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Calypso music : identity and social influence : the Trinidadian experience

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Conclusion

Limitations

This study has been driven by my personal experience growing up and becoming a musician in Trinidad. The way I have acquired my insights into calypso can impossibly be fully reconstructed afterwards. I have sought to complement my knowledge by studying the literature, by analyzing the music and by doing a survey. However, none of this can be considered definite evidence of my propositions.

The aim of this study has been to demonstrate that calypso is not merely a reflection of Trinidadian cultural history but that it has been an instrument of social and cultural transformations as well.

The Role of Calypso

I have attempted to make this plausible by showing that the calypso genre has fulfilled the following roles in Trinidad society:

1. AS 'VOX' POPULAR IT HAS BEEN ONE OF THE MAIN VEHICLES BY WHICH NEWS, SOCIAL COMMENTARY AND REDRESS IS DISSEMINATED, AND AS A RESULT IT HAS BECOME A SOURCE OF INFORMATION AND ENTERTAINMENT, AND AN INTEGRAL PART OF EVERYDAY LIFE.

Over time such types of recurrent behavior become the building blocks of the identities by which groups are defined, and by which individuals grow susceptible to suggestions and inclined toward unified action. I refer to the following theories and posits as arches of support:

- The social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978, 1981, 1982) and the self-categorizing theory (Turner, 1987) which share the common posit that the identities formed by individuals reflect group membership. Group membership in turn defines the relationship between individuals and the culture from which they derive the shared identity meanings of the group;
- Smith-Lovin's (1988) successful argument that a range of social identities is used by people to represent how they envision themselves in interaction. The argument is congruous with findings from research by Stryker and Serpe (1982) that have linked role patterns with internalized meanings of individuals;
- The affect control theory (Heise, 1979; Smith-Lovin and Heise, 1988; MacKinnon, 1994), the central premise of which proposes that people act to maintain alignment of their

identity meanings with the impressions created by local social interaction, either through actions or reinterpretations of events. The theory has also shown that identity meanings act as reference signals to control behavior, and that they are represented symbolically by cultural artifacts such as books, films, language, food, and music.

It has been demonstrated in this study that the text of certain calypsos and the images conjured up by those texts have been designed to influence collective choreographed behavior and unified thought among audiences and practitioners alike, as exemplified by the use of instructional slogans such as in *Limbo Like Me*, *Wine Yuh Waist Mama*, and *Follow The Leader* to elicit choreographed dance movements while playing mas, at fêtes, or during aerobic and gymnastic class sessions; redress calypsos that address disparity, and solicit solidarity, as was successfully accomplished by the Mighty Sparrow's *Calypso Boycott* (p. 66); and the respective deliberate instances of the incorporation of calypsos, first by the Carnival Improvement Committee in 1939 to eulogize Trinidad in order to boost tourism (p. 50), and by the UNC government in the 2000's to encourage support and demerit their opponents during pre-election campaigns. These strategies are congruous with Patton's (1994) notion of social text since the texts, the performers, and the performances themselves when delivered in front of specific audiences, conjure images and elucidate symbols which create meaning for those audiences via "symbolic performance" (p. 56).

This process is also referred to by rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke (1966, 1968), who has shown that language can be used as a means of creating unity and corporation through its interaction in social and rhetorical contexts. According to Burke, language becomes "verbal parallels to a pattern of experience" and the symbolic act becomes greatest "when the artist's and the reader's [listener's] patterns of experience closely coincide" (p. 152-156).

In Trinidadian society this concept holds true because the patterns of experience of the calypsonian and those of his/her local audiences coincide. This feature has been consistent among the works of all calypsonians throughout the evolution of the genre because they have always come from the same cultural milieu as their audiences and have both shared similar socio-political experiences. An example is *ragga soca* which came into vogue during the late 1990's, and is a blend of Jamaican dancehall music and jargon (Patois or broken English), or as referred to by Leung (2009), Jamaican Creole English and Trinidad soca rhythms. Two prominent artistes, Bunji Garlin and Maximus of the younger generation of grassroots milieu, popularized the genre which was instantly embraced by young audiences and by grassroots audiences in both Trinidad and Jamaica. Leung has described the new genre as "an

innovation that uses JCE features in systematic ways to negotiate and index a specific experience and identity of the Afro-Trinidadian underclass” (p. 509).

