

Carnival in Latin America

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CLACS Resource Packet for Educators

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What is Carnival?

Carnival, or carnaval in Spanish and Portuguese, is one of the most vibrant and culturally significant celebrations in Latin America. Rooted in a mix of European, religious, indigenous, and African traditions, it has evolved to represent the diversity and creativity of its people. This guide provides an overview of the history, traditions, and cultural impact of Carnival to help educators engage and teach students about its rich heritage.

What is Carnival?

Carnival celebrations have roots in Italy and ties to the Catholic Church. The word “carnaval” stems from the Latin phrase carne levium that means to remove meat. The time from Christmas to Ash Wednesday is one of celebration where people use up all their meat and oil in preparation for the more solemn and reflective Lenten season.



Carnaval Math and Science

Mardi Gras, French for Fat Tuesday, is the last day of this celebratory season and thus the last day of Carnaval. The date depends on Easter. Originally, Easter was the Sunday after the Jewish feast of the Passover. That date changed depending on the lunar cycle but was complicated by the Jewish calendar not always being in sync with the lunar calendar. Thus, Christian leaders couldn't always predict a certain date and would have to wait for rabbis to announce it. Finally, Christians decided that Easter would always be the first Sunday after, but not on, the Paschal full moon which is the first full moon on or after the spring equinox. However, that day can be determined in different ways. There is the astronomical spring equinox which changes each year. March 21st is known as the calendrical spring equinox.

Pope Gregory XIII developed the Gregorian calendar, which uses a solar dating system with 365 days and 12 months. Used today, across the globe for secular life, it has Easter as the first Sunday after the Paschal full moon which is the first full moon on or after March 21st. Thus, Easter falls between March 22nd and April 25th.

Once Easter's date is determined, count backwards six weeks to get to the first Sunday of Lent. Then count back to the Wednesday before that first Sunday of Lent which is Ash Wednesday. The day before is Mardi Gras or Carnaval.

[How are the dates for Easter, Palm Sunday, and Ash Wednesday determined?](#)





Carnaval remains a powerful symbol of cultural resilience and public expression. In recent years, it has also served as a platform for reclaiming public spaces and addressing social issues. Most Latin American countries have at least one day set as a legal holiday for Carnaval.

Carnaval in Brazil

Brazilian carnival celebrations blend African, indigenous, and European influences. Carnaval in Brazil is a weeklong festival. Traditions include parades, costumes (fantasias), masks (mascaras), and Samba dancing. Cities and neighborhoods have parades (desfiles) with decorated floats (carros alegoricos), Samba groups (escolas de samba) with musicians and dancers, including a Baiana, or group of women dancers dressed in traditional colonial period clothing of Afro-Brazilian matriarchs. They perform in the Sambadrome which is the area along a street or alley and usually has bleachers or some type of seating for an audience. Parades may have blocos or groups of people from a neighborhood or organization that wear similar outfits.



Carnaval in Brazil

In Italy, home of the Catholic Church and the Lenten traditions, the Carnevale was celebrated with elaborate costumes and masks. Masquerade allowed for freedom, celebration, and expression. However, only the wealthy could afford the very elaborate and expensive costumes.

The Catholic Portuguese colonizers brought Carnaval to Brazil where African traditions were incorporated. Parading to ward off bad spirits is an African tradition as was using feathers for masks and costumes during celebrations to symbolize rebirth and the rise of spirits. While masks allowed a temporary escape from reality, they also provided a means to protest and criticize.

The costumes of European traditions were not only expensive, they were heavy which matched the climate of February in Italy, Spain and Portugal. Brazil, however, is in the southern hemisphere so February is summer with lots of sun and high temperatures. Costumes began to use lighter and less material and over time evolved into mainly large and fancy headdresses and tails with feathers and beads for women. However, the colonial dress of Afro-Brazilian women is also a common outfit at Carnaval.



Carnaval in Brazil

Initial traditions the Portuguese brought included throwing paint, flour, eggs and water at people. This often led to violence and eventually gave way to traditions of costumes and dancing. Eventually, samba became the focus of carnivals around the country.

Common Carnaval street foods include:

Pão de queijo - cheese bread

Espetinho - grilled meat on a skewer

Podrão - hamburger

Feijoada - bean and pork stew often served with rice

Brigadeiros - similar to chocolate truffle confections



Links about Carnaval in Brazil

[Top 50 Rio Carnival Floats Samba School Parade](#) - Carnaval Carioca in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Samba performances and colorful costumes that take over the city for the biggest carnival in the world.

