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Calypso, Spoken Word and  
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“MY LIFE IS RAPSO”:  
RAPSO AND CULTURAL ACTIVISM  
IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO



*Marisha Duncan*

Identity and music share an inextricable relationship, and in the Caribbean, music has articulated social, cultural, and political narratives of history that affect identity. Music creates spaces for cultural expression and it is central to the mobilisation of persons in social and political movements. Rapso music is recognised as movement-music that supplied suitable soundtracks of resistance during the 1970 Black Power Revolution in Trinidad and Tobago. Rapso is recognised as a musical form of poetry rooted in Afro-Caribbean oral traditions. Rapso music gained public attention through the cultural expressions that echoed the aims of the Black Power leaders and organisers during the 1970s.

An important figure in the development of rapso is Lutalo Masimba, popularly known as “Brother Resistance”. As a young man, he observed the events of the 1970 Black Power Revolution that gripped Trinidad and Tobago society. He was inspired by the growing protest poetry, dub poetry and the Last Poets with a desire to advance “local culutre.” Brother Resistance formed a collective of rapso performers, the Network Riddum Band from East Dry River, Port-of-Spain. He attended Queen’s Royal College and later entered the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus to study economics and history in 1976. In 1992, he was awarded the Hummingbird Medal (Silver) by the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago in recognition of his contribution to the creative arts sector. Brother Resistance currently serves as the President of the Trinbago Unified Calypsonians’ Organisation (TUCO), a member organisation that represents the interests of calypsonians and local musical talent. Since his early years at the University of the West Indies, Brother Resistance has been at the forefront of rapso in Trinidad and Tobago and the world. He is recognised as a talisman of this

musical genre, and his journey as a cultural artist highlights the impact of youth resistance, the function of movement-music and connections shared between music and identity formation.

In this interview, we explore themes of African cultural identities and the role of cultural activism in Trinidad and Tobago. Brother Resistance was interviewed on June 4, 2020 via Zoom video meeting. The interview was transcribed and edited for clarity.

#### RAPSO AND THE AFFIRMATION OF AFRICAN CULTURAL IDENTITIES

**Marisha Duncan:** You are widely regarded as a pioneer and founder of the rapso cultural movement in Trinidad and Tobago. I would like to know what do you think are the early influences that shaped rapso as a genre and how has your personal involvement in this musical artform contributed to its development?

**Brother Resistance:** The first thing is that there is a perception that I started the movement but it is not so. The person and persons we consider to have started the movement is Lancelot "Kebu" Layne; he is believed to be the grandfather of the rapso movement, and Cheryl Byron as the grandmother of the rapso movement. When we say the rapso movement, we are talking about the oral tradition in its recent manifestation, because there was a manifestation before that coming out of the plantation slavery - the experience of the Midnight Robber, Pierrot Grenade, the Chantwell who was the sounder for the drummers - all of that, antecedents of the present day rapso movement, and it is extremely important because there is where the vibration of the griot or the storyteller coming out of Africa manifested in the Caribbean. The tradition manifested within that plantation experience. People call my name but they really want to say, "Lancelot boy, you did a fine job"; all I did was carry the baton. Lancelot, Cheryl and others whose names may not be known or mentioned because we do not know who they are.

I have given my life to what I do and therefore, my life is rapso. Perhaps that is the reason why people identify me as one of the founders of the movement. I give my life to the art form. I take the art form in a personal way, and I work to embrace others who work in the oral tradition to develop [a] framework for us to know each other, connect with each other, not only in Trinidad and Tobago here but throughout the African-Caribbean diaspora.

**MD:** You have been recognised as a distinguished alumnus at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus for your lifelong commitment to rapso and more broadly the creative arts. You were a student during the 1970s. Discuss the social and political climate on campus at the time.

BR: I attended the University of the West Indies in 1976-1977. What was the climate like? The climate was fierce, it was frightening and all these things, but frightening because of my perception of what a university should be. UWI was the opposite of that; there was no space for free thinking, no space really for personal opinion, except if that opinion is drawn from opinion that the university considered. Somebody must have said that before and it was published [in a scholarly journal] that the university recognised, and you had to draw an opinion from that. If you voiced your own opinion, your opinion did not matter.

