

RHYTHMIC IMPORTATION, LINGUISTIC ADAPTATION AND INTEGRATION IN ARUBAN MUSIC: AN ANALYSIS OF THE PLACE AND DEVELOPMENT OF CALYPSO AND SOCA IN ARUBAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

This paper describes the state of the Calypso and Soca musical art forms on the Dutch Caribbean Island of Aruba. A deeper look is taken at the integration, place and development of Calypso and Soca in the Aruban cultural synthesis *anno* 2010. Calypso and Soca, originally as Afro-Trinidadian musical genres, were introduced to Aruba by British Caribbean migrant laborers in the 1940's and 50's who were employed by the American owned Lago (Exxon) Oil Refinery. After a steady transformation and adaptation process, these musical genres, especially the Soca known to Arubans as Road March, have become extremely popular within the general Aruban community. However, as soon as the celebration phase concludes prior to the Lenten season, the enthusiasm for the music diminishes significantly and it struggles for airplay and artistic and cultural recognition. The Calypso and Soca that are performed in Aruba are predisposed to other musical influences because of Aruba's geographic setting and its dynamics of cultural fusion. Many rhythmic and linguistic elements pertaining to Aruba, Latin America, the Netherlands, the French Caribbean and the United States can be found in Aruban compositions; much to the delight of some and to the dismay of others.

Calypso Childhood Memories

The rays of the morning sun are already beginning to show in the eastern tip of the island now dubbed as the sunrise city, but in those days we called it chocolate city. Many lyrical professors, to the sounds of "*tiki-tungkutung, tiki-tungkutung*" have graced the stage, tackling issues ranging from the inability of the government to manage the budget to social issues such as teenage pregnancy and gossip *talk* like who is sleeping with whom in the community. After many hours of waiting in the morning dew, the MC announces the name of the reigning calypso king; "Mighty Talent". The weary crowd instantly transforms into jubilee. Comparable to Mohammed Ali in his

heyday, a dark, curly kitted fellow as arrogant as can be, in San Nicolas Creole English says: “*A win already, ohyu go home*” without even uttering one lyric. The crowd even goes wilder but then slowly calms down to the point you could hear a pin drop in a crowd of more than 8000. What happens next, is 5 minutes of love, lyrical precision, improvisation, humor, political commentary and rhythmic expression the island hears and feels only once a year.

After reading the above fragment of a 10 year old Aruban boy’s remembrance of his first Calypso and Road March contest at 6 am in the Lago Sport Park, one might suppose that Calypso and Soca music would be Aruba’s greatest national past time equivalent to Baseball and Apple Pie in America, Merengue and Bachata in the Dominican Republic and Steelpan in Trinidad and Tobago. But this is not exactly the state of affairs. Aruba’s mere 50 year affiliation with the Calypso and Soca art forms has in fact been relatively successful but not without its share of controversy. This relationship can best be portrayed as multifaceted and even paradoxical at times (Razak-Cole, 1998: 33).

It has been often alleged that the Dutch Caribbean, in particular Aruba, does not produce a vast amount of literature by its “own” people (Rutgers, 2000). In Western academic discourse about the Caribbean, the usual Derek Walcotts and the VS Naipauls are portrayed as the lone guardians of the literary arts (Benítez-Rojo, 1993). On the musical scene, the Jamaican-American Calypsonian and actor Harry Belafonte’s name constantly surfaces by means of his American styled Calypsos such as “Day-Ooh” and “Mathilda”. At times, the Mighty Sparrow, Lord Kitchener and the Mighty Chalkdust may perhaps get an honorable mention (Horne & Dunn, 2006). Let there be no doubt that these gentleman have served the Caribbean arts tremendously and deserve immense respect, nonetheless let us not forget that for every one of these illustrious persons there are thousands of men and women who toil in obscurity under the *Kwihi* and the mango tree, on the fishing boat, at the market place and in the rum shop, composing Shakespearian style poetry and Montesquieuan type philosophy while challenging the establishment and permitting us to laugh at the same time (Guadeloupe, 2009). The Red Plastic Bags, the Ajamus, the King Bobos, the Pretenders, the Mighty Talents, the Black Diamonds, the Rasta Lindas, the Lady K’s, the Singing J’s and the Lord Boxoes have been producing oral literature through the Calypso and Soca art forms for decades but little is known about them outside of their country and region.