[Carnaval Samba Parade](#)

[Rio Neighborhoods](#)

[Brazilian Carnival for Kids](#)

[Carnival Celebrations for Kids](#)

[Carnival History](#)



Samba

The Samba dance derives from a ritual Candomble dance. Candomble is an African-based religion in which the enslaved Africans also incorporated indigenous and Catholic religious traditions.

Samba fused different cultures and traditions from the 20th century Brazilian working class which included people of Polish, African, Roma, and Russian Jewish descent. Samba is an expression of spirituality, joy and resistance and was outlawed in Brazil until 1917.

Soon after legalization, Samba was incorporated into Carnaval festivities. In the 1920s, the first Samba Schools developed having its roots in one of the Carnaval blocos which was an informal Carnaval street group. Samba Schools served as a place for musicians and dancers to develop their art. They also served, and continue to be, as a place of community, support and opportunities for people living in poor and marginalized areas.

Links to More Info:

- [Black in Brazil: Once Banned, Samba Now Part of Country's National Identity](#)
- [NPR Brazilian Believers of Hidden Religion Step Out of Shadows](#)
- [NPR Samba School Outrage Points to Carnival's Murky Financial History](#)
- [BBC Brazil's Samba Schools Go Political as Funding Cuts Bite](#)
- [History and Traditions of Rio Carnival Costumes](#)



The Samba musical director (Mestre da Bateria) uses a whistle (apito) to cue the musicians similar to a drum major in marching bands. The bateria is the percussion section which includes:

- Agogo - handbell type instrument from West Africa used in samba and capoeira.
- Surdo - large bass drum that anchors the samba beat
- Caixa - snare drum played snare side up
- Tamborim - hand-held frame drum played with a flayed stick and provides the most complex patterns of the samba rhythm.
- Pandeiro - hand held frame drum with bells around.
- Ritmista - Male dancer who performs intricate steps while also playing a drum.
- Raina da Bateria - Queen of Percussion who is the principal female dancer at the head of the Bateria

The dance section is led by a male and female couple. Mestre-sala is the male dancer who accompanies the female flag bearer (porta-bandeira). Both dance while presenting the flag.



Samba Schools in Rio



Carnaval in Rio de la Plata Region

Murga

Murga combines theater, dance and music for a lively street performance. Rooted in Cadiz Spain, the cultural expression incorporated other European and African music and dance in what are now Uruguay and Argentina.

It was very popular in working-class, immigrant neighborhoods and included African drumming, calls of street vendors and melodies of popular songs. In Argentina, murgas are performed during carnival parades. Murga in Uruguay involves a greater variety of musical instruments beyond the bombo, tambor and cymbals of Argentine murga. Usually, the performances are more formal and elaborate theater productions in Uruguay.

Satire, social and political criticism are key components of today's murga. Murgistas are not professional performers but rather people in the community. It's their lived experiences that help place every day life in the larger sociopolitical context.

Comparsa

Carnaval or street bands in Argentina and Uruguay. They have roots in African music and are greatly influenced by the Samba traditions and Brazilian samba schools

Murga Video

[CNN Murgas: A musical tale of two cities](#)

[Murgas, a practice that protects memory](#)

[The Murga Generates Identity](#)



Carnaval in Rio de la Plata Region

Argentina

The carnaval in Gualeguaychú, Argentina is the longest in the country. Every weekend from January to March there are corsos, or weekend parades, with costumes, drums and dancing. Children often spray people with foam. In the 1970s, the military dictatorship removed the designation of public holiday for carnaval, effectively outlawing it. Since carnaval celebrations often had social and political commentary and critical undertones, the authoritarian government feared that large gatherings could be used to mobilize opposition against their regime. Not until 2011 was Carnaval reinstated as a national holiday.



Uruguay

Lasting over 40 days, Montevideo's carnaval is the longest carnaval in the world. It includes parades and performances of murga, dance and music. In the mid-18th century, enslaved people were given a day to celebrate their cultural identity which included Candomble traditions. After abolition, the celebrations continued and eventually a fusion of Candomble and traditional Uruguayan music evolved. These sounds are central to Uruguay's Carnaval.

