

IZIBONGO

Celebrating Art in Africa and the Diaspora

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Nelson

Mandela's

Shirt

A tribute to the Trinidadian and Tobagon artist
CARLISLE HARRIS

Ediforria

This modern folk tale is set on the imaginary East Caribbean island of Atinuda. The name comes from the Yoruba word for creativity, as Ona, the capital city, is named after their word for art and design. These words were chosen to reflect the cultural impact of the Yoruba people of south-west Nigeria, in Trinidad and Tobago and other nations in the region of the Caribbean Sea.

We often pay homage to our great elders, when they have physically left us: but we should let them know before they go. So this tale celebrates one of the doyens of Caribbean art; as well as inter-generational interaction and the power of art.

Part two of the celebration of this artist; from Trinidad and Tobago, I am happy to present to you, CARLISLE HARRIS.

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Two of his paintings from on the "Oval" Wall, 2009

from *Carlisle Harris*

<https://reggaediscography.blogspot.co.uk/2018/01/izibongo-magazine-2018.html>

<http://rastaites.com/>



The artist with one of his paintings on the Waterfront Wall

from Carlisle Harris

Nelson Mandela's Shirt

a tribute to the Trinidad and Tobagon artist, Carlisle Harris

Waking in the warm, jasmine-scented morning and taking the shorter, back door route, the Elder of Atinuda bids good morning to the Maidens of the Muse, caretakers of the Shrine of Creativity, as he enters there, to say his daily benediction.

"God of All,
Let colour bring healing to those who need it.
Let every person's contribution be appreciated.
My continual wish remains,
That the creative shall overcome the negative.
Watch over us,
In all that we attempt to do together.
Watch over us."

After this, returning, he showers, giving thanks again for the simple wonder of water. Water as river, to sit by, when searching for a solution; water as drink, as nothing sweeter passes down the human throat; water as resurrector, to dispel the sluggishness of sleep, in preparation for the new day. He goes from the room of soap and water, to the culinary zone. Once again, he gives thanks for that perfect blend of tomatoes, peppers, garlic and onion, eaten with roti and washed down with coconut water. Ready now for what the day will bring, he steps into the streets of restive humanity.

Everyone's going in the one direction, with bits of paper, cardboard and cloth; couriers of colour, going towards the main city square. It is Saturday, the first one of the month: so it is a Day of National Creation. So there they go, an inter-generational exodus to a place of creativity, everyone carrying a piece of their contribution.

Children and adults alike recognise him; greet him, shake hands, desiring to be in his presence. A crowd gathers around him – and they are soon caught up in the multitude, going to the carnival of colour. I should rephrase that, as they are the carnival of colour: trailing iridescence, as they pass along the way. The children chant...

"We never hesitate,
Don't want to be late;
We're going to create with the Elder."
Tra la la,
Tra la la la la.
Gather together,
We're going to create with the Elder."

In many cultures around the world, they celebrate the emergence of the New Moon; on the island nation of Atinuda, they pay homage to creativity. Through the streets of the capital they come, three of which are named after other masters of art on the neighbouring, larger island of Trinidad and Tobago, where the art infrastructure is more developed; Bosco Holder Avenue, Carlisle Chang Drive and LeRoy Clark Street. Later on, in these same

streets, after the visual vision has had full implementation, there will be heard the sound of drums and more joy, as the people celebrate the achievements of gathering together.

White sheets have been sowed together and placed on the largest wall in the town square. The plaza is shimmering with colour. Did you ever see a rainbow flutter?

Spaces are made for the Elder to walk through. After saying a few words of thanks to God and the wishing of inspiration for all, he then, using velcro, attaches a piece of cardboard to the sheet. Choosing a colour – autumn orange - from the palletes arrayed in front of the wall, he paints the cardboard piece he'd affixed to the wall. With that, cheers and applause are heard, as the crowd surges forward and the communal creativity begins. The rainbow that moved, slowly becomes stationery, like kente on brick, rather than on flesh; a beautiful magnet attracting all. People come from all over the island - by car, motorbike, bicycle and on foot. Many stay in their home town, village or regional centre, for the art ventures that are happening there, but many others choose to travel to the capital, Ona, to the largest gathering. Those that bring the herring and cod, brought old netting; staff from local schools, brought paint and scissors; a chain store donated glue and velcro; local builders brought ladders.