The ingredients that hybridized the two parent genres present images and symbols with which both contingents identify; those ingredients constitute the pulse of both the young generation of West Indians and the marginalized peoples of the Caribbean basin – the underclass. In the tradition of calypso and reggae, Jamaican dancehall and ragga soca have provided marginalized peoples of the Caribbean with a voice. Both genres have been attracting the attention of global audiences who may or may not have experienced repression and/or social displacement; audiences comprised of the younger generation particularly those with ancestral ties to the Caribbean, but not excluding contingents from ‘foreign’ cultures since both genres have become pop culture via assimilation and social media.

Stokes’ (1997) argument that music is meaningful because it provides means by which people recognize identities and places, and the boundaries that separate them, can now be reiterated in support. “Musical performance”, he writes, “as well as the acts of listening, dancing, arguing, discussing, thinking and writing about music, provides means by which ethnicities and identities are constructed and mobilized” (p. 5).

2. AS SOCIAL TEXT IT HAS CHRONICLED MAJOR EVENTS, HAS PRESENTED MEANINGFUL SYMBOLS BY WAY OF ITS RHETORIC AND PERFORMANCE, AND IT HAS BROUGHT ABOUT AWARENESS AMONG THE GENERAL PUBLIC, STIMULATED DIALOGUE, AND TO SOME DEGREE, HAS FOSTERED A SENSE OF EMPOWERMENT AMONG THE REPRESSED MASSES.

However, by merely documenting events and exposing social injustice, the calypso falls short of having effected change. It is by its alignment with the machine that has constantly and consistently resisted cultural repression that it has exerted a significant degree of persuasion.

3. AS AN ARM OF THE ARSENAL THAT ROSE UP TO REPUDIATE COLONIAL IDEOLOGY IT BECAME AN AGENT OF SOCIAL INFLUENCE AND CHANGE.

As has been shown by literature cited in this study, (1) state powers have consistently sought to consolidate control and rule by suppressing cultural manifestation, especially when it is expressed by the masses (St. John, see chapter 1), (2) conversely, social change and struggle for cultural ascendancy usually involves some degree of intergroup interaction and confrontation, and (3) the calypso genre has been, from its inception, imbedded in the conflict between repressive regimes and the socially repressed Jamette sector of Trinidadian society (Elder, Liverpool, Hill, Rohlehr, see chapter 4).

Elder (1998) emphasizes the functions of the genre mentioned above, as a transmission of its ancestor, the calinda, which is still re-enacted during present day carnival celebrations.

Cannes brulees, (Canboulay) is basically a ceremony symbolizing cane burning that Africans in Trinidad devised to celebrate their freedom from slavery in 1838...a symbolic ceremony in which its psychological images take various forms and are manifested in a variety of artistic behaviors - music-making, poetics, vernacular languages, dramatics, dance, and other acrobatic gestures...it is a ceremonial protest...with roots in several identifiable West African tribal rites. (p. 38)

All the symbolic icons and activities that represent defiance of colonial ideology are displayed during canboulay. Included among them are the *flambeaux* (torches), the drum and drumming, the blowing of the bull horn, songs of defiance (calindas), stick-fighting, the wearing of masks, masquerade processions, erotic dancing and postures, the portrayal of African royalty, and satirical portrayals of Europeans.

4. AS A CULTURAL TRANSMITTER, IT HAS BEEN INTEGRAL TO THE CONSTRUCTION AND MAINTENANCE OF MULTIPLE IDENTITIES.

Its voice has been heard loudest and most clearly at every juncture of the carnivalesque arena; there, all the identities that have been constructed and maintained over centuries are displayed and performed. The identity theory (Stryker, 1980, 1987; Stryker and Burke, 2001) states that “identities are internalized role expectations”.

It has been accepted that in the most general scenario identities serve as behavioral guides for individuals. Turner’s (1987) social identity and self-categorization theories have established that group identity is displayed in symbols such as flags, monograms, uniforms, slogans, music and so on.

