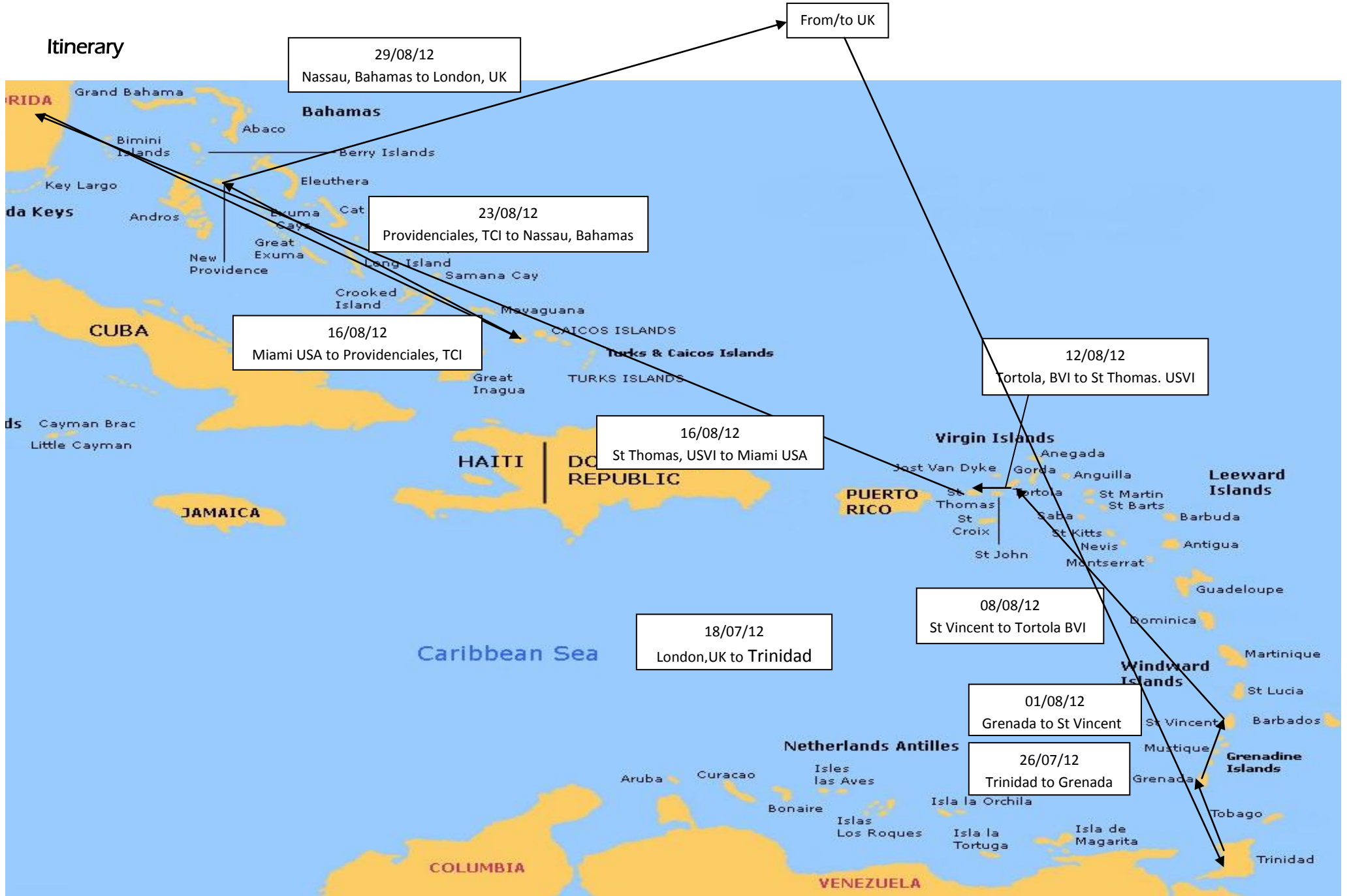
Throughout this journey I took photographs wrote notes and conducted interviews with over 30 people in 7 different countries. The common history of the islands meant that there were many similarities but there were also stark differences which in the spirit of equality and diversity deserve to be acknowledged

The focus and aim of this fellowship has been to discover as much as I could about the history and innovation of dress, costume, body adornment and fashion development in the islands I visited. I would then use this information to develop focus groups workshops, exhibitions and teaching resources here in the UK as well as provide links to various establishments in the Caribbean. There is a wealth of information in the Caribbean about this subject and it is important that this information is given a suitable and celebrated platform.

Not wanting to fall into the trap of ideas that could have been I finally sought avenues and advice to get the project underway. I am incredibly grateful to the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for gifting me with the opportunity to start this project/ journey and bring to fruition a heartfelt dream. It is with the guidance and structure of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust team that I have been able

to organise a rather complicated and exhaustive trip and get the most out of the people I have spoken to.

Itinerary



Trinidad and Tobago

After tearing around Gatwick airport trying to get a broken padlock off my hand luggage; having to endure overzealous airport security and just making it to the plane with 10 minutes to spare until take off; I finally found myself in Trinidad.

It had been sometime since I'd visited family in Jamaica and what with being wrapped up in the daily 'fast spin' cycle of London life I'd almost forgotten how the Caribbean heat hugs your face once you leave the pressurised cabin of an aeroplane.

Having communicated with Elize Rostant from the Ministry and Arts and Multiculturalism at length about the dress history and traditional clothing in Trinidad I came to realise that there was no actual national dress and really the practice of carnival and the costume development of carnival had become their national dress symbol and pride. Not wanting to base my whole experience on carnival costumes I pressed further and got sent a whole list of fashion and jewellery designers to meet and speak with.

