CREOLE AND POST-CREOLE:
THE MUSIC OF CARNIVAL

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We are accustomed to think of calypso as the music of Carnival; but this music itself has different roots. There was the music of the formerly enslaved, the music of the African peoples who came as indentured workers after slavery such as the Yoruba and the Rada; there was the music of the other islands from where many came as immigrants and with which there was significant cultural contact. It must here be remembered that some of the early calypsos were originally “folk songs” of Trinidad and other islands. Also, calypso is strongly rooted in the kalinda stick fight songs which were once very much the music of Carnival. Hence the emergence of the recognisable “Trinidad calypso” and its central place as the music of Carnival were the result of a complex folk pattern, one which indeed defines the Afro-Trinidadian community itself.

The significance and texture of the music in different contexts varies. Its Kalinda roots gave it a powerful rhythmic drive; in the “golden age” between the world wars it was lyrically strong, but musically restrained. Then there is its significance after World War II with the coming of the steel band as the powerful African vibration surged through the streets.

What is here being disclosed is the central place of calypso in the Carnival of the creole mainstream structure which defined Trinidadian society in its entirety. In this mainstream continuum, the Eurocentric was structurally dominant at the top, the Afrocentric oppressed at the base and the Indocentric alienated at the periphery. However, it was the Afrocentric vibe which vitally defined the Carnival, just as its energy vitally defined the society as a whole.

By the time of the rise of the nationalist movement in the 1950s, the African rooted calypso was firmly established as the music of the mainstream Trinidad Carnival. Nationalism was primarily rooted in the aspirations of Afro-Caribbeans. Hence in Trinidad, calypsonians supported the nationalist agenda. There is indeed evidence that the outstanding career of the calypsonian, the Growling Tiger, was destroyed because he dared to sing against Dr. Eric Williams (Gibbons 1994).

Calypso has at times portrayed the Indian negatively (Rohlehr 1990, Constance 1991, Trotman 1991, Puri 1995). This was particularly the case in the early nationalist period when ethnic tension was sometimes
acute. Here may be found parallels with contemporary calypsos that may be termed "racial." However Indians as a group were viewed as peripheral; the main thrust of the calypso engaged intra-African and intra-creole (mainstream) concerns. Calypsos were to go on to attack the nationalist leadership - the Afro-Saxon elite - which betrayed the masses. This was evident in the alignment of some calypsonians with the Black Power movement of the 1970s. Here the key inter-ethnic confrontation was with the white - Eurocentric - elites.

However in the 1980s, the creole structure began to breakdown, which has had critical consequences for the calypso and its place in Carnival. Three characteristics of this post-creole period need to be examined.

(1) an increased dominance by the Eurocentric presence and the rise of a middle class culture;

(2) the increasing presence of the Indian in the society's mainstream and the African response;

(3) the emergence of a distinct Afro-Trinidadian youth culture, one which is in many ways discontinuous with what preceded it.

The increased Europeanisation of the society was symbolised by the coming into power of the National Alliance for Reconstruction (NAR) regime in 1986. While it began as an alliance which collapsed relatively quickly, the NAR was effectively French Creole - Eurocentric - in its orientation and represented a dominant inter-ethnic middle-class culture. The rise of the present genre of ethnocentric "attack calypsos" first really came into prominence when they attacked this regime. Also being witnessed in this post-creole time is the Indian expansion in the mainstream, again symbolised by the election of a new regime - an Indian based government. This process provoked severe attacks on the ethnocentric calypsos. The Indian could no longer be ignored.

These [attack] calypsos are derived from the traditional lyrically strong social commentary calypso. However, the tribalism which characterises this new genre is rooted in the dislocation and ethnic distress which at present defines the African presence on the landscape. Many of these calypsos remain in the framework of the old - now moribund - nationalism with its assumptions that the African ought to govern, that the loss of power was somehow a mistake, a slip, and the Indian is an outsider.

The question arises as to whether these calypsos are racist. Certainly they are tribal (ethnocentric); some are "racial" in that they portray another ethnic group negatively. Now, the nationalist ideology in which many are framed is inherently racist - whatever may have been the intention of its founding fathers. Here state power is held by one group, and this provides the basis for structural separation and exclusion. But it is probably unfair to describe the calypsonians' appropriation of the idiom as racist, as this is now being done from a position of powerlessness and dislocation. However, this generation is to a large extent trapped in the nationalist frame.

This Indian presence is itself defining the music of Carnival. Chutney, which is not seasonal, has established itself in this space. There is as well the pichakaaree songs which though not a part of Carnival space -
traditionally understood - do confront the tribal calypsos. This kind of Indocentric response will probably expand in the years to come, though what precise form it will take is not clear.

However it is the African youth culture which is fundamentally redefining the music of Carnival. Here, the dance hall (dub) space is defining its place. Perhaps far more significant is the manner in which this dance hall space is providing a point of departure for the radical redefining of soca itself. Indeed we may now speak of “traditional” soca and a new kind of youth soca which probably ought not to be called soca at all as it is in a sense fundamentally discontinuous. Indeed, there were greater continuities between the older calypso and soca which basically emerged out of the same culture than there is with the music of the older generation and that of the youth who are to a large extent coming out from a different space. The cutting edge of this movement is the profoundly powerful work of the young genius, Machel Montano.

Also emerging from this youth space is rapso. This form has firm roots in the traditional calypso yet employs a rap-like vocal interpretation. Moreover, in its texture, it is at home in the youth space. Rapso is grounded in Afrocentric consciousness and ideology and possesses a powerful message; yet its musicality is strong. Here, probably, to a very large extent, is to be located the future of the “serious” lyrical calypso. Indeed, the music of this youth culture possesses a primordial African quality, an energy quite capable of subverting the nationalist betrayal. We are witnessing the beginning of a revolution of unimaginable dimensions. Hence, calypso as the music of Carnival is being redefined by the African youth culture; it is also being challenged by the dance hall and chutney spaces. Carnival and its music, like Trinidadian society itself, is an arena where ethnic groups and sub-cultures encounter engage and confront each other.

Perhaps we may here enter the debate surrounding “chutney soca” and “soca chutney.” As regards “chutney soca”, “soca” should perhaps be understood as the noun and “chutney” the adjective; hence this refers to an African form - soca - which is assimilating musical patterns from an Indian form - chutney. Similarly “soca chutney” refers to an Indian form assimilating African patterns. We may identify the nature of these forms from their inherent texture, what Indian aesthetics refers to as bhaao. Hence it is not at all a case of “fusion”. Rather it is ethnic groups encountering and defining each other, yet each defining its own space.

At present, the African is inward looking, seeking to discover [their] own primordial centre. The Indian on the other hand is quite assimilative; hence, in the chutney space, one may readily encounter soca, dance hall and pop. It appears that both ethnic groups are seeking to correct the imbalances of the past when the African was often accommodating to the point of compromise while the Indian was often inward looking to the point of exclusivity and isolation.

Indeed the present scenario calls into fundamental question such terms as “fusion”, “creole” and “doula”. Such language has very often in the past masked racist agendas where one ethnic group sought to dominate others. At best, such terminology belongs to an obsolete analysis. What we do appear to be witnessing is the desire by different distinct ethnic groups to find a home in the Trinidadian
landscape. As they encounter each other in this quest, the Trinidadian possibility will unfold. In this process, it does appear that the arena which is Carnival will continue to play a key role.