We wish not to delve too profoundly into the origin of Calypso and Soca, nor write about the musicological aspects of these art forms à la University of the West Indies Professor Gordon Rohlehr. Nor do we desire to go into detail about the legends of the

art form during the “Rum and Coca Cola” wonder years à la Keith Warner¹. Instead, we strive to shed some light on the expansion of these musical genres outside of Trinidad, specifically in Aruba. As Aruban insiders we feel that much of the Trinidadian and British Caribbean know little about the development of Calypso and Soca music in the Dutch Caribbean. Perhaps it is because of the small island big island bias that has plagued Caribbean unity ever since the days of colonialism, *Status Aparte*, the Federation, and Carifta or maybe it is because of the language barrier we supposedly have with the rest of the Caribbean (Lamming, 1991; Allahar, 2005). In Aruba interesting developments have been taking place on the musical and cultural scene during the last 50 years. Aruba’s multilingualism and geographical location near Latin America while still in the Caribbean makes for an interesting brand of Calypso and Soca (Razak-Cole, 1998: 35). It is extremely important that the reader understands the space and environment into which these musical genres have been thrust in Aruba, and under what conditions they are being performed there.

Subculture to mainstream

The demographic constellation of Aruba is similar to that of Trinidad, Cuba, Puerto Rico, or Brazil in the sense that there isn’t a predominant homogenous ethnic group living on the island. Aruban multiculturalism, multi-ethnicity and musical fusion are products of vast migratory processes, especially during the 20th century that cannot easily be described. It could be considered a Diaspora community that was extracted from another Diaspora community with capitalism as the common motivator (Guadeloupe, 2009). Aruba did not have an immense plantation economy involving African slaves. It should be mentioned, though, that the Afro Caribbean Aruban populations that are presently residing on the island are mostly descendants of migrant laborers from the British Caribbean. The Afro Caribbean immigrants originated from numerous islands in the Caribbean such as Trinidad, St Vincent, St Kitts, Montserrat, Nevis, British Virgin Islands, St Martin, St Lucia, Dominica, Granada and Barbados amongst others (Alofs & Merckies, 2001).

Although most of the inhabitants of Aruba are in some way, shape or form ethnically and racially diverse, these English-speaking immigrants have constituted a distinctive community. They have resided in the constituency of San Nicolas, predominantly in the makeshift town known as “The Village”. As a consequence of interlinguistic communication, a distinct dialect of Afro Caribbean English lexifier Creole emerged by way of fusion out of a *lingua franca* known to Arubans as Village English or San Nicolas English (Holm, 2000). The American-owned Lago Oil Refinery held English-speaking tradesman in high regard to a certain extent thus giving the English language a superior social status on the island. San Nicolas urbanized rather distinctively and

¹ Referring to concepts presented in a lecture entitled The Implications of Authorship in Calypso. It was presented in the National Library of Trinidad and Tobago in 2005 by Dr Keith Q. Warner.

for decades marched to the beat of its own drum until the era of automation which eventually resulted in the closing of the refinery in 1985 (Alofs & Merkies, 2001).

Culture, religion, language, food and music are the binding elements of any Diaspora community and represent the bond with their childhood and their place of origin whether it is actual or imagined. When a foreign musical culture transcends locality to become what is considered to be “native culture”, it is often met with resistance. Musical change is difficult for people to comprehend because it puts traditional and conservative values, which they express through their music, in an unfamiliar space where it suddenly has to compete for survival. This is often countered with nationalistic cries expressed in public warnings about the demise of authentic Aruban culture. It wasn't until the final years of the past century that Calypso was formally acknowledged by government officials as Aruban culture.