However in Trinidad there is no escaping carnival as on arrival to our fairly basic but relatively nice guesthouse a troupe of 20+ young Colombian carnival artists had also just arrived looking for somewhere to stay. They came complete with huge brightly coloured costumes large hats and big drums this put the receptionist into a complete fluster and mini panic which thankfully we managed to sort out without too much inconvenience or distress.

The Colombian troupe had come to perform at the Colombian embassy and their costumes were utterly amazing however any conversation I wanted to have with them about the artistry and development of them was thwarted by my utter lack of Spanish and their complete lack of English. I could only look and smile broadly and make favourable noises whenever they passed all dressed up for a performance.

As this was Trinidad and carnival was all around my first stop was with Ronnie Joseph the press officer for the Carnival Institute of Trinidad and Tobago. Mr Joseph had just been declared a tribal elder by the native peoples of the Orinoco and he was in a very good mood and had prepared much information for my arrival. He told me all about the history of Trinidad carnival and why it was in February as appose to around summer or Christmas like many of the other islands. It turns out that when the French controlled the island they had allowed the enslaved Africans to celebrate and indulge themselves before Lent under the strict understanding that when Lent came they would repent beg for mercy and seek absolution of all their sins. As Lent was always at this time of year the carnival tradition grew out of this to the mammoth celebration it is today.



Mr Joseph told me about the different characters in the carnival: La Diabliesse; a character that is based on a folkloric myth of a beautiful female with a cloven foot in place of one of her feet. Apparently she is said to lure men off the road at night and take them into the depths of the forest never to be seen again, the Sailor bands and the black Indian bands amongst others. Mr Joseph told me about how the various colonial powers that ruled over the island had all influenced the look and feel of the carnival costumes.



With Christopher Nathan at 6 Carlos Launch

I interviewed Mr Joseph at length about the production and expertise of costumes and how the artistry was being taught and preserved. He mentioned that a carnival costume museum was desperately needed in Trinidad but the government were not at all concerned with providing one and despite the fact that carnival brought an influx of revenue and tourists to the island that the institution of carnival was still not really respected or supported to any great degree. He also mentioned that the artistry was in danger of dying out because the young people (especially the young women) were more concerned with showing their bare bodies and less concerned with wearing beautifully made costumes which had a meaning. It seemed to be up to individual carnival leaders and families to educate their children and young people about carnival and thereby sow the seeds of interest within them.

A few days after visiting at the Carnival Institute of Trinidad and Tobago I met with Christopher Nathan who developed and ran the Fashion Design programme at the University of Trinidad and Tobago. He has set up Trinidad's Fashion Institute and is the government advisor on all matters to do with Fashion and trade development. The meeting with Mr Nathan also went very well, he had great insights and ideas and was very passionate about the development of Fashion in Trinidad and the rest of the Caribbean. He spoke about the development of manufacturing in Trinidad and how it wasn't making sense for the local economy to ship things over to China to be made when there were people in Trinidad willing to work. He said he was in the process of suggesting garment manufacturing reform to the government and how this would boost the economy and the world view of Trinidad. When I enquired about the lack of national dress in Trinidad he had some really interesting things to say about the development of national dress in the Caribbean suggesting that the national dress is really resort wear as the islands are obvious holiday destinations. Mr Nathan remarked on my research and said that the work I was doing was really



With Meilng Esau at 6 Carlos Launch

important and that I must do it small chunks so as not to overwhelm myself. I really appreciated that advice.

At London Fashion week in February I met acclaimed Trinidadian fashion designer Meiling Esau I had emailed her and mentioned I would be in Trinidad in July and requested an audience. As was expected she was incredibly busy but was happy to speak with me. She told me about her fashion practice and development and the influences she had. Meiling really is the Doyenne of Trinidadian fashion and is very well respected. She had just started a new fashion lifestyle magazine called 6 Carlos and invited me to the magazine launch. She told me she regularly takes on Fashion students from London College of Fashion as interns and I met her latest intern who was there for the summer.

A couple of days later I went to Tobago. After spending a couple of days there I realised that the vibe and energy was completely different to Trinidad. I had gone there to see the Heritage Festival (a month and a half long celebration from the 23rd June to the 1st August) and watch the costumed performances. Tobago had a much more traditional aesthetic and was much more Africanist in its feel, interestingly this also meant that the retention of influences from colonial forces was also more prominent as was shown in the costumes at the festival.

Whereas Trinidad carnival seemed as if it was trying to be a rival to the style and artistry of Rio carnival in Brazil the Heritage Festival in Tobago seemed to be displaying the true heart of the country which I felt was being ignored to some extent. All the traditional practices and folkloric dancing I didn't find in Trinidad I found in Tobago. The locals are very proud of their Heritage Festival and this year was its 25th Year so they went all out with the celebrations.

I found that British style dress from the 19th and early 20th century had been enveloped into the traditional costumes of the Tobago heritage festival and become creolised. Influences of Scottish

tartan were evident in the madras material which made up many costumes and had been mixed with various styles of West African gele head wrapping.



Performers at the Heritage Festival in Tobago

Something I noticed was that most of the performers were young people and the Heritage Festival didn't seem to have a problem with getting their young people interested in wearing traditional costumes. I think this is because the importance of heritage and traditions had been taught and instilled within the children from a young age. In this respect I think Trinidad could learn something from Tobago.