First year when I came in there was a struggle for the bus for students from Port-of-Spain to the campus and San Fernando to the campus. A struggle for a bus, a simple request for a bus turned into a major struggle, the students versus the administration. Inside of that the workers had their own situation, with wages and working conditions. On top of that lecturers in WIGUT<sup>1</sup> had their own challenges for fees and so on. So, the campus really came to a shut down within my first term and I was said, "Wow what kind of madness is this." But I could not run from it because I was in the centre in the midst of all the madness I was there and people tried to work out if I was a Marxist Redness or if I was Pan-Africanist.

All these different political things on the campus was kind of strange to me even though I was a cultural activist prior to my coming to the campus; all these different demarcations thing and different groups I was not able with that. That was the situation and besides that I got victimised by some of the lecturers because sometimes I would not come to class but I would do my work and they could not understand how I could do my work without coming to their class. Besides all of that, I was good because I made a pledge to my father who never went to secondary school, so he was living through me and I made a pledge to him that I would go to university, stay there and get my degree.

MD: Rapso has featured in your creative, professional, and academic outputs. You have professionalised rapso in Trinidad and Tobago advocating for more resources and the greater recognition of the art form. How would you define rapso?

BR: It is always difficult to define an artform because art is living and alive and it always changing. Essentially because rapso we say, "is the power of the word in the rhythm of the word." We say that it is really like the voice of the people in the heart of the struggle for true liberation, the struggle for self-definition, the struggle for self-determination. Then we tried to bring it more concrete and we say, "okay, rapso is the poetry of calypso" and we wanted a connection with calypso to be embraced, we wanted that to be understood, we wanted to make sure that people know this is connected with what we do here in Trinidad and Tobago.

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<sup>1</sup> West Indies Group of Teachers

We make the connections right through so people can identify from wherever they stand where they coming from, they can define and have a definition or description of what is rapso. To be more practical again we have said, "where the rhythm of the voice blend with the rhythm of the drums".



Brother Resistance and the Network Rapso Riddum Band

Port-of-Spain, Trinidad & Tobago. 1986.

**MD:** It is interesting how you describe rapso as a space that was specifically established to address issues of the African experience in Trinidad and Tobago as well as the wider conversations on African liberation. Rapso was instrumental to the mobilisations during the Black Power Revolution. How would you describe this relationship between the Black Power Revolution and rapso?

**BR:** Yes, there was a relationship. When you look at work from Lancelot Layne and poets like Lasana Kwesi who would talk about people afraid to fight because they comfortable in their situation, they might have gone to university to get their degree, they have a comfortable life, a decent job, they have a car, family and thing. Poets like Jet Shiro, like Abdul Malik the bad poet who was grounded in his experience as a lines man for T&TEC,<sup>2</sup> you get a worker's perspective now in poetry.

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<sup>2</sup> Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission

The chants when moving the lines became poetry and those types of experiences become poetry to the people, real experiences, and people relate to that much more than some leader's speech. Even though they would embrace and connect with the speeches of the leaders it was the poets that would bring the juice and that connect and move them forward and that is how that connection in the room was; it was a serious thing because people in the rallies would respond to the poets.

MD: But what was the specific relationship between rapso and political actors such as the National Joint Action Committee (NJAC)?

BR: I was not in NJAC. I would look up to these guys. I don't want to say NJAC didn't want me, that's a whole next discussion, but we had challenges in that kind of way because they have their poets, they had their drummers, so it was like an all-inclusive. So, we were in the community, we had poets, we had drummers and thing but to get on that stage, on an NJAC stage, it wasn't any easy thing. You had to pay your dues. I didn't know you had to pay your dues in the struggle but for us it was a blessing because we continued doing what we were doing, expanding what we were doing in our base out in Quarry Street, East Dry River. We just continued doing what we were doing. We did not have to answer to anybody, we didn't have any kind of structure to contain us or anything. We were rebellious and revolutionary. We just did what we had to do.