The loudest expressions of calypso music have come via its association with carnival. They become audible and visible at that time, and unlike on any other occasion the genre is given total license then. Or rather, it assumes total license, thereby impacting Trinidadian society in its entirety through participation in or abstinence from the associated festivities of the carnival ritual. All the behaviors exhibited at carnival time can be correlated to the foregoing identity theories outlined in chapter 3. They can also be corroborated by a perusal of the functions of the genre outlined in chapter 4.

Some of the identity theories presented in chapter 3 share the underlying posit that the cognitive-emotional process which shapes the social identities of individuals and the collective identity of groups (the ‘we-ness’), creates a ‘state’ of readiness and commitment to

unified action and susceptibility to suggestion. Moscovici (1976) has proposed that the function of social influence is to maintain social control and that every person must have the same values, norms, and judgment criteria (p. 17). He has shown that “such cohesion and attraction strengthens the degree of influence” (ibid).

Calypso and Social Influence

It follows therefore that race, ethnicity, cultural supremacy, and social status can be considered strong indicators of the salience of processes of social influence. The context of the term ‘social influence’ as used in this study has been twofold and refers to:

- any change of opinion or behavior collectively exhibited by one group, and
- any behavior collectively engaged in by individual members of one group, that is a consequence of the actions of individuals or members of another group.

Taken in this context, it becomes clear that social influence and social control are reciprocal processes, as supported by the literature. This study has repeatedly shown that over time attitudes have changed toward calypso, and because of calypso. The anti-social stigma that once characterized it has been removed and calypso has ascended to the status of national music of Trinidad and Tobago. The once considered ‘outcasts of society’, the Jamette sector, influenced an entire nation into adopting the calypso genre as the collective expression of Trinidadian culture, a process fraught with conflict. Through innovation and persistence, they produced several unique indigenous cultural artifacts that have helped to propagate calypso music. In tandem, the cultural artifacts, the steel drum, the carnival ritual, the calypso and soca genres have continued to create symbols by which the polyglot Trinidadian society and its citizens have been and continue to be identified with internationally. History has documented that, despite extensive organized socio-cultural repression institutionalized by Europeans and successive powers and perpetrated against the peoples along the African diaspora, certain formalized socio-cultural practices and traditions among Africans have not been eradicated. Furthermore, those practices and traditions have been transmitted to the descendants of this diasporic global community, thereby becoming a source of empowerment that has enabled them (Africans and African descendants) to reconstruct their lost identity, to construct and maintain new identities, to attain upward mobility, to influence assimilation, and to become the cornerstones of the arsenal that had risen to rebel against and repudiate colonial ideology.

The calypso art form as it had been defined and redefined during the colonial period has crystallized but has not been lost. The multi-faceted functions which it once served,

celebration, blame, ridicule, humor, entertainment, disseminator of news and gossip, form of livelihood, and festivity have remained intact. The order of salience of those functions has changed and festivity has become paramount. This has occurred with the ascendancy of party soca and its derivatives in an era when visual stimulation has gone viral. In tandem with the imagery and exoticism displayed at carnivals around the world, soca music has become one of the main agents of persuasion, or rather, enticers of cultural assimilation and ethnic unification. I substituted enticers for agents of persuasion because the processes of syncretism, assimilation and acculturation are not effected by force. This is also in keeping with the model for group and individual relations in culturally plural societies developed by Sommerland and Berry (1970), and Berry (1974, 1980), which have established the four options – assimilation, integration, segregation-separation and de-culturation – and have helped to provide a framework for research on intragroup relations (Berry, 1976; Berry, Kalin and Taylor, 1977; Berry, Wintrob, Sindell and Mawhinney, 1982).

One essential feature that has been observed in the ‘new’ contact zones that have been emerging in this post-modern era is related to the direction that the flow of influence has taken. During the colonial period, the displaced peoples were forced to assimilate Eurocentric culture whereas Europeans were free to choose one of the options outlined above. In the post-modern era the flow has been reversed and the once displaced, and in many ways still displaced peoples, by asserting their identities, have become the source of influence. The identities they have forged are autonomous and not guided by the perceptions and expectations of outsiders. The acceptance and assimilation of their expression by the dominant, and contingent cultures with which they interact is not coerced.