Grenada

On arriving to my guest house in Grenada I learnt that two people had been found dead in fairly horrific circumstances. I only mention it because everywhere I went people were talking about it. It seems that both people were found on the day I arrived; one in the morning and one in the evening. Although they were found in different parts of the island there was a theory amongst the locals that one had something to do with the other. The details were pretty horrific and far from the story of Grenada the taxi driver from the airport had given me of a sleepy little island with not much going on!

My taxi driver told me that the tourism boom hadn't really taken off in Grenada and that the big thing for them was carnival which pulled in a crowd and brought much needed revenue to the island. He told me that Grenada was still a fairly quiet place with very little crime. He assured me that most people would be nice and friendly towards me and my Britishness shouldn't be a hindrance or cause for unfavourable treatment. Grenada is a beautiful place that seemed like a large sleepy seaside village but my goodness the hills! They have hills in Grenada that could kill a mountain goat and my leg muscles were certainly unaccustomed to the exercise.



Mrs Beverly Steele and Mrs Gloria Payne Banfield

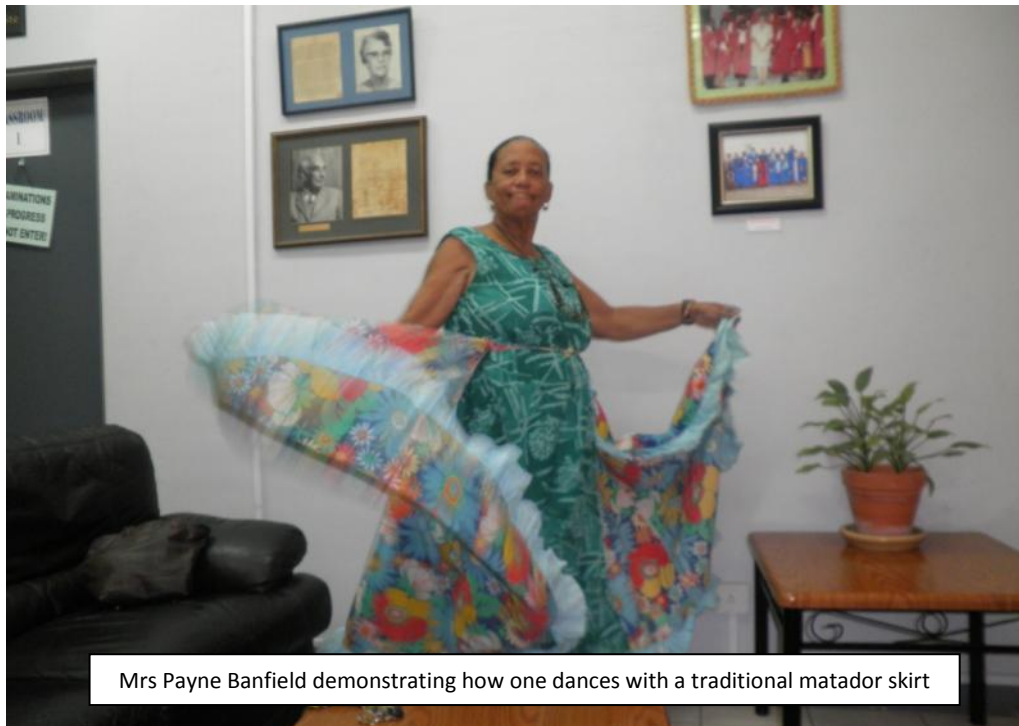
Thankfully my guest house was central and close to everything and I had made an arrangement to meet with Beverly Steele and Gloria Payne Banfield; Grenada's Grande Dames of cultural heritage at the UWI campus which was across the street.

Mrs Steele and Mrs Payne Banfield were utterly fabulous they spoke nonstop for two and a half hours. When one paused for breath the other would jump in with something else interesting. They are in the process of developing a Grenadian national costume which I understood to be both fun and a headache at the same time. They told me all about the traditional dress and the skirts used for dancing the folkloric dances. They told me about the costumes that are worn at carnival and what the different types of costumes mean. As with Trinidad each costume character had a different meaning which usually related to a local myth or one carried over from West Africa or something relating to the practices of the colonial forces.

They were very pleased to meet me and happy that something like CIAD was being developed. I love getting endorsement and encouragement from the elders it puts wind in my sails. They asked if I would help them with the development of their own madras fabric which would start them on the road to developing their own national costume. I said I would keep in touch and give them any help I could with development of their own madras pattern. I have since connected them with David McGill from the Tartans for Africa organisation and asked if he might advise them on pattern development.

Mrs Payne Banfield said Carriacou had a stronger African retention than Grenada and told me I should go there and speak to a man named Winston Fleary who everybody knows and apparently would be easy to find because he had lost a leg in an accident.

So the following Monday I went to Carriacou to find with Mr Fleary. Like Tobago Carriacou is a much smaller place with a strong traditional element. They have a Maroon festival every April where traditional costumes and dances can be seen. Unfortunately I was unable to find Mr Fleary but again I did note that the retention of historic dress and traditional dress practices amongst the young has a place if you make it an important part of their holistic education.



Mrs Payne Banfield demonstrating how one dances with a traditional matador skirt

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines

In St Vincent I was staying up in the hills not far from the airport where there was a constant cooling breeze which I really appreciated. Carnival has just finished a couple of days before I arrived so most people were still reeling from that. This island didn't feel as sleepy as Grenada and the town centre is definitely bigger. Once again I experienced very little problems in terms of staring or attracting unwanted attention to myself which was great. However that changed whenever I opened my mouth! The lady I was staying with said it was because I looked like a local girl and people are trying to work out if my accent is put on or not.