But before I continue, I must tell you the name of the collage and how it came about. A youth proposal competition was organised to find a name for the next piece and how it should be executed. The wining girl said it should be a collage, a colourful one, with everyone adding a little bit. To represent someone who tried to unite all, to bring all the colours together: Nelson Mandela. And because she liked the style and colouring of those he wore, she chose as the title, Nelson Mandela's Shirt.

The senior citizens come also, after all, The Elder is a septuagenarian! A few of them join in too. The rest of them sit around; chatting, knitting or playing chess, watching the assembly of generations. They are the only ones who don't call him Elder: they call him Brother. He always makes sure there are enough chairs for them; they always bring him home made treats, like mango chutney, samosas or bottles of green seasoning.

In his belief in inclusion, he reached out to the Probation department, requesting that offenders on community service, be assigned to him on the days of national creation, to help out here and there and to give them the opportunity to create also. He reminds me of the 15th century Ethiopian saint, Kristos Samra, who I think of as the Patron Saint of Reconciliation. She believed that no one was beyond redemption, including ol' Lucifer!

No stabbings or shootings are reported on the days of national creation. Who'd want to be accused of polluting harmony? Which young man wants to face pressure from his grandparents and neighbours, as well as the police. No: punishments and vendettas were reserved for the days before and after.

More cardboard as well as plastic bottles in varied colouring, was brought to the square by one of the local re-cycling projects.

For health and safety reasons, three children are kindly told that they can't go up the ladders. They run off to join a game of tag, with other children enjoying that pass time, that children have played since time begun.

A group of Rastafari – men, women and children – join the gathering. They hail the Elder, who returns the greeting of welcome. After a short prayer between them, three of them,

with bass, funde and kete drums, begin to play. Children soon gather round; a few begin to dance. Adult heads begin to nod; a few bodies are seen swaying. The Elder gives thanks for their contribution.

He gives thanks also, for the young people of the youth project where he delivers workshops, as he observes them encouraging the younger ones, to join in the creative process.

Teachers from the technical institute where he was vice-principal and members from the art society that he presided over, are giving informal art workshops in painting, to those who want to develop their artistic skills.

Throughout the day, former students, mentees, supporters and fans, come to pay their respects to the Elder. Watching this intermittent parade, reminded me of followers of religion, receiving blessings from a revered priest.

Three little children, coming across rolls of paper streamers, pick them up and run with them; caught in the gentle breeze, we see an enchanting quivering of indigo, turquoise and cherise. While laughing and enjoying the spectacle, an adult guards the remaining streamers!

Where there are people, there is food. Due to donations – from the public and from private sources - received since the last day of creation, the assembled can help themselves to either fried bread, shark and pineapple slices; mango, in hot pepper and lime; or mashed potato, with garlic and sweet tamarind sauce: and roti, always roti. An alcohol free zone during the days of creativity, the city square gathering offers peanut punch, sorrell or coconut water. Happy with the culinary delights, the children vocalise their pleasure..

"As we love chickpeas in roti,
We love these painting parties;
We love Atinuda.

Boys: He brings magic
Girls: We bring imagination
Boys: He brings patience
Girls: We bring respect
Boys: He brings wisdom
Girls: We bring eagerness.

As we love crab and dumplings in curry,
We love these painting parties;
We love Atinuda."

As if adding his colour to the kaleidoscope, a yellow oriole alights on the wall. The oriole is the national bird of Atinuda, which is one reason why there are two yellow stars in the middle of their flag, which also contains red, green and black. Like the children, he also raises his voice in praise; the melody he brings, is perfect accompaniment to the Rasta drumming. So while the little one sings, a hush falls over the the gathering: even the children stop their play to listen and the drummers, also caught up in the beauty of the moment, put their drums aside, to listen to a fellow musician. At the conclusion, the spell is broken and the sound of joyful humanity returns. The Elder of Atinuda says another silent prayer, giving thanks for all that he sees and hears.