CALYPSO AND CHUTNEY:
PARALLEL DEVELOPMENT AND INTEGRATION

Unanan Persad

After the 1998 Calypso Monarch competition, a furious debate took place about whether some of the calypsos sung at the show were racist, and many people offered various opinions as to whether this was so or not. It appeared that the consensus was that the artform was abused, and several editorials and columnists expressed that opinion. Although a lot of people felt that we were on the brink of racial war, I felt that this was not the case, and expressed the opinion that in the main, Trinbagonians were not really racial. I felt that racism existed amongst a minority of the population, and we had allowed a marginal group of calypsonians to influence public opinion on the race issue.

Two weeks after the debate, I was at the Pigeon Point jetty in Tobago, and while sitting there, I observed an Indo-Trinidadian man walking along the beach with a bag on his shoulder selling something. When he neared the jetty, he was approached by an Afro-Trinidadian male security guard who began to hassle him. At that point, two Afro-Trinidadians who were sitting near me, left the area, and began to argue with the security guard asking why he was interfering with the man who was only trying to make a living. They pointed out that he had come all the way from Trinidad with his knitted hammocks and was offering tourists value for money and in any case he was on the beach front, which was public land, and not trespassing on private property. That simple episode renewed my belief and faith that our country was not on the brink of racial warfare, as I have seen similar numerous circumstances where Indo- and Afro-Trinidadians have stood up and defended each other.

The development of calypso and chutney took place against the existence of two major races from slavery and indentureship up to the present time, with similar interpersonal relationships. Calypso was a product of the frustrations of plantation life under slavery. At the end of a work day, the slaves gathered when they were allowed to and recreated the rhythms of their native Africa with their indigenous musical instruments and makeshift substitutes adapted locally through creativity and innovation. I believe that they may have sung and chanted in their native tongues, until that disappeared, as a result of the forced assimilation into Colonial life and adaptation of English as the language of their newly adopted society. In time the songs were done in English and became the earliest form of calypso.
As the art form became more sophisticated, and as the slave owners recognized the lyrics, the artistes began to disguise their lyrics and to use the medium of the double entendre to poke fun at their masters. With the abolition of slavery and emancipation, social commentary was fine tuned and evolved into what we now know as calypso. In essence, this art form was really a continuous evolution of the culture and traditions that served to entertain, comfort and sustain the psyche of the African peoples in the period of exploitation and dehumanization, having been violently removed from ancient and rich heritages in their native land.

Calypso, with similar developmental patterns, is a product of Indian classical music in the Bhojpuri style. This was the music brought by the Indian indentures from the Gangetic plains of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Those who came were simple country folk who had traditions of song and dance in their culture dating back thousands of years. Indenture was not much different from slavery, as it was also a violent and dehumanizing experience. In their case however, they were allowed to bring their few possessions with them. Musical instruments and religious texts were brought from India to Trinidad during the indentureship period. Because of their religion and language Indians were considered heathens and kept apart from society, and even denied educational opportunities.

In this isolated environment, their religious, cultural and social traditions survived almost intact to this day. Indian classical music was mainly of a religious nature and was adapted from the religious texts; its earliest form was probably the bhajans sung at prayer meetings. Life on the plantation was not easy, and the indentures, like the slaves, gathered in the evenings after work, at weddings, childbirth, death and other ceremonies to socialize and ease their frustration in song and dance. As with calypso, bastardization of the religious lyrics also took place, and they also sang about their masters in a derogatory manner in a language he could not understand, as a form of protest action.

In recent times, some of the religious lyrics have been changed to contain vulgar words, changing the entire meaning and mood of the songs. This is evident in some of the songs at Phagwa festivals, and in the competitive singing between performers on the Saturday night prior to Indian weddings. The music itself, in the main supplied by a harmonium, dholak, and dhantal, was easily adapted to the calypso and now evolving soca music. Sundar Popo was an early proponent of the crossover music, and popularized it with his recordings. The dholak could produce the sound of the African drums and vice versa. The dhantal was the equivalent of the iron man in a calypso rhythm section. Gradually, “soca chutney” as an art form evolved, and the Soca Chutney Monarch Competition attracts both calypsonians and chutney singers. Artistes have themselves crossed the racial divide, and are rated as excellent performers. Sonny Matthews and Cecil Fonrose are highly rated Indian classical singers; Drupatie Ramgoonai and Ricki Jai are rated as good calypsonians.

