**CALYPSO: THE ANATOMY OF CONTROVERSY**

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Calypso fictions and narratives, fantasies and commentaries, venture into vitally important areas of social intercourse which, because of unspoken protocols of civil discourse, remain sensitive areas of darkness. Within the freedom of performance, a space hallowed by tradition, the calypsonian has been able to discuss and comment upon taboo subjects, and in the volatile times in which we live at present, nothing is more explosive than inter-ethnic sexuality. If one wants to measure how far Trinidad and Tobago has progressed—or regressed—along the road to national unity, one needs to monitor the nation’s sound sensors (puns intended) which register increasing decibels of *lacourée* whenever a calypso discusses intimacy between an Afro-Trinidadian male and an Indo-Trinidadian female. Songs about intimacy between the Afro-Trinidadian male and the Indo-Trinidadian female are far more common than those between Indo-Trinidadian males and Afro-Trinidadian females, partly because Afro-Trinidadian male calypsonians far outnumber their Indian ancestry counterparts. [One notes in passing that the handful of women calypsonians—Afro in the main—never discuss inter-ethnic sexuality in song].

The calypso’s treatment of race relations, the most intriguing social phenomenon of post-emancipation Trinidad and Tobago, has elicited widely divergent comments from observers. Dr. John La Guerre (1988:195), the eminent political scientist, has claimed that “before 1956, it can be said that there was relative harmony among the races, notwithstanding the ballads of calypsonians”, but Professor Gordon Rohlehr, the dean of literary studies on the calypso, remarks that since the 1930s, the very ballads have revealed much about masked inter-racial hostility. “Calypsoes about real or imagined affairs between African men and Indian women”, he adds, “tell us very little about the women and much more about the open or secret confrontation of the two ethnoses” (Rohlehr 1990:256). He also remarks that “the ambivalence of the ethnically divided society engenders a humour of race which could scarcely conceal the growing acrimony in the relationship of Afro-Trinidadian and Indo-Trinidadian towards each other” (Rohlehr 1990:498).

Evidence from history indicates that the African and the Indian took or claimed to take offence to the “Other’s” appearance and hygiene. This deep-seated and long-standing prejudice may have taken root in universal human xenophobia and then, watered by the bitter rain of the plantation climate, grew into a mighty tree sheltering all sorts of irrational fears and anxieties and also, it seems, cleverly-engineered and-masked personal ambitions. Despite all the taboos about miscegenation,
however, individuals kept crossing the ethnic divide. Historian Bridget Brereton quotes The Protector of Indians as believing that as late as 1871, "no single case existed among male or female immigrants of cohabitation with an African", a situation easily explained by the view that Indians found Africans to be akin to monkeys.¹ And yet a generation and a half later the Orfy letters testify to the practice of inter-ethnic intimacy (Reddock, 1994:102-103).² By 1933 the dongla woman had made her way into literature via Thomasos's short story of the same name (Reddock 1994:106).³ By contrast the sexually active calypso imagination had only reached the stage of adoration for the East Indian woman, the forbidden fruit wrapped in a tissue of ethnic prohibitions (Atilla's "Dookhanii" 1930). Clearly the society had travelled the long and winding road of sexual fascination before the calypso registered comment on same.

My concern here is with the songs which deal with relations between African males and Indian females because some of these have generated major controversy while those few on Indian male-African female relationships have largely gone unnoticed. The controversies ignited by songs like Shorty’s "Indrani" (1973), Sparrow's "Maharajin" (1982) and Iwer George’s "Bottom in the Road" (1998) illuminate the disturbed state of race relations. The controversies sparked off by these compositions explain the subtexts of the calypsoes themselves. Further, more than the calypsoes, they reveal much of the bitterness secreted beneath the masks of tolerance, although the tendency in much polemical writing is to foxtrot around the main issues.

Indo-Trinidadian prejudice against the African's appearance has been documented (see Brereton 1974 above and also Malik 1971:19-20), and yet Indians objecting to "Maharajin" (1982), for example, hardly said so; it came out in the responses to the letters of complaint. One Lennox Sankersingh of Diego Martin blasted the song for its "absolute contempt towards the value, culture and religion of the Indian community". He interpreted the line "jam you, jam you jam you jam" as reflecting the degree of his resentment towards the song.⁴ Shazaad Mohammed of San Juan felt that Maharajin's naaee and bhoojee are "racial" and that "they are ashamed to see their daughter with a nigger-man."⁵ One wonders if his "they" includes those letter writers who attacked the song. Similarly it took another fearless scribe, one Macdonald James of Couva, to point out that the problem with Iwer George’s "Bottom in the Road" was that it has an Indo-Trinidadian woman, Tantanee, confessing her craving for Creole salt fish, Rawan’s regal rod. According to James, Tantanee also offends grievously by defying the commands of her elder brother who in the Hindu patriarchal scheme of things is a senior member of the family.⁶ The point to all this is that only when the calypsonian sings and controversy erupts does one get a sense of how pervasive are the stereotypes and how strongly people feel about interracial intimacy.