I quickly managed to meet up with Hugh Raguette Chair of the Carnival Development Committee and Julian Pollard designer and member of the now defunct National Cultural Development Foundation. They told me some amazing history about St Vincent that makes it unique amongst the other islands. Interestingly though Vincentians either don't know this history or somehow don't think it important. One of the gentlemen I spoke to said it was down to a Vincentian identity crisis and low self esteem.



As the history seemed fairly relevant to the understanding of influences on dress history in this island I have included a brief synopsis in this report.

The St Vincent identity crisis stems from the fact that there were a large population of black Caribs on this island (now called Garifuna as black Carib is thought of as a derogatory term) and when French priests arrived in 1662 to catholicise the natives they couldn't understand where all these Africans had come from. Columbus had also written in his log how he was surprised to find African people on these islands. The British explanation is that a slave ship sank off the coast in a hurricane and Africans swam to shore and mixed with the Carib peoples, but as Mr Raguette reasoned that would mean that Africans would have had to somehow get out of the iron shackles that bound them to the ship, swim and survive against hurricane waves and weather to reach the shore. The possibility of this he said is largely improbable. There is also a claim that enslaved Africans escaped from Barbados but Mr Raguette points out that the history of Barbados doesn't support that claim as the Africans would have to know that there was another island not too far away to swim to yet they never ended up in St Lucia.

The information Mr Raguette was telling me is based on the book *They Came before Columbus* by

Ivan Van Sertima. In it he suggests that Emperor Abouboukari from the Mali Empire sent out two expeditions to the Caribbean and it was the result of these expeditions that saw Africans from Mali settling in St Vincent and mixing with the Carib peoples. The Garifuna language is based in Dogone (one of the largest tribal groups in Mali) and uses many Dogone, French and Arawak words.

So the French came and tried to settle and colonise the island and were fought off by the Garifuna



Fort Charlotte where the canon faced inland to fight the Garifuna

people. The British came and tried the same thing and were also fought off with Garifuna guerrilla warfare tactics. This went on for a very long time as the Garifuna were particularly fierce in protecting their island from the British and the French, until the British went to the Germans with their problem of how to destabilise the native peoples and colonise the island. Once the Germans were on board they came up with the idea of

burning the crops and destroying the food supply of the native people as they reasoned once they had no food they would be hungry and come out into the open therefore making them easy to capture. This tactic worked and after the Carib war which ended in 1797 the British succeeded in colonising the island and sent the Garifuna people to Belize and Honduras.

If you know anything about the history of the Slave Trade you'll know that the trade was abolished in 1807 which gave the British only 10 years to legally trade slaves and flood the island with a few thousand Africans. With slavery eventually ending in 1834 that meant that St Vincent was only ever a formal slave colony for 37 years! In the greater scheme of Caribbean enslavement 37 years is no time at all.

Over the years many Garifuna have come back to the island and as Mr Pollard said it's safe to say that a large majority of the population of St Vincent have Garifuna ancestry! This history is indeed very fascinating but Mr Pollard points out the problem is that many Vincentians don't know or understand this history and they don't understand that there were Africans on this island before Columbus' intervention because they believe the reasoning's given by the British and they believe that black Caribs were wicked and evil because that's what the British taught them.

Mr Pollard said that at a recent community meeting held in the local court attended by the Garifuna, judges asked the Garifuna people to identify themselves. He said people were shocked and confused when several black people stood up and identified themselves as Garifuna because they just couldn't understand why the Garifuna were black.

This information was of interest to me as St Vincent didn't have a national costume (due to internal politics) and hadn't identified any particular dress history to speak of but I could see the influence of many different cultures on the dress history development and I think this would be an exciting and rich creative history to teach.



Interestingly however I came across a conflict amongst the scholars with regards to the information I had received. I spoke with local historian Dr Edgar Adams who confirmed the information I had received from Mr Raguette and Mr Pollard. He said there were quite a few expeditions, some of whom made it and some of whom perished along the way. Dr Adams has written a number of books on the culture and history of St Vincent, many of which are used in the schools. Dr Adams told me about the jewellery and body adornments used by the Garifuna people and that because slavery hadn't been going for that long in St Vincent there was no real retention of European dress styles amongst the populace. However I also spoke to another local historian Dr Adrian Fraser who refuted everything I had been told and basically told me all the information I had been given was completely

and utterly wrong!

Dr Fraser, who is in the process of writing a book about St Vincent slave history, said that there was no evidence to prove that there were expeditions that came from Mali, landed in St Vincent and mixed with the native Carib people. I asked him if he believed that there were any Malian expeditions at all and he said if there were the Malian's would have died out long before the Europeans arrived! Dr Fraser refuted the claims of the book by Ivan Van Sertima and said he had done the research and he knows the claims not to be true!

There is a lot of work to do in St Vincent and as with many of the islands the work is mental and emotional rather than physical. The low self esteem thing doesn't look like abating anytime soon but really it's something that needs to be worked on by each individual soul, and boosted in schools. Development of a national identity through costume and national dress could help with that.

Mr Raguette said that the problem that they have with teaching this history or the history of carnival, design and development, in schools is Christian fundamentalism. Christian fundamentalists have somehow got it into their heads that any teaching of carnival history and development in worshipping the devil and they have gone so far as to protest under carnival billboards and take out big ads and write big articles in the newspapers saying that carnival is building alters to the devil.

And so in extension any island history that may be celebrated and promoted during carnival that veers away from the approved teaching is also worship to the devil.

