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Calypso music : identity and social influence : the Trinidadian experience
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Summary

This study, *Calypso, The Trinidadian Experience*, has sought to establish links between calypso music and the construction and maintenance of identities, and to locate the genre as a mechanism (or as part of a broader mechanism) that has exerted on-going social influence within Trinidadian society and by assimilation within global communities. It has chronicled the evolution of calypso music from its emergence in Trinidad to recent times, and has highlighted contingent institutions, peculiar traditions, and salient trends and events that have shaped the socio-political and cultural landscape there during the colonial and post-colonial periods.

The study is descriptive and explorative, and follows an interdisciplinary route that has integrated historical fact, socio-anthropological philosophy, psychological theory, post-colonial study, and musicological and ethnomusicological axioms. The study has also contemplated and incorporated thought that has become generally accepted theory among some of the interrelated disciplines referenced. It has analyzed a large corpus of written material, and audio/visual recordings of music performance, and participation in calypso and carnival-related events by practitioners and audiences alike.

Although the main foci of the study have been localized to the island of Trinidad, the Caribbean basin where the calypso genre has been prolifically propagated, the lenses of scrutiny have been extended beyond those borders. During the past thirty-five years major changes have taken place, changes that have come by way of hybridization, migration, and changing social dynamics. Some of the ways in which the genre traditionally served its functions within Trinidadian society in the past have changed. For instance, although calypso's function of protest is still extant it no longer informs rebellion. As a result, reliance on the genre's functions as tabloid and vox-popular has diminished.

This is evidenced by poor attendance by Trinidadians at calypso tents which had once been a major forum for social awareness, 'collective effervescence', and entertainment. Patronage at some of the other types carnival shows (Demarche Gras, Kiddies Carnival, and so on) has also been declining. Such outcomes are attributable to one or more of the following reasons:

- The issues which had previously fueled protest (repression, disparity, class-discrimination) are no longer extant or relevant within modern society and therefore the masses have enjoyed a period of complacency and well-being;

- The tastes, pulse, and consciousness of Trinidadian society have changed and therefore other forms of entertainment are being sought;
- The musical style of calypso music is now regarded as old-fashioned and other musical styles are found to be more appealing;
- The younger generation, as is the nature of prodigy, require and demand change and are deliberately innovating compositional devices, and replacing old ones;
- Commercialism, technological advances, and assimilation have ushered change;
- With the emergence of soca and other hybrid genres presently in vogue the function of celebration and dance has superseded storytelling and the kind of topicality of yesteryear.

Calypso music has been superseded by soca music. This hybridized strain which emerged during the mid-1980s, coalesced into several sub-genres (like chutney, groovy soca, and rapso for example) that have been as viable as calypso music. Soca music has been embraced and identified with internationally by people throughout the Anglo, Franco, Hispano and Dutch-Caribbean, and also by peoples of North, Central and South America, Europe, Asia and beyond. There are several reasons for this global identification with soca music by peoples within and as well outside of the 'Trini' in-group, that is to say peoples of other nationalities and ethnicities.

Firstly, one must remember that although Trinidad had been the center stage of the development of calypso, simultaneous degrees of evolution had been taking place in several other countries. Secondly, carnival celebrations have always been a common cultural forum for the peoples of the Caribbean and Central America, and it still remains a major vehicle for the dissemination of its music. This means that the carnivalesque behavior exhibited by those peoples have been internalized; it is part of their cultural identity, they respond to the associated images in a unique way. The images of their culture and their responses to those images have become assimilated among global communities by contingency.

Thirdly, in comparison to calypso, hybridization has been more rampant between soca and other music forms extant among 'zones of contact'. Although they both share features belonging to the West African and *musica criollo* pantheons, soca music more closely resembles music genres such as meringue, samba, punta, poco, and cumbia. As dance music its simplistic duple meter pulse is quite familiar and easily internalized. Additionally, these and other strains referred to, boast several common functions: escape, wanton abandon,

sexual expression, rapture, instrumentation, phrasing, performing style, rhythm, lack of melodic improvisation, and melodic and harmonic minimalism.

The trend of musical interchange has continued as is evidenced by a perusal of reggaeton, the relatively recent genre that has emerged via the integration of elements of the calypso (rhythmic pulse and melodic contour), performance style and jargon of the Jamaican dancehall music culture, and the incorporation of Spanish lyrics. Another hybridized genre that is currently in vogue in Europe is afro-house which has incorporated all the elements of the music forms referenced. Common musical features, products of acculturation, that can be identified among the new hybrid strains are:

- the steady duple-meter downbeat supplied by the bass drum;
- the presence of a recurrent *tresillo* or modifications of it played by the snare drum or another member of the percussion family;
- chant-like melodies repeated within a narrow pitch range;
- sparse lyrical content, and
- limited harmonic range and variation.

This study, then, can be a springboard into the investigation of ways and means by which music systems and music behavior of quite different cultures are being integrated across cultures. Perhaps music and dance can be used to initiate cohesion among contingent ethnicities in global settings given the tendency toward hostilities at ‘zones of contact’. It can also shed some light on the merging of cultures in relation to the formation of new hybrid cultures and artistic innovations such as soca, reggaeton, and afro house for example, and awareness and adaptation of ‘the Other’.

The dissertation begins with an introductory section that outlines the central issues of the study. Here, the thesis question is stated, and the following premises are established: that the calypso genre in Trinidad was not limited to being merely a reflection of the social consciousness of the people, that it was part of the machinery that rose up to repudiate colonial ideology, that it exerted social influence, and that it provided building blocks for identity construction and maintenance. In this section central issues, strategies that will be used to address those issues, and concerns pertaining to limitations are presented.

In chapter 1 an overview of posits that have been advanced by several scholars from disciplines belonging to the field of social science is provided. Also, a chronological perusal

of the socio-historical events that have impacted Trinidadian society is undertaken in order to highlight the backdrop against which the story unfolds.

In the second chapter etymological and anthropological evidence attempts to trace the origins of calypso and further clarifies the relation between calypso and a number of similar music forms that have been simultaneously propagated within the region.

In chapter 3 theories from the fields of psychology and sociology relevant to the construction and maintenance of identity, minority influence, and interaction between groups is highlighted in relation to calypso. This is done in order to provide a springboard that will enable correlations to be made between generally accepted theories in those fields and socialized behaviour patterns peculiar to Trinidadian society.

In chapter 4 the potential of calypso music and its functions are explored within the scope of decolonization and its affiliation to anti-colonial institutions and associated activities. The potential of the art form to articulate, provide meaningful images, maintain identity, and to instigate social reform is discussed.

Change, the perception of change, and factors affecting change and stability are tackled in the fifth chapter, by ethnological inquiry, involving total immersion, silent, aural, and visual observation, dialog, the incorporation of questionnaires, listening and performing sessions, and analysis of a vast corpus of calypso music.

Finally, in the conclusion the findings have been summarized.