In the initial years Calypso and Soca musical genres were principally listened to by San Nicolas residents and a small number of immigrant communities on the island who could relate to the music (Razak-Cole, 1998). Third generation Arubans of English Caribbean extraction frequently recall stories of their childhood filled with music. Here is such a story:

“When I was small, and it was my father's birthday, we had friends over. They would sit in the yard eating and drinking old time Caribbean food such as Johnny Cake and Saltfish and drinks such as, Ginger Beer, Mauby and Sorrel and they danced all night long to the music of Sparrow's “ Jean and Dinah” and also Lord Kitchener's “Suga Bum Bum”. Even my grandparents were on the dance floor together with the young children as myself. So we knew how to dance and “wine we waste” as they say. We learned to 'wuk up' and other dance moves by mode of trial and error.”

The above memory fragment indicates the considerable degree to which Calypso and Soca rhythms and environment have molded each generation. Milieu plays a profound role in the process of cultural synergetic progression, regardless of skin shade. The Calypso and Soca music that was previously listened to by a minority in Aruba, acquired increased reverence in the mid 1980's. The musical integration process can in part be ascribed to 2nd and 3rd generation Aruban calypsonians of British Caribbean descent who spoke and sang songs in English as well as in Papiamentu. This meant that Papiamentu speakers could also partake in the musical tradition. The Calypso and Road March contest has grown rapidly over the past 50 years so that at present it has become the most popular musical event on the island (Razak-Cole, 1998).

Calypso and Soca Linguistics

The Aruban Central Bureau for Statistics reported in 2002 that approximately 69% of the Aruban population reports that Papiamentu is the language that they speak at home. Approximately 13% of the population considers Spanish to be their home

language, while 8.2% of the population speaks English at home and 6.2% speaks Dutch. The remaining residents speak other languages such as Haitian Creole, Hindi and Togalog (CBS, 2002: 90).

The 2008 Unesco Heritage Report on Aruba indicated a considerable decline in the use of the English language at home even though the island is heavily impacted by popular culture and tourism from the US. The Unesco report also indicated that a high percentage of the inhabitants command all four of the major languages but consider Papiamentu to be the main language of communication. Even though the island is a constituent of the Dutch Kingdom, Dutch culture is only practiced intermittently during cultural celebrations, such as the festivities surrounding the Queen's birthday or the *Sinterklaas* celebrations (Alofs, 2008).

Socio-linguists have discovered that Arubans use different languages at different moments depending on the situation. This conscious situational language alternation skill is known as "code switching". Code switching is not uncommon in Caribbean bilingual or multilingual societies (Holm, 2000). Arubans code switch frequently depending on circumstance and intent of the conversation. Linguists have also noted that because Arubans converse recurrently in diverse languages, the absolute command of all languages spoken is arguable. When Arubans travel to America, the English Caribbean, Latin America or the Netherlands they quickly comprehend that the Aruban routinely substitutes items from other languages when he or she cannot locate definite terms in a specified idiom (Croes, 1995).

Such observations have led us to hypothesize that the pluri-lingual fluidity that typifies the Aruban language situation has become one of the distinguishing features of Calypso and Soca music in Aruba. Pioneering Aruban Calypsonians such as Paul Conner, Young Quick Silver, Ray Anthony Thomas, Rasta Linda, Lord Cobashi, Mighty Reds and Mighty Cliffy predominantly sang songs in San Nicolas English up until the mid 1980's. Lord Boxoe was the first Calypsonian of that generation to start singing in Papiamentu; *Basha Awa Bai* is one such song that became a generational transcending hit. The first Calypsonians and Soca singers catered typically to a San Nicolas English minority. As interest grew along with the crowds, Calypsonians increased their usage of the Papiamentu, Spanish and Dutch in their presentations (Razak-Cole, 1998). Claudius Phillips also known as the Mighty Talent could be considered the principal trendsetter for code switching in Calypso and Soca music. With productions like; *Dedye den Carnaval*, *Lenga Afo* and *Party (Simon Says)* he has become a megastar and celebrity in the Aruban music business similar to Machel Montano and Destra Garcia in Trinidad. He is debatably the first big calypso artist to crossover to the mainstream, paving the way for various Black Calypsonians from the San Nicolas constituency. This approach to Calypso and Soca has been emulated by quite a few artists and has for the most part become the norm for the manner in which Calypso and Soca are performed in Aruba.