More about
[Uruguay Carnaval](#)



Carnaval in Colombia

Recognized by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, the carnival in Barranquilla, Colombia is the second largest in the world. During the colonial period, the city of Barranquilla became one of the country's busiest trading centres and a place where European, African, and indigenous peoples and cultures converged. As such, different cultural traditions blended to create a carnival with dances including the mico y micas, the African congo and the Spanish paloteo; music, including cumbia, and; folk instruments such as different drums, maracas, and claves. In addition to many drum ensembles, carnival includes groups playing a variety of wind instruments. Head ornaments and animal masks adorn dancers, actors and singers. Theatrical and musical performances may be based on historical or current events including satire of socio-political figures and issues.



[UNESCO: Carnival of Barranquilla](#)
[Colombia Travel: Carnival of Barranquilla](#)



Carnaval in Bolivia



UNESCO designated the carnaval in Oruro, Bolivia to the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity list. The Uru people are indigenous to the city and its carnaval celebrates its religion and traditions. As in other parts of the region, carnaval provided opportunities for Indigenous and Africans to conceal their traditions in Christian liturgy.

- [UNESCO Carnival of Oruro Intangible Heritage](#)
- [UNESCO Carnival of Oruro](#)
- [Carnival in Oruro Bolivian Life](#)

Oruro sits 3,700 meters in the mountains. The sacred site for the Uru people was resettled by the Spanish and became an important mining area. The Uru traveled long distances to perform their rituals especially for the Ito festival. The Spanish banned the ceremonies but the Uru transformed their gods to be Christian icons and saints.

The traditional llama llama or diablada in worship of the Uru god Tiw became the main dance at the Carnaval of Oruro. Today's carnaval includes over 28,000 dancers and 10,000 musicians walking the processional route for 20 hours. Medieval mystery plays are performed. Masks, textiles and embroidery are highlights of the carnaval traditions.

Desertification of the Andean high plateau along with agriculture and mining declining, emigration threatens the Oruro population.



Carnaval in Peru

In Peru, in addition to the large parade spectacles, there are also other traditions in different parts of the country. For example, in Juaja, men cut down a eucalyptus tree and plant it on the main day of the carnival in squares, parks or open spaces in the neighbourhoods. There are orchestras and people go dressed in very pretty clothes from the area. Then a “cortamonte” (mountain cutter), of the neighbourhood dances around the tree and they cut it down with an axe. Whoever cuts it down becomes the godfather of the following year and people come to collect the gifts.

- El carnaval ayuda a reconciliar el espacio publico en latinoamerica
- Carnaval and Cortamonte



Carnaval in Trinidad & Tobago

- [Carnivals Indigenous Origins](#)
- [Smithsonian A Brief History of How Carnival Is Celebrated Around the World](#)



In the late 18th century, as an act of resistance, enslaved Africans set fire to sugar cane since sugar was a valuable export for the colonizers. Percussive music of African origins played on drums to empower them in the act of defiance. A dance that resembled stick fighting was also part of the ceremony. This ritual known as Canes Brûlées, later became known as Canboulay. Claiming they were violent, British colonizers outlawed sticks and drums in an attempt to ban Canboulay. This led to the Canboulay Riots. Steel pan drums and bamboo instruments were adapted to circumvent the ban.

Canboulay later evolved into Carnaval which is a celebration of culture and resistance. Many of the historic accounts and evidence related to Carnaval came from documents of the colonizers. As with other countries in the region, the history, significance and traditions of the Indigenous and Africans were passed down orally and through learning and experience. Today's carnaval has three main elements known locally as “pan, soca and mas”, which stand for steel pan groups, soca/calypso music, and masquerade which is a cast of traditional characters in costume.



Carnaval in Mexico

In Mexico's carnivals people dress in costumes and masks usually to satirize power groups including landowners and politicians. The Veracruz Carnaval includes the burning of the bad mood or Quema del mal humor. An effigy of a figure, such as COVID-19 in 2022, is captured, brought to the zocalo for trial and then burned to get rid of all its bad energy. Singing and dancing commence. After the Queen of the Carnival is coronated, she then crowns the Ugly King. Parade floats include paper mache figures, bright colors and flowers as well as the groups of dancers.



Veracruz lives for carnaval



Additional Resources

- [Hispanic Outlook](#)
- [Carnival Music](#)
- [El Carnaval En America Latina](#)
- [Cómo se celebra el Carnaval en América Latina?](#)
- [Carnaval en América Latina](#)