If one were to study the history of public response from "Indrani" to "Tantanee", one can see how the latent atavistic mistrust of an earlier age has degenerated into open ethnic contestation and how this development has transformed the reductive satire of yore into a humourless derision more consistent
with the stocks, the rack and the gallows than with the rites of passage or with the careless—albeit abrasive—Trinidadian *picong* which is reputed to be the mechanism by which the society transforms potentially violent hostility into cleansing laughter.

As far as I know, Shorty’s “Indrani” (1973) was the start of institutionalised protest against calypsoes featuring inter-ethnic intimacy. “Indrani” is a typical double entendre based on the sex motif. An ageing Indo-Trinidadian female nightly besieges a young virile Afro-Trinidadian male for an untranslatable something. Unskilled at Hindi, he manages only to remember the key word “lelo” and this baffles him because “lelo”, as he understood it, contained elements of suggestivity well beyond the woman’s age and respectability. The Pawan Sajeewan Hindu Cultural Organisation objected that this song “denigrated East Indian womanhood” but the Cabinet, to whom the protest was addressed, ruled that the song was not a denigration of any particular group.” One wonders about the perceived denigration. Did it originate in the calypso’s saying that the Indian woman was the aggressor, a heresy to the prevailing Indian “madonna” image?

Nine years later Sparrow’s “Maharajin” (1982) went under the knife from enraged African feminists and Indian purists alike. The Africans, unable to separate the calypsonian from the narrator, were outraged that Sparrow was proposing honourable marriage to an East Indian woman, a form of respect never accorded to the many African subjects of his calypsoes. Fidelity to their cause dictated that they overlook the fact that Sparrow was then and still is happily married to an Afro-Barbadian woman. East Indian purists declared themselves unhappy with the song, but their stated objections did not include their problem with the sexual violation pounded out in the last chronic line “Ah want to jam you, jam you, jam you, jam tonight”. Also, those who objected to “Maharajin” could not bring themselves to find fault with Wanderer’s “Premattee” (1983)—composed by Shorty, transformed from The Love Man into Ras Shorty I—nor Sugar Aloes’s “Roti and Dhalpouri” (1989). Is this because Sparrow, earlier known for his “Mr Rake and Scrape” (1961), “The Village Ram” (1964), “Congo Man” (1965), presented himself as the black ram battering the gentle nymph while Wanderer and Aloes operated within the sexual tradition of courtly love of the medieval romance or the sentimental love ballad of Hollywood or even the hands-off adoration of Atilla’s “Dookhanii”?

All hell broke loose when Iwer George released his “Bottom in the Road” late in 1997. By this time, the government of the day was the United National Congress (UNC), the party with its centre of gravity in the Indian community. Mr Ragbir, Director of Telecommunications, personally called up the many radio stations to re-consider airing the controversial calypso in the light of certain provisions of their licence. Iwer, the self-proclaimed “Bum Bum Master” with a nearly perfect record for ditties praising the delectability of the female posterior, had crossed ethnic boundaries at the worst possible time. Professing to be shocked and hurt by the media ban as by the barrage of letters about Indian-bashing and degrading women, Iwer penned a second song with the same melody in which he alleges that the problem with the first was that its subject was an Indian. For some time *lacakue* reigned gloriously. Rafique Shah, editor of the *TT Mirror*, called for a ban on all bottoms including that of Mrs. Panday, wife of the Prime Minister, who is traditionally one of the
thousands of danskin-clad bacchantes in the masquerade band Poison.9

When everything was said and done—for the while at least—one feels that the truth behind the protest was essentially the same as that to "Indrani" a quarter century earlier: purists were unwilling to accept that the Indian woman could be aggressively pursuing the African man. Such an admission violated the comfortable, convenient stereotype.