We have concluded that there are several reasons why Calypsonians code switch:

1. They gain favor with the predominantly Papiamentu speaking crowd by speaking a language that more Arubans can understand. It is a strategy of inclusion, through which the crowd becomes a stockholder in the cultural product.
2. They illustrate their linguistic versatility and virtuosity to the panel of judges. A fluent command of dissimilar languages is often highly regarded.
3. More fans equal greater commercial success. The market for their music is greatly expanded in Aruba and in the Dutch Caribbean.
4. When they are lost for words in San Nicolas English, they utilize vocabulary in other languages as a “bail out.”

Mighty Talent in his 1992 Calypso *Equal Rights* sings²:

“If you ever realize, people look you in your eyes and just to criticize, if is anything they hear on the road somewhere, they bad talk you and that’s not fair. They judging you, by the friends you got if you using dope or not, and so what if your friend *polso*, that don’t mean that you is a *mariko*.”

At this juncture he is Code Switching on his punch lines. *Polso* factually means broken wrist, but it is commonly used in Aruba as reference to a homosexual in a derogatory manner. The word *mariko* also means gay in Papiamentu.

Mighty Talent sang the following lyrics in his song “*If I was Prime Minister*”.³
Rapport Zaandam ik gooi hem der uit, for accusing me that my *buraco ta fluit!*

Rapport Zaandam is Dutch for a research report that was written by a former police officer by the name of Zaandam. *Ik gooi hem der uit*, means in Dutch that he is getting rid of this document. He switches to English and then goes back to Papiamentu where he says *buraco ta fluit* which roughly means “my hole is whistling” in Papiamentu but its *double entendre* meaning is, “a homosexual taking it from behind.”

Not all Calypsonians and supporters approve of this approach. Calypsonian Antoni Gario also known as Black Diamond is a fierce opponent of the unwarranted use of diverse languages. In a 2010 panel discussion at the University of Aruba he asserted that a certain linguistic authenticity has to remain at the nucleus of the art form. He alleged that “the body of a car can be changed in many different ways but the car cannot drive if it has square wheels. It can then not be considered a car anymore.” In his song *Kaiso Killers*⁴ he expresses his opposition to the excessive use of other languages. He sings:

² *Claudius & Oreó present 10 years of Glory with “Mighty Talent” CD*

³ *Claudius & Oreó present 10 years of Glory with “Mighty Talent” CD*

⁴ The 2003 winning Calypso “If home self we discriminated”

“When they can’t rhyme they use Papiamentu, such a old trick in di book di judges don’t know, it’s a frantic situation for di mind, now we leave thief di drum and di baseline.”

His straightforward approach has gotten him much critical acclaim but less commercial success than *The Mighty Talent*. In addition, he frequently claims that other Aruban folkloric musical genres such as the *Tumba* and the *Dande* cannot be performed in San Nicolas English. It would be disrespectful to these musical genres if that were to be the case. Only in Calypso and Soca he says do “we” accept this type of disrespect.

