

From Slavery to Steelbands



It was the heroic and bloody struggle of people of African descent in the Caribbean, North America and South America to win their freedom, which helped to abolish the **Transatlantic Slave Trade**. From the beginning they fought for their freedom with uprisings, plots, running away or simply burning down the slave system to a stand still. The most significant blow was the 1791 **Haitian Revolution** when freedom was won by an African slave army led by **Toussaint L'Ouverture** in Haiti.



The first victims of the murderous European slave trade were the original peoples of the region, the **Amerindians**. These were the fierce **Caribs** or **Kalinago** and the **Arawaks** or **Taino**. They suffered extermination caused by slavery on sugar plantations, disease and genocide for land. By 1618 the Carib and Arawak peoples and their culture had been effectively wiped off the face of the earth.

The European colonists badly needed a source of cheap labour to work the lucrative slave-run plantations of the Caribbean. The Spanish, French, British, Portuguese and Dutch decided on the same solution. They went to Africa. Men, women and children were abducted, imprisoned, beaten, enslaved and put on ships to make the horrific journey chained together and stacked like sardines in the bellies of the slave ships. Many died of sickness, murder and suicide. The Atlantic sea between Africa and the Caribbean was known as the **Middle Passage** and is the watery graveyard for many souls.

Trinidad became a plantation slave society. The African population of Trinidad consisted of many tribal groupings or "nations" from all over West and Central Africa. But African culture in Trinidad was dominated by the **Yoruba**. With a strong culture they came late to the Caribbean slave islands. The Yoruba dominated the religious, cultural and artistic life of the Africans in Trinidad.

The Yoruba religion followed in Trinidad was called **Shango** (or today **Orisha**). Shango drummers were very accomplished and were always in demand as secular musicians. The peoples of African descent in Trinidad practised their religion culture and

music against overwhelming oppression from the plantation slave owners and the Christian church. For this reason as in the rest of the Caribbean the music, religion, language, food, and culture of West Africa was always practised secretly and used as an uplifting resistance weapon against the slave system and its demoralising effect on identity and self worth.

Drums in Trinidad were used for musical entertainment, to celebrate important occasions like births, marriages and deaths and the rich culture of dancing and masquerade like the **Bele**, **Bongo** and **Limbo** dances along with the **Kalenda** stick fighting. Drums were also used to transmit messages in their constant plans and schemes to win their freedom. The plantation slave owners feared the power of the drums.