It seems easier to accept the stereotype of the African as rapist. Ms. Hulsie Bhaggan the [former] UNC Member of Parliament for Chaguanas, promoted that in 1993 when she claimed that thirteen (13) Muslim virgins—presumably Indo-Trinidadians—had been raped by African men. This accusation exploded on a national community which had been panicked into a state of nervous vigilante alert by the upsurge of banditry. Hardly had the nation settled down when Ms. Bhaggan once again grabbed the headlines when she and a handful of constituents sat on the Solomon Hochoy Highway effectively obstructing free passageway between South and North. Her stated reason for this was an attempt to bring to national attention the water woes of her constituents.

In the calypso season of 1994, several calypsonians exacted a vicarious sexual punishment on her for her actions. Tallish's "Hulsie Want Water" proposed that the country's most eligible spinster needed sexual stimulation and release. Watchman's "How Low" tells of the dismay felt by the hardened prison inmates who, hearing that Ms Bhaggan had vowed to remain in prison until justice was done, had readied themselves for her coming only to hear that she had changed her mind about suffering persecution for justice's sake. Cro Cro luxuriates in the thought of a vicious sexual attack if he had come upon Ms. Bhaggan seated improperly on the high way ("Respect the Law") No one came to Ms. Bhaggan's defence. Was this because she had been declared "a loose cannon" and was ostracised by the UNC patriarchy?

In contrast to marked absence of response to the corrosive and violent calypso statements about Ms. Bhaggan, one has the overreaction to Aloes's single unflattering mention of Mrs. Panday in "Ah Ready to Go" (1998). The only viable explanation for this anomaly is that Hulsie had sinned against the patriarch while Mrs. Panday was tenderly and publicly supportive of him.

In closing, one should consider several developments. Trinidad is segregating by day but integrating by night. Despite all the race talk, mixed marriages are on the increase. "This alone should give us pause. Also, people need to listen to what I call the silent songs, that is those calypsos which no one seems ever to hear or listen to. Everyone thinks that Watchman is a racist, and give as evidence his 1997 Dimanche Gras performance of "Mr. Panday Needs Glasses." Few that remember that on the very night when he gave so much offence with his dramatic presentation of that song, he sang in his "Rise up My People".”

But if a man could marry a woman not his race
And both of them could live as one happy family
And their children play with your children, no disgrace
That is the essence of unity.12

Perhaps we need to revisit the classic silent song, Dougla's prize-winning "Split Me in Two" (1961) to understand how we are
devastating the couples and the issue of mixed marriages. Perhaps we need to listen closely to the calypsoes and not broadcast hasty invective, thus making bad matters worse. Perhaps one day we will thank the Calypsonian for his Calypso which forced us to take a more serious look at ourselves. Shouldering the concealed guilt of an entire nation is hardly an enviable task.

According to the letters cited by Reddock, Orfy alleges evil intent on the part of the offending men. This denial of complicity and consent on the part of the Indian women will be a feature of the Indian response to calypsoes on mixed marriages and the like.

Curiously, the first two short stories featuring a discussion of the East Indian presence are about mixed people. Alfred Mendes’s “Boodhoo” is about a child of an Englishman and an Indian. Was this because the Indian had not yet begun to write about himself?


Shazaad Mohammed, “Indian woman has no sense of humour,” Express, 27 February 1982. 5.


“Hindu group asks PM to ban “Indrani,”” Trinidad Guardian, 9 March 1973: 3.

“Indrani is no insult,” Express, 3 April 1973: 4.

Raffique Shah, “Ban all bottoms from the road ... even Oma Panday’s,” TT Mirror, 7 December 1997: 4. Shah’s article is accompanied by photos of Mrs. Panday gyrating gleefully on her bemused husband.

This came too soon in the wake of his double threat to Sham Mohammed the late former PNM Cabinet minister, who, in the general elections campaign of 1991, had called publicly for an Indian Prime Minister. Cro Cro’s “We Doh Want It” (1992) had threatened to “buss down” Sham’s gate or “romance his woman” to produce a voting population of little midget douglas. In the minds of many, these sentiments confirmed Cro Cro as a racist cursed with violent rapist tendencies.

Watchman is married to an Indo-Trinidadian and in his song he may have been referring to his own domestic situation. Incidentally, Cro Cro, defending himself against charges of racism confesses a past affair with an Indo-Trinidadian paramour. See Debbie Jacob, “Cro Cro: I’m not a racist,” *Express*, 15 February 1996: 5.


La Guerre, John. 1988. “Race Relations in Trinidad and Tobago.” In *Trinidad and Tobago: The Independence Experience*, edited by Selwyn Ryan. UWI, Trinidad: ISER.