San Nicolas English is sometimes complicated to understand for non native speakers. It is spoken at a very high pace and the grammatical structure greatly differs from the standard dialect of English. Language comprehension by their supporters was one of the major obstacles for Calypsonians such as Lord Kitchener and Lord Melody. Even though in the 1950’s they garnered much success in England and America, a great many of their supporters could not comprehend them completely. They mostly understood fragments of the song and this of course limited their enjoyment of it. Caribbean American entertainer Harry Belafonte was born in America and commanded the accent fluently so therefore had greater success. Many Caribbean critics felt that he was not authentic enough and distorted or even stole the culture for his personal benefit. He was a grandmaster at “shifting identity” or “shape shifting”⁵ because he acted Caribbean amongst West Indian folk and like an American in front of American audiences (Horne & Dunn, 2006).

Soca becomes Roadmarch

Every country that celebrates carnival has its distinct music that it dances to. In Brazil they dance to the sounds of Samba and in Curaçao it is the *Tumba*. In Aruba it was also the *Tumba* before the 1980s until Arubans began shifting to Soca as their Road March (Razak-Cole, 1998). In this process Arubans of making it their own, of course, Aruban Soca evolved into a distinct, multilingual variety of Soca which integrates various styles and rhythms.

Temple University Professor Louis Gordon⁶ claims that the use of certain vocabulary in music can be related to the manner in which we learn language in the Caribbean. He asserts that because there is not a reading tradition in the “Western” sense, much of what is learnt is transferred via oral tradition. University at Buffalo Anthropologist Victoria Razak pointed out in her lecture on musical traditions at the University of Aruba in 2010, that nursery rhymes and other folk songs often get misinterpreted in the transition process.

⁵ The 2003 winning Calypso “ If home self we discriminated”

⁶ In a discussion on language acquisition in 2009, Aruba

Arubans use brand names instead of generic names to refer to certain products or appliances because the brand name is the form which they have most often heard in their daily lives. For example, the term *pampers* is used to indicate all types of diapers and *frigider* is used to name all refrigerators. *Keds* really means sneakers and *cornflakes* signifies all types of cereal. We could assume that this may also be the reason why Soca music is called Road March in Aruba. When an Aruban says Soca, they normally are referring to a slower and more harmonious form of Road March with a different type of lyrical content, such as that found in songs by Le Groove, 2 Sweet, Mighty Sparrow and Krossfya. Soca is a more traditional sound in the Aruban perspective. In the Aruban context, 'Real' Aruban Road March is music produced by artists like Mighty Campo or Claudius Phillips. Matters of linguistics, ascribed meanings and communicative context are at the heart of comprehending the Calypso and Soca musical genres in Aruba. Musical meaning and understanding develops in a close relationship with society, history, understanding and experience. In a sense, that is what is most splendid and fascinating about language; each society gives its own interpretation to their words and their music. Of course there are some 'musical purists' who may disagree with this approach for fear of the demise of their culture.

Musical Intelligence

Arubans adapt quite effortlessly to other cultures and know a great deal about foreign ways of thinking as well. Where this concerns knowledge of diverse musical genres, Arubans score very high. During one of my lectures on Regionalism and Regional Integration in the Caribbean at the University of Aruba, I performed a musical test with the students. The students were asked to listen to 10 Caribbean songs, all of different genres and in a variety of languages, including English, Spanish, French Creole and English Creole. They were required to state the name of the artist, the genre and their place of origin. Not surprisingly, they knew almost all of the songs, ranging from the French Creole rhythms of Kassav and Carimi, to Marc Anthony's New Yorican Salsa, to the *Ritmo Combina*⁷ of Curacao, to Venezuelan derived *Gaita* music. Even though French Creole is not understood by the majority on the island, the rhythms, tones, melodies and sensual bodily expressions are what Arubans identify with and can relate to.

Aruban Soca Subgenres

We have identified the following Soca subgenres existing in Aruba.

Aruban Road March: Aruban Road March is sung by bands like Oreo, Search and Robert y Su Solo Banda Show. It is a combination of classic Soca with the occasional use of Papiamentu, and is supported by a strong trumpet section, especially at the

⁷ Curacaoan music called rhythmic combination. Popular amongst youngsters and sung in Papiamentu.

climactic stage of songs such as *Break Away*. The performers often ask their audience to perform certain hand and body movements in commando style.