This could be an underlying reason for the political problems with the development of a national dress which is a real shame because whatever the accurate story of the Garifuna the history of St Vincent and the Grenadines is incredibly rich and varied.

British Virgin Islands (Tortola, Road Town)

Unfortunately I didn't get very far with my research in the BVI. I had been in conversation with the Director of Culture Mrs Brenda Lettsome – Tye for quite a few months via email and Skype; we had arranged to meet each other when I got to Tortola and discuss the territorial dress (which they had just decided on) and some of the other forms of historical and contemporary costumes and attire. Unfortunately the day I flew into Tortola she had to fly out because of a family bereavement.

Fortunately I had connected with a couch surfer who is a journalist for the local newspaper and she gave me the name of Mrs Eileene Parsons who she said would be able to help me. Mrs Lettsome - Tye had also emailed me the name of the same person and told me that I should make contact with her as she would be able to help. I called Mrs Parsons and she was very happy to speak with me so I made an arrangement to call her the following Friday morning and go to her house on Friday afternoon so she could tell me about all her cultural achievements.

Very much like Mrs Steele and Mrs Payne Banfield in Grenada Mrs Parsons is highly regarded and respected in the BVI and has buildings named after her. She was a dancer and informal cultural anthropologist; she developed, choreographed and danced with the BVI Heritage dancers before illness claimed both her legs. My journalist friend said she was a lovely sweet old lady who loves to talk with great enthusiasm and over the phone on she came across as exactly that.

I had also managed to find out the name of the two women (Mrs Phillips and Mrs Frazer) who designed the territorial dress and had managed to obtain the home work and mobile number for one of them. However continual calling and leaving of messages produced no response. I found out through my journalist friend that the other designer's family ran a local department store and she was often in there. Unfortunately by the time I got to the shop it was closed. Through the local grapevine I discovered that Mrs Phillips husband is a policeman and so I went off to the police



station to see if I might be able to speak to his wife through him. Unfortunately this was another dead end as he was on sick leave and speaking to him on the phone revealed that he appeared to have no idea of his wife's whereabouts either!

The following morning I called Sergeant & Mrs Phillips again and left more messages explaining who I was and where I was from and why I was trying to get

hold of her. Sergeant Phillips called back and said he still hadn't seen his wife as he said he was asleep by the time she got home and she had left before he'd woken up. By now this was all

beginning to sound a bit weird and strange and I was beginning to wonder what on earth was going on.

I called Mrs Parsons as I had arranged to do to remind her of our afternoon meeting. She then proceeded to cancel our appointment and go to great lengths to dissuade me from talking to her about the national dress or anything to do with costume or historic dress on the island! She asked me who I was and why I was interested in this so I told her again about myself and about the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust and basically repeated the conversation we'd had 36 hours previous. She wasn't at all happy and she kept saying that the government has not put their official stamp on the designs and they have not been approved so she can't talk about them or the process in deciding on them. She talked about how Mrs Lettsome –Tye hadn't told her about me and she wasn't going to speak to me about dress and I wasn't to come to her house!

I eventually managed to get out of her that she suffers from phantom pain and was not up to having visitors. I had no problem with that but we could have saved time and confusion if she had just said so in the first place! I spoke with my journalist friend who had done some investigative journalism for me and had located the other designer Mrs Frazer. She had found out from Mrs Frazer that Mrs Phillips had indeed received all my messages and seen all my missed calls and spoken to Mrs Frazer about whether they should speak to me or not. The decision was made by the two of them that they would not speak to me as they hadn't been given official permission from the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Education! No one thought to be courteous enough to return my calls and let me know this however! It seems that there was some fear attached to speaking to me. One person I spoke to said it was because I was British and speaking to me would seem official but if I was from somewhere else in the Caribbean it wouldn't matter as much!

My Journalist friend said she got the distinct impression that something serious had gone down and that's why everyone was behaving like frightened children over something as simple as talking about the national dress. Thankfully my journalist friend had interviewed Mrs Parsons a few months before I arrived and took some photos of the territorial dress at the competition ceremony. All I really discovered from the BVI is that if I want to speak to anyone on the island about things of this nature it is probably best to get permission in writing from the uppermost echelons of government.

U.S. Virgin Islands (St Thomas)

St Thomas is the second largest island in the US Virgin Islands and the one dedicated to shopping and tourism. I realised fairly quickly that I was all together on the wrong island as St Croix is the one with all the history and culture apparently. Unfortunately I wasn't able to afford to get to St Croix as it was about \$200 by sea plane and the ferry was no longer running.

However I made the most of St Thomas and met with the Carnival Committee there. The director, Mr Caswil Callender was very pleased to meet me and had asked veteran carnival artist and teacher Alrid Lockhart to join us for our meeting. I really enjoyed meeting these people, I liked them because they were expecting me to call and every time they heard my voice on the phone they recognised me and greeted me with enthusiasm, it was a far cry from the odd behaviour of the folk in Tortola!

Needless to say our conversation went on for hours and we talked about everything from costume and traditions to youth and skills development.

Mr Lockhart was very animated and spoke at length about everything costume and dress related as the assistant Denise and I nodded and made the right noises in the right places. Denise hurried about, finding magazine articles as reference for what Mr Lockhart and Mr Callender were saying and by the end of our meeting she'd managed to dig up a pile of magazines and books to give me as reference material.