This study has shown that calypso has not merely reflected the social consciousness of Trinidadian society, but that as rhetorical oral performance it is a constitutive act (Baumann 1975) which provides alternate patterns of persuasion and social influence, and symbols, images, or identity meanings that present means by which identities are individually and collectively constructed and mobilized. Burke (1966) has referred to the images that rhetoric provides as verbal parallels and has stated that rhetoric is confined to that which is “designed to elicit a ‘response’ of some sort...it helps to form attitudes” (p. 174). What has been emphasized is that the goal of rhetoric is persuasion.

Calypso and Conflict

The study has also demonstrated that calypso music has not merely been a backdrop to the socio-cultural, ethnic and political conflict that had ensued but was at times at the center of that conflict. It must be remembered that stick fighters had fought in defense of ‘yards’ or ‘gayapes’ and as was customary, calinda songs were sung during such encounters. The burning of cane fields by slaves in Trinidad was an act of sabotage during which the perpetrators sang songs of defiance in coded language and danced the calinda – the song, dance and competition being of a confrontational nature. The song *Joe Talmana* even eulogized the leader of the 1881 insurrection in which the battalion comprised of stick fighters fought against Captain Baker, the then-chief of police and the authorities. These events demonstrate the degree of unity and solidarity among the ranks of the batonniers and the function of their music form as part of the arsenal that challenged the British Crown Colony.

That their songs had been customarily sung in coded African dialect and continued to be sung in the coded language Creole, that they were accompanied by drums which had been banned, that their function was to bolster their fighters, insult, threaten and intimidate their rivals, was interpreted as unveiled defiance by and against the authorities; hence the suppression of many forms of African expression and the right of assembly. As this study has also shown, the spirit of defiance and confrontation was transmitted to calypso via the calinda, and similar subsequent repressive and sometimes harsher measures were extended to it as well. The fact that calypsos were relentlessly employed and had enabled forms of redress and protest to be leveled against the colonial and subsequent repressive regimes has identified the genre as an integral part of the mechanism that sought to repudiate ideologies and accompanying breaches of humanity perpetrated by those agencies.

The features that have been outlined speak to the related function of the two song styles (calinda and calypso) and the unbroken line of cultural continuity between them. As has been demonstrated, both cultural continuity and function have been linked to the identity theories that have been presented in support of the positions taken.

As a tool of empowerment, calypso performance enabled the Negro male to reassert his ‘lost’ masculinity, the chantwel and the stick fighter to assert their combative prowess, the ex-slave to redefine his identity and gain cultural dominance, and women to challenge and change

chauvinistic mechanisms and stereotypes of the male dominated society. As a result, alternate collective attitudes and behaviors have become socialized.

Calypso music has survived the onslaught of repression mainly because it had continued to be a main voice of open resistance to repression, had become an important source of cohesion among opposing contingents during the unification of society, and because it had remained integral to the daily activities and social institutions within the grassroots mainstream. As those activities and social institutions became socialized, calypso music and some of its associated practices acquired mainstream acceptance while at the same time, ambivalence toward them diminished. Calypso music in all its forms has been inducted into the national theatre of Trinidad and several other islands, particularly those once considered to be part of the French and British Caribbean. The music form has continued to remain a symbol for, and the principal cultural expression of the peoples of that region, at home and abroad.

History has revealed that the calypso genre evolved from its position at the bottom of the socio-cultural ladder that had once defined the habitat of the Jamette sector of Trinidadian society, to become the dominant cultural expression of that nation. It was the repressed expression of an oppressed people, a people who resisted, endured and overcame the yoke of oppression that had been imposed upon them for centuries by way of colonial imperialism. As has been shown, the fight for the elimination of disparity, the repudiation of imposed ideology, the eradication of social and racial prejudice, social ascendancy and the assertion of identity in pluralistic societies especially in the face of repression always involve conflict. Perusal of the historical chronology presented in this study has revealed numerous incidents that substantiate the forgoing claims.

If one is to accept therefore the validity of the evidence that has been documented by way of historical fact, as an example Elder's report discussed in chapter 1, and if one is to accept the argument advanced by Nettleford (2003, p. 138-139) in the same chapter, then the political process of the repressive regimes did not impede the role of the calypso as an identifying force or as an agent of social influence in Trinidad nor among the other diasporic Afro-based communities within the boundaries of the Caribbean.