Groovy Soca: Groovy Soca is a highly melodious type of Soca that is played by bands like 2 Sweet, Climax and Le Groove. It is based on traditional Lord Kitchener type Soca but more modern in its presentation. It is also supported by enhanced computerized sounds with a heavy Rhythm and Blues type bass. The way the music is danced to, is by way of the *chip* and *wine* forward motion. Movements below the waste are held in high regard.

Uptempo Groovy Soca: Uptempo Groovy Soca is played by bands like Youth X-Treme. It is a groovy melodious Soca *à la* Le Groove, but it is danced in an accelerated tempo. This subgenre is more geared towards the younger generation. The *chipping* and *wining* motion is done at a faster pace.

Jamback Soca: Jamback Soca was imported from the Northeastern Caribbean islands like St Croix and St Martin. It is a highly computerized sound with an extremely accelerated tempo. The songs are meant mostly for jumping and waving or doing certain dances. NBO, Impak Band and BMW are the bands that play this type of music. Many young people also like this type of Soca.

Socahouse: In 2009 Dushi Band of Aruba introduced the island to a new style of Soca called Socahouse. As the name indicates it fuses electronic House rhythms la DJ Tiesto with Jamback Soca. The *chipping* and *wining* motion is not needed for this dance. In order to dance this style of Soca you must make quick repetitive hand gestures and stiff body movements while jumping continuously. It can be considered to be Rave type music.

Ragasoca, Powersoca, Chutneysoca and Buyon, although played, are not that popular amongst the Aruban music enthusiasts.

The Future of Calypso and Soca in Aruba

The Calypso and Soca musical genres have been transformed according to the environment in which they have developed. We could surely observe in what manner the language, the geographic location and ethnic constellation have influenced the manner in which Aruban Calypso and Soca are presented.

The strength of the Aruban Calypso and Soca can be found in their uniqueness of style and language. The general populations of very few countries in the western hemisphere are able to speak four different languages. Aruban Calypso and Soca artists can effortlessly code switch at will and have the ability to entertain diverse audiences simultaneously.

Versatility in this case can be a weakness as well, depending how one looks at it. Audiences that are not familiar with music that is sung in more than a single language, perhaps may find it difficult to comprehend. Also, because of the highly localized

topics, the punch lines in the Calypsos and the commands in the Socas may not be understood by non-Arubans. It is already complicated for a Standard English speaker to understand San Nicolas English, and adding several languages and instruments additionally to the mix, can cause immense bewilderment. The major Calypso and Soca market can be found in the British Caribbean as well as the British West Indian Diaspora communities around the world. Many who live in Canada, the US and England would find it difficult to buy this type of pluri-lingual music from Aruba that challenges their ability to comprehend the lyrics.

Despite the high level of cognitive and linguistic intelligence of Aruban Calypso and Soca artists, their music remains relatively isolated with little crossover appeal. These extremely rich and complex musical genres never attain much success outside of the Netherlands and Dutch Caribbean shores. This will remain so, unless the music is marketed in a different manner. Either they take the path of Curaçaoan Jazz artist Izaline Calister, who has achieved international success in her native Papiamentu, or they start composing songs for both the local and international market.

The following poem was written by Gregory Richardson expressing the way he interprets the Calypso art form.

I am Calypso

I criticize the government, the fights in parliament,
corruption and I speak about accountability

I am Calypso

I defend the humble, the neglected,
the disenfranchised and the discriminated

I am Calypso

Me talk bout mi neighba,
di shame and di scandal in the family

I am Calypso

I talk about private parts in an obvious
and yet clandestine manner

I am Calypso

Me make yu laugh till yuh belly buss

I am Calypso

I speak about love, culture, unity
and national identity

I am Calypso

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