Alrid Lockhart, Denise Henley-Smith and Caswil Callender

I will definitely be keeping in touch with them, Mr Callender and Mr Lockhart seemed to feel a bit sad, helpless and angry that the culture of the Virgin Islands wasn't being taken more seriously by the government as they didn't have an actual cultural ministry. Mr Callender said the government kept talking about tacking a mini department on to the end of the ministry of tourism or education but as of yet nothing had been forthcoming. As always the issue is funding and funding can't and won't be directed towards culture and cultural development without the invention of the government; the Carnival Committee is an independent not for profit organisation that brings huge amounts of revenue to the island but receives no support from the government despite this.

Unfortunately such is the problem in a few places I've been.

Yet despite there being no official cultural ministry there seems to have been a decision made about the use of madras fabric (a fabric who's pattern is influenced by tartan and is woven in the southern Indian province known as madras, it is very popular throughout many islands in the Caribbean) in the national dress that is causing a bit on controversy. These islands have changed hands amongst colonial forces more times than anyone cares to remember but were settled by the Danes for about 250 years. The enslaved Africans having no other source of clothing material would bleach flour sacks and make clothes out of these, fine clothes too apparently, but madras was never a part of this islands history.

Nevertheless it's been adopted by the USVI as the national fabric much to the chagrin and annoyance of several people and much of the natural population. Denise remarked how, to the best of her knowledge, there had been no vote or meeting to ask the public's opinion or see what the people thought, it was just decided over their heads. They did mention that it could have been adopted to try and bring the national costume in line with the rest of the Caribbean islands.

To get to the bottom of the madras controversy I had been directed to several people by an incredibly helpful woman at the Tourism board. I ended up trying to get hold of a Mrs Sonia Dow from a department in St Croix, she is apparently the authority on the madras debate, but unfortunately she was continually busy and unable to speak with me. I shan't give up though I am determined to get to the bottom of this!



With Mr Callender at the Carnival Committee offices

Turks and Caicos

So after waiting in Miami airport for 6 hours and flying through an electric storm I eventually got into Turks and Caicos and met the owners of the eco cabin I was staying in. They were a nice old Jehovah's Witness couple; Frank and Pru from Texas who have been in the TCI for two years. They did what many people do; came for a holiday and only went home to collect stuff so they could go back. They told me that they're basically on a holy mission to help their church with the Spanish speaking communities on TCI.

The following Friday morning I met with David Bowen, the Director of Culture who for a government official is incredibly cool! He plays all manner of musical instruments, trained with the Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre in New York, worked in Japan on their national dance theatre, studied yoga in India and many more things besides. My meeting with him was at 11am on Friday but I somehow ended up spending the whole day with him talking about everything from national dress to the islands demographics and ending up on politics, which is where all these conversations end up! I ended the evening watching him play bass in one of his many jazz/ rock bands. For all intents and purposes he is a bit of a dude!

As with most people I had contacted before my research trip I had been in communication with Mr Bowen for a few months. He told me he had cleared his diary in anticipation of my arrival and to help me with my research. He is incredibly passionate about what he does; as one of the few actual TC islanders left on the island he is really keen to uphold and promote his culture. It turns out there were never too many TC islanders to begin with but out of an official population of 37000 only 7000 are actual TC islanders (known as belongers) and therefore eligible to vote! He had adopted me for the week I was there and was very excited about introducing me, CIAD and WCMT to everyone he knew and worked with.

The Turks and Caicos Islands are flat not one mountain, hill or steep incline. Providenciales (known as Provo by the locals) the island I was staying on, is so small it takes 27 minutes to get from one end to the other! There are quite a few little islands and cays but only 6 of them are inhabited. TCI does not border the Caribbean Sea



Director of Culture David Bowen & his assistant Barbara Johnson

like the other islands it's on the other side of Cuba and Hispaniola with Atlantic Ocean on either side so technically it could be considered not Caribbean at all. The islands are limestone based so any ground which is not tarmac is white from either the sand or the limestone or both, there is no soil.

TCI is still a British principality and so there are a lot of British ex pats, Americans, Haitians and Dominicans (DRs). The official language is English but 4 languages are spoken here: English, French, Spanish and Creole. If it wasn't for the little shred of culture that is managing to be clawed back into existence the whole place would be a cultural vacuum.



Mr Bowen telling me about the sisal plant & how the fibres are used for making textiles and rope

Mr Bowen told me about the fascinating history of the TCI where the Africans who populated the islands had come from a Spanish slave ship wreckage. They had taken Africans from the Bambara people of Mali (Mali again!) and were on route to Cuba but were trying to hide from the British off the coast of TCI as this was after the slave trade laws had changed. The ship was wrecked and the Africans were rescued by the British (although they were made to work for one year for the British

to clear the debt of their rescue) Thus the TCI became populated with Africans along with the enslaved Africans the American and British landowners bought with them when they came to claim slices of these islands after the American war of Independence. The original population were Lucatan Indians but unfortunately they died off due to diseases brought to the islands by the French and Spanish. Mr Bowen has apparently been in touch with Professor Henry Louise Gates Jr to do DNA testing on the dwindling natural TC islanders to prove and cement these findings.

Mr Bowen was indeed a one man cultural power house. He got me an interview with a local fashion designer who had just shown at Caribbean Fashion week and was very excited about having a huge order for a boutique in New York. That was all very good and well but to be honest most of the information I really wanted seemed to be in the head of Mr Bowen.

Mr Bowen had single handedly resurrected the ailing culture of the TCI by going around all the islands in the archipelago and speaking with the islanders. He had designed the national costume with the help of all the islanders asking them their opinions and getting them interested in their own culture again. This had worked a treat as the national costume of TCI is very lovely and truly unique in the costumes of the Caribbean.