The historical antecedents to the development of calypso and chutney are basically the same. An oppressed people expressing their frustrations in song and dance and gradually adapting to an alien culture, while at the same time maintaining a hold on their own culture and traditions. Today, there
is debate on whether the art form is abused as certain calypsonians wish to enter another dimension and introduce race as an element of commentary. There must be some reason for this misadventure, and if we examine the historical antecedents to slavery and indentureship, we might escape from some of the myth we embrace that is really an intentional distillation of history to cater to the needs of the Colonial masters, as Lloyd Best argued in a recent article in the Express.

After the abolition of slavery and emancipation, the Africans refused to work the plantations. They had good reason, since it reminded them of beatings, repression and generally bad and inhumane conditions. Most of them migrated to the urban areas, and those who remained on the plantations demanded better pay and working conditions. By this time, the plantation economies were on the wane, and lost productivity had to be restored or the planters would have had to go out of business. The Colonial masters attempted to solve the labour problem by importing Chinese and Portuguese labour to replace the emancipated Africans. These workers were unsuitable for work in the hot sun, and their low productivity brought an end to that experiment. By this time, some of the Africans who migrated to the urban areas could not find jobs, and they began to view immigrant labour as a threat to their own survival.

The British East India Company began to export Indian labour into the West Indies and other British territories to work the plantations in an effort to boost their waning economic fortunes. In effect, scab labour was brought in to break the strike of the former African slaves. It is my opinion that the basis of any decision ultimately lies in some economic considerations. Therefore the suspicion with which the Africans viewed the Indians was warranted to an extent as they saw the indentures as taking bread from their mouth. The colonial powers understood the suspicion and hostility, and exploited it to its fullest potential, putting the races against each other. The planters wanted to make money, the Africans wanted to be paid fair wages, and the Indians were compelled to work at low wages if they intended to buy their passage back to India, a condition of indenture. Each of the participants had an economic stake in the matter.

From 1845 to the present time, much water has flowed under this divisive bridge, and it is my opinion that a majority of Afro- and Indo-Trinidadians understand the circumstances of this accident of history, although many are victims of the myths explaining racial hostility. Our cultures, traditions, music, dance, cuisine have become so intertwined that it is sometimes difficult to make a distinction as to the origins of certain aspects of our society. It is not surprising to find so many interracial marriages, and there is a significant amount of people of mixed blood in the society. In all of the societies with a colonial history and tradition, racial, religious and other divisions continue to be a problem, an inheritance of that system. Recently, evidence of this has been manifested in Indonesia, where after the collapse of the rupia, Muslims are attacking ethnic Chinese, blaming them for their economic misfortune. In Malaysia the situation is the same. In Ireland, Catholics wage war on Protestants. In the Middle East in Iraq, tribal warfare is taking place among Arab brothers. In Africa, Hutus are killing Tutsis and vice versa.

To take us out of this mode, it is incumbent on us to educate the masses to embrace history instead of myth, truth instead of lies, and to understand the political
machinations of our pre-independence existence. It is very easy to be influenced by the bigoted views of a minority when we do not have the proper and correct information at our disposal, and to poison their minds especially in the current economic environment of developing countries. No one race has a monopoly on racism; there are bigots on all sides. I however, like the eternal optimist, firmly believe that the majority of our citizens are honest and decent people who will respect you for what you are, rather than judge you on the basis of your race, religion, colour or class. Let us therefore strive to understand our cultural differences and diversity, and to tolerate each other with unswerving discipline if we are to become a productive and successful nation as we enter the next millennium.