Aside from that, NJAC was it. Even though they didn't embrace us in that way, NJAC was it because from NJAC and the whole Black Power Movement I got to know myself. I am always proud of those moments coming through 1970 and later on. I am always proud of those moments. I begin to know myself, I begin to love myself, I begin to embrace my blackness and I begin to embrace Africa, I begin to understand like how I talking to you now, I don't have to talk the Queen's English, that this Trinidadian I talking here is good enough and valid enough as any language in the world. I would learn that the music of the drums is an instrument like any other instrument.

When I step outside in the world I am proud of my African self. I don't get involved in no small talk about if you not really black you are not an African or if you are a Trinidadian and them kind of small talk. I have seen workplaces where at that time there was no African faces. When you go to the banks and so on when you look at it where there was air conditioned and it had glass and you walk inside you didn't see yourself aside from the security or the cleaners and I have seen that transition in the country.

Still today I would never surrender to say let me do some music that could be the popular thing and people go like meh and I go make some money. I not saying popular music is not important, I not saying money is not important. It is the foundation on which I stand and I look at the early persons who would have sacrificed their lives for the struggle. I look at that and I say "yes"

and I feel proud when I look back at my journey - I am still standing. I never bow, never surrender.

**MD:** Do you see connections between the cultural and activist work of rapso in the 1970s for chants of "black power" and the current movement of youth globally that assert "Black Lives Matter"?

**BR:** Everything that we do in terms of rapso represents like a drop or a foundation for what is taking place in the world. People have challenges with Black Lives Matter and some say, "No, All Lives Matter." The reason we say, "Black Lives Matter" it is because it raises a situation and allows a voice to be heard. Things have been going on for too long. We liberate ourselves from the plantation and still we have done so much to bring the world where it is today in terms of achievement and progress. But this year, 2020, a struggle like this is still taking place and with the rapso movement we stand proud of our culture, who black and proud and Africa. We stand proud. Who vex we ain't business. If you vex move out the way. Let we pass.

**MD:** Makandal Daaga died on the 8<sup>th</sup> August 2016. After 1971 and the reassertion of political legitimacy by the ruling People's National Movement, the Black Power Revolution also died. Revolutions die as well as the songs that channel them. Discuss the notion that "rapso is dead."

**BR:** Revolutions don't die. When you look at what is happening across the world in [the United States of] America and other countries of the world, what is the subject matter? Racism and injustice. That kind of thing and that is at the centre of it and therefore for a new calibration of younger people that understand that they have to come out of their house in the midst of COVID-19 and that kind of thing and pick up a vibration in this kind of struggle. That is to tell you really and truly, a seed was planted and still going. Rapso didn't die and rapso men don't die. They just stay cool and they multiply. Today, we have a number of people doing rapso music on the radio like how it use to play at one time on the radio and that kind of way. People creating rapso. People coming and say, "eh this is a new one there is a new one doing it there."

When you look at the explosion in the spoken word arena, spoken word poets, to some extent, they feel that they are different to other poets. I understand that and to some extent it have a little elitist kind of vibe but inside of all of that they doing poetry. They bringing the power of the word in whatever style or form they bringing it and therefore it is one family and it is the same experience of the griot. As they grow older in they self and the art form they would understand, "but wait nah spoken word ain't now start." There were spoken word poets before [such as] Amiri Baraka.

People would say, "go down by U.WE SPEAK and a next session in south and other places and open mic and Songshine in East [Trinidad]." The spoken word was one of the main ingredients

I looked at and I feel good and proud to know that poets are still representing themselves and representing the power of the word and when I see that, I see rapso. I don't make no division and there is no line drawn.

#### CULTURAL ORGANISING & ACTIVISM

**MD:** You have associated rapso with spoken word and calypso. However, you failed to mention some of the tensions between the art forms. Discuss some of the debates and differences that emerged between rapso and calypso.