TCI National dress

The TCI national costume is white with 6 bands of colour; 2 on each arm and 4 around the hem of the dress or 3 on each arm of the shirt for the men. Each colour represents a different island or cay in the archipelago and is taken from a particular characteristic which is popular or common on that island. The costume is finished off

with a straw hat which is woven by the locals from palm fronds.

Mr Bowen had also developed the national folkloric dance group and learnt traditional steps from the old people to teach to the young people. He had also developed the annual crab eating festival and TCI's own version of Junkanoo (a festival that happens annually around Christmas time on most Caribbean islands) called Maskanoo, which involves costumes made of strips of cloth that are very reminiscent of traditional costumes worn in parts of West Africa.

As with many of the other islands a problem Mr Bowen was having was teaching all this cultural heritage to the children, not because the children or the parents didn't want them to know but because most of the teachers on the island were not from the TCI and so knew nothing about TCI culture or history. He had developed a massive document that he was hoping he could put together in some coherent form to give to teachers as a kind of cultural bible that would help with the teaching of the islands culture and history. There is a lot of work to do and I could see that Mr Bowen was becoming exhausted from carrying the weight of everything on his own. I offered to use my skills and teaching knowledge to help him with the development of the TCI cultural bible.



Mr Bowen leading the parade at Maskanoo

The Bahamas

The Bahamas is a most fascinating place that I had never paid very much attention to before. It really has been the jewel in the crown of this research trip. I met some truly amazing people and had some remarkable experiences.



Lady weaving palm fronds

As soon as I arrived I met a young chap in a restaurant who was intrigued as to why a British black woman would be travelling on her own. Once I'd explained myself he told me he was very proud to be Bahamian and was keen to show me the real Bahamian culture. He introduced me to his granny who was an amazing source of information about clothing and "plaitin" which is what Bahamians call the weaving of palm fronds. She seemed very

pleased to speak to me, and told me all about how they used to make clothes out of bleached flour sacks and chicken feed bags.

The following day I met with Mrs Arlene Nash Ferguson a lovely woman who is the director of Educulture, a Junkanoo museum and workshop, from her old family house. We spoke for some time about the tradition of Junkanoo, and the tradition of "plaitin". She told me how the African women who had been bought to these islands developed over 200 different styles and patterns with their weaving. We spoke at length about how sad it was that the tradition is dying out with the old people because many of the young people don't recognise its value and so are not interested in taking it up.

I learnt that Junkanoo in the Bahamas is slightly different from the other islands and unique in the sense that all the costumes have to be made out of paper and or natural materials. In each Junkanoo band there can only be 6 people who have costumes containing



Mr and Mrs Ferguson at Educulture

fabric. I found this particularly exciting as the possibilities and scope for creative innovation and recycling are endless but surprisingly she said they didn't recycle the costumes after use and that they get thrown away. Mrs Ferguson said that they recycle in the sense that they take old cardboard packaging and use that in their costumes (making junk a new, as she said) but as far as actually breaking the costumes down and reusing the materials she didn't see how that could feasibly be done. I could see she would benefit from me imparting some serious knowledge here.



Paper Junkanoo costume

Whilst Mrs Ferguson was questioning me about the research project, WCMT and CIAD she had a bit of a brainwave. She said she co hosted a radio show with two other guys and that I should come onto the show as a guest and tell everybody about what I was doing and why. Excellent! So we made an arrangement for her to pick me up the following morning and take me to the radio station. Mrs Ferguson really is one of those salts of the earth types of people who you'd be really happy to have in your circle. Her husband Silburt is chairman of the Junkanoo committee and he too was cherishable. I left their museum with a huge smile on my face and in my heart, I'm really glad to have met them both.

The next day Mrs Ferguson picked me up and off we went

to the radio station. The radio show was great, I've never been interviewed on radio before and it was really good, I didn't fall over my words I felt confident and interesting. The other hosts were very funny and we spoke about fashion and costume and what exactly was Bahamian national dress. They don't have one. In fact what they do have is something called Androsia which is basically brightly coloured batik fabric that is used for everything from bedspreads to bikinis. They were shocked when I told them that Androsia was invented by a Canadian man and his wife in 1973 and that really it wasn't essentially Bahamian. One of the dj's told me he never knew that, that it was the first time he'd ever heard about this, and that they'd always presumed that Androsia was made by a Bahamian. I found it strange that I should be telling other people about their own cultural history.

As the show went on I tackled them about this lack of recycling the Junkanoo costumes. I came up

with various suggestions and ideas that they could have a second celebration after Junkanoo where they broke the costumes down and shredded them to make new paper and card for new costumes. They seemed agog and the dj's nick named me Tropical Storm Teleica and said the things I was saying was causing them all to think and really re-evaluate the way they did things. We got a few calls into the show and they all were saying really positive things and the listeners seemed to like what I was saying. One caller, a lady by the name of Pamela Burnside who is apparently quite a prestigious person, called in and requested that I be given her contact details so that she could meet me. I was told if Mrs Burnside requests an audience then you know you've done something right!

Mrs Pamela Burnside was a fashion designer who studied at London College of Fashion in the 70's she met and married Jackson Burnside who was and still is a very well respected architect in the Bahamas. Mr Burnside died from a brain aneurism last year but his widow Mrs Burnside is still very well respected on the islands. She introduced me to so many designers and artists and magazine people and drove me around everywhere that I wonder how she wasn't on the list of key people to meet that I got from the Director of culture.



With John Cox and Ashley Knowles at the Guardian Talk radio station

Mrs Burnside introduced me to John Cox (associate professor at the College of the Bahamas, radio talk show host and chief curator at the National Gallery of the Bahamas) and suggested to him that he have me on his show to talk about my work, CIAD and what I've found in the Bahamas. I went on his show and we were accompanied by Ashley Knowles one of his junior

curators from the National Art Gallery who wanted to talk to me about textile design and development. The show was great although it was the quickest hour I've ever had in my life, I promised to stay in touch with them both and add them to the CIAD seasonal newsletter. So from never having done any radio shows before I had managed to do two in under a week.

A few days later I met with Tamara McCartney Cargil and the ladies at Common Wealth Fabrics; I was asking them about design styles and styling. It turns out (as expected) that most of the styles are American influenced occasionally British but nothing intrinsically Bahamian. They told me that formal wear still takes on a traditional British form with hats and gloves worn at most occasions. The conversation with them was very interesting because they ended up suggesting that they should have a competition to come up with a design for the Bahamian national dress! I got very excited about this and they actually started to think about how to put together a competition for the many designers that use their store. Things are moving and shaking, and they ended up thanking me for

coming along and making them think! I'm so glad I could help. I told them to keep me updated on their progress.

Next year is the 40th anniversary of Bahamian independence and when I mentioned to Mrs Ferguson about the competition idea the Commonwealth Fabrics ladies had talked about she became very enthused and said it would be a wonderful thing to introduce for the 40th anniversary. There definitely seems to be a shift or movement amongst the people I'd spoken too and if the people on the ground keep the energy up I foresee wonderful developments in the cultural dress arena for the Bahamas.

Mrs Burnside had taken over my itinerary for my last day and had planned meetings with various artists and designers. She was most insistent that I attend a coffee morning at a local artist's private gallery where some young art students had just come back from a trip to New York. The gallery owner/ artist was really interested in my research and offered me his studio to exhibit work in if/ when I go back to the Bahamas.

After viewing some of the art and architecture made and designed by her late husband on Paradise Island Mrs Burnside whisked me off to meet two more designers before I had to get on the plane. She was very keen for me to meet two young guys who ran an event called FashArt which basically gave a platform to up and coming designers and artists to exhibit their clothing and artwork. The concept was great the guys were really sweet and very engaging. I told them I would add them to the newsletter mailing list and we will keep the connection alive.

At the end of the trip my head was buzzing with so many ideas and concepts that I wanted to try out with my students. I've met some amazing people, and I do feel like I've achieved so much and made some really wonderful friends. The opportunity to travel and meet people has really helped with the development and growth of me as an individual and the organisation I'm building.



Palm frond and hessian shoes by Christina "Muffin" Fernander

Conclusion

I have learnt so much from this trip that it has really opened my eyes to the amount of work needed in this field. I have been inspired to do this research through my own desire to find out about the history and development of dress from the African Diaspora as I know that it has had a massive impact on popular dress culture all over the world. I was encouraged by the work of Carol Tulloch who has written several books on black style and continually encouraged by everyone I met along the way who was happy that this work was being done.

I feel like there were a few detractors and people who couldn't see the necessity or relevance of this research and that may have been because I myself didn't realise how important this work would be to so many people. As such I was unable to articulate the relevance of it when questioned. That will change now. I really have just started on this journey and I had no idea how deep it would go or that so many people would be so open to it.

I quickly realised that the two major problems for the people I spoke to were funding for the development of creative cultural practice and education and how to engage the young people with their own cultural heritage. The funding issue is something I and many teachers in the creative cultural arts have to deal with in the UK as successive governments have failed to see the benefit or necessity of a progressive and diverse arts education. Young people will always look to what is fashionable and "cool" as a way of



defining themselves and that is to be expected, however trying to get students to look at the beauty and interest within their own cultural heritage and use that creatively instead of looking elsewhere first is something that only seems to happen in very few places. It is apparent that the funding issue and the cultural engagement issue is something that goes hand in hand for both the UK and the Caribbean.

I began to understand early on that there is a need for more cultural education and understanding not just between Britain and the Caribbean but between Caribbean islands and that it would benefit us all to talk about and enjoy our differences as well as our similarities instead of ignoring them or avoiding the issue. Young people really need to know what is valuable about their own culture, from what I have seen when this is instilled within them from an early age and continually reinforced they possess a sense of self pride, awareness and self confidence. The learning and understanding of this would be of benefit to students in the Caribbean if only, at the very least, to be able to protect and claim their islands intellectual property.

The sustainable design and innovations I saw would really help some of my students understand how to make fashionable items out of natural and reclaimed materials. Many young people I work with in the UK know nothing about this cultural dress history or sustainable fashion. I spoke to a few people about the possibility of an artistic cultural exchange as I think this would be very rewarding to students. This is something I would like to try and develop and it is one of my aims to provide a clear platform to access information about the innovations that are happening within this area of fashion development in the African Diaspora.

The importance of this information is not just for people of Caribbean heritage it is for everyone and is part of the tapestry of cultural knowledge that we must develop to gain a greater understanding of each other. Fashion and textiles has been called one of the most environmentally damaging industries yet there are processes and techniques being used on small islands in the Caribbean that would be extremely beneficial to sustainable development.

I have already started the process of disseminating this information by developing a website; www.ciad.org.uk, holding lectures at the ADAD Re:Generations conference, holding focus groups and developing course plans to deliver at local schools and colleges. It is my plan to have an exhibition sharing some of the information I have discovered about costume history and development next spring.