**BR:** It should be no tension between people in the rapso and the calypso movement because we are coming from the same foundations. The power of the chantwell, the power of the drums again, that is foundation. We cut from the same root therefore there should be no tension at all. When we say [that rapso is] "the poetry of the calypso," Dr. [Louis] Regis, (God rest his soul), he would have a problem with me saying that. He would say, "calypso is poetry." [I replied] "I know that but I just wanted to identify the poetic style that we were doing and identify and connect it firmly to calypso." In that kind of way for me there was no tension at all, in no kind of way. Any tension it may have or may still have is really a waste of time and not even worth this question.

**MD:** You have stated that there is no tension between rapso and calypso while acknowledging that there may be concerns about your definition of rapso as "the poetry of calypso." Interestingly, you occupy a unique position as a rapso performer who is simultaneously the President of the Trinbago Unified Calypsonians Organisation. Why did you decide to play a lead role in organising for calypsonians?

**BR:** You want to talk about TUCO in this thing? Well, who I am has prepared me to be able to hold this office where it is concerned. Challenges would be questions of members not having a sense of belonging enough. They don't see the importance of us getting together to deal with issues that we may face in the entertainment sector. We get together, yes, for a competition, for a prize money, you know, and things of that nature. Things that affect us especially in this society where entertainment and the creative industries are still not considered when you talking about economic development and when you talking about social development. So, having an organisation is extremely important and therefore the greater role for TUCO to play is a very serious one but in order for it to be fully effective there must be this sense of buy-in from membership where that is considered.

Secondly the organisation is constantly struggling to release itself from the strangulation that is put on it by Carnival. That is a funny statement to make. Calypso as a music drives the carnival ever since to now whether you want to call it soca or whatever. I don't want to get into the semantics. The music has driven the carnival and drives the carnival whereas the carnival have

the music in a lock neck. Carnival has locked calypso neck so you find from ever since I could remember the most calypso does play carnival time from generation to generation. Most of the airplay of calypso is carnival time, so most of the younger people come and when they think of calypso they think of carnival. It is not so. Calypso is music like any other music. We struggle for fifty percent local content. But people [think they] have to go outside to get a sense of their worth. All these things TUCO has been a vanguard in these kind of struggles but until we have that buy-in from standing members, each contributing, to pay in that struggle, it will always be challenging.

**MD:** Throughout this interview you have highlighted the significance of rapso and calypso in Trinidad and Tobago. However, these two indigenous art forms do not feature prominently in the formal education system at the primary and secondary school levels.

**BR:** That's a shame in the first instance because when we talk about rapso, the voice of the people for self-definition, these are things that help us to define ourselves and establish our self-worth and know who we are in the world. To be proud of who we are in the world, so we come talking about reshaping the education system in 2015 when [Rowley-led People's National Movement] government took over. They talked about redesigning the education system to create a more patriotic Trinbagonian. I smile and said, "We have been waiting on this but truth and in fact we are far from it because much has not been done."

However, we must compliment the Minister of Education.<sup>3</sup> The Minister of Education and his team [in partnership with] the TUCO executive [met and] agreed that calypso should be totally introduced into schools. So things would be put in place and necessary adjustments where the curriculum is concerned. Calypso as a vehicle for teaching Social Studies, History, Social Biology, and you name it. So that is where there is some hope, a glimmer of hope on the horizon, but then well COVID-19 is here and as it came everything went on pause. So, we do not know where we will pick up from that. We know it is not an overnight thing and [it will] take some time because an entire history of calypso, our language, our personal vibe and cultural arts will be a fundamental part of the syllabus and education experience.

**MD:** There is potential for rapso and calypso to transform the way we come to understand language.

**BR:** The system define and describe the way how we does talk because as far as the system is concerned they say we can't talk English so it is a vernacular or dialect of the Queen's English. We prefer to talk about nation language as defined by the late professor Edward Kamau Brathwaite. We have a certain kind of way we does talk, a sing song kind of talk, how we does use the words, how we does communicate with each other, we have that. We have words, not in the English language, not in the English dictionary. Every now and then we does put in one

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<sup>3</sup> The then Minister of Education was the Honourable Anthony Garcia

or two [words in the dictionary]. They put in mauby a few years ago. You would hear some words like that not in the English language; you would hear words from Africa that we using since our parents time that still using now. Here have words from Hindi and bhojpuri and things that we still using now.

**MD:** What is the future of rapso in Trinidad and Tobago?

**BR:** In present day, the school system they need rapso inside of there. They need rapso in official social gatherings and to get an appreciation as a nation and appreciation for the rapso experience and the spoken word and within the context of the oral tradition. Some people talk about success and measure success by talking about the Billboard charts but we ain't business with that because being on the Billboard charts is like saying you need to get validation of yourself outside of yourself. What sense that making? When you know who you is and how good you is, how strong you is, how powerful you is and you want the world to know who you is and if the world can't take you as you is, they have to move and let you pass. As simple as that. Move and let me pass cause I coming through. Rapso is about that that kind of way. Look at the Billboard charts. Look at international hits.

A number of people, now younger people, now don't even know that in the 1930's the calypso was out there in the international hits and charts. People like the Roaring Lion and Atilla the Hun. They travel and they sing alongside the Four Mills Brothers and the top artist at that time in America. They move on to Europe and places like that. People don't know them things but because we have a strange disconnect with our history we does try to do the same thing that was done before and make it like it new. People don't understand that the privileges that we have now is because of people that came before, but there is a disconnect with history.

**MD:** And for spoken word?

**BR:** Many [spoken word poets] see themselves coming out of the television cause you know in this country television is someone reality. What we living is the dream, so we living the dream and television is the reality. So when they watch they [television], they see Def Jam Poetry; they want to be a poet like that because that is what they seeing all the time. If you look at the quality of their work, many aspects [are] greater than that, more powerful than that, and more illustrative than what they [see] on that television, but that is their starting point. I can't vex for their starting point. You have to start somewhere but what I am trying to say is that they are here [in Trinidad and Tobago] and there is something greater and beyond that. And, to connect to that, they would see a space open up for them. For us, the spoken word was good for us, seeing people coming though the oral tradition. When a man would come and say, "Allyuh feel allyuh doing something new?", we replied, "But how you mean? We make this. We create this." We have the midnight robber. The midnight robber is a wordsmith and the portrayal is a lyrical quality and performance.

Eventually everything will connect in time. We have a show called Rapso Explosion<sup>4</sup> and we invite a few of the spoken word poets to come on stage and be part of the experience. We try to embrace and link. I have never been [opposed] to the open mic session, I have [attended] open mic sessions [and] performed at open mic sessions whether it be Songshine or Issa Vibe or any one of these things. I try to make events but the timing is very difficult. The biggest event for the spoken word poets is the [slam] competition<sup>5</sup> with prize money and that is a different, whole different experience. Like calypsonians [who] go into a competition to beat people and that sort of thing, it is different for us.

## CONCLUSION

This interview illustrated the interconnectedness of rapso to calypso and spoken word in Trinidad and Tobago. Brother Resistance argues that these musical artforms are divergent in structure but connected through African oral traditions. Rapso and calypso were critical in carving out social spaces for articulating social and political issues relevant to people of African origin. While Brother Resistance may not embrace the popular notion that "rapso is dead" and critiques the contemporary spoken word movement with a degree of derision, he works to extend historical knowledge in formal education and cultural performance sites for youth to develop a standpoint that is rooted in the Trinidad and Tobago context.

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<sup>4</sup> Rapso Explosion is a cultural event that celebrates the oral tradition during the carnival season in Trinidad and Tobago. The event was established in 1998 and it is organised by the Trinbago Unified Calypsonians' Organisation.

<sup>5</sup> First Citizens National Poetry Slam is held annually in partnership with the Bocas Lit Fest and The 2 Cents Movement. It is the largest poetry slam in the Caribbean. The prize money for first place in 2019 was fifty thousand Trinidad and Tobago dollars.