

# ASSESSING THE LINKS BETWEEN IDENTITY AND SOCA MUSIC IN THE TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO MUSIC INDUSTRY

MEAGAN SYLVESTER

UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES, ST. AUGUSTINE, TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

## Introduction

This paper seeks to investigate the nature and scope of identity as it pertains to soca music in Trinidad and Tobago's music industry. Identity will be explained in terms of its general instrumentalities and manifestations initially and then more specifically in terms of the links between ethnic identity and the many genres of soca music and their attendant following by particular ethnic populations. In Trinidad and Tobago, there are mainly three types of soca music, namely, 'regular' soca, chutney soca and ragga soca. These three will be explored in some detail as we attempt to assess which groups in Trinbagonian society identify with these types of music. Trinidad and Tobago is a multi-ethnic society and therefore different genres of music cater and appeal to various constituencies within the population.

265

---

This is a preliminary piece of work which is qualitative in the main, employing phenomenology as its principal method of social investigation. The interviewees are soca, chutney soca and ragga soca artistes in Trinidad and Tobago as well as a smaller contingent of patrons of the arts who through snowball sampling have been revealed to be individuals who are part of the soca music industry in a formal or an informal way. This paper represents an initial attempt to present a sociological analysis of popular cultural trends in soca music instead of relying on the more conventional cultural studies perspective usually reserved for the study of music.

The concern with who owns cultural forms has come to define many of the key debates in modern sociology and politics in this global age of physical displacement, diasporic identity, cultural uprooting and the search for home and 'what is mine'. We are concerned here about both of the fundamental dimensions of identity and belonging: 1) the psychological or the individual dimension and 2) the sociological or group dimension.

In the Caribbean, an understanding of the role of belonging can be said to come from a central place within oneself with which identification with a nation, a race or an ethnicity resonates. How do I define myself? How do I see the group to which I feel the closest affiliation? Am I Puerto Rican, American, Trinbagonian? Am I black, Hispanic or East Indian? What expresses best my deepest ethnic affiliation? Is it music, religion or sport? If it is music, for the purposes of this paper, which sort of music do I identify with? I am part of a cultural space and there is music there. Which type(s) of music am I drawn to and why? The central focus of this paper is to shed some preliminary light on links between ethnic identity and preferences for certain musical genres over others.

Styles of domination may have differed between one or the other imperial powers, but from 1492 onwards, race and later ethnicity have consistently played a central role throughout the Caribbean in defining power relations and in separating the 'in' group and that which is accepted from the 'out' group and that which is not. However, in today's world of globalisation and neo-colonialism, the political departure of the old colonisers has been accompanied by the economic arrival of the neo-colonisers and as a result some of the old questions of identity and belonging and acceptance have been transformed to a certain extent.

### **Understanding nation, identity, and ethnicity**

This paper follows on the work of Allahar & Jackson (2005), Geertz (1975), Chirot (1977) and Giddens (1984) which when summarised speak to an understanding of the concept of the nation as having two possible manifestations: 1) an established **nation**, complete with economic, political, legal, military, economic and civic autonomy in a clearly demarcated territory or 2) a space where sentiment, a yearning or movement for independence and autonomy on the part of peoples who, although they share a "a corporate sentiment of oneness" and "a consciousness of kind", do not yet inhabit a clearly defined territorial space. To bring this concept home, we need look no farther than post colonial formations in regions such as the Caribbean, where multi-ethnic states like Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana house nations in search of homes, to understand the role of the collective conscious agreement by a group (such as Afro-Trinidadians or Indo-Guyanese) to adhere to nuances and peculiarities which give them a sense of belonging to and ownership over particular aspects of their social environment, for example, food, language varieties, and cultural forms such as music.

The notion of an ethnic community or an *ethnie*, is bound to identity because it refers to a named human population possessing a myth of common descent, common historical memories elements of shared culture, an association with a particular territory, and a sense of solidarity (Smith, 1998). Ethnic groups or ethnicities are

bound not only by an inclusive sense of one-ness but also by an exclusive sense of ‘we-ness’ (vs. ‘Other-ness’). Ethnic nationalism then, is to be found in situations where a discrete ethnic group lays claim to a national identity and patrimony and seeks to separate itself from other groups either ethnic or non-ethnic.

### **Trinidad and Tobago – ethnic conundrum**

Trinidad and Tobago are the southernmost islands of the Caribbean archipelago and constitute a twin island economy. It is a multi-ethnic space whose population includes significant numbers of African-descended, South Asian-descended and “mixed” peoples. The Central Statistical Office’s, Population and Household Census (2000) puts the numbers of African descended peoples at 39.6 percent, Indians or South Asian descended peoples at 40.3 percent and members of the ‘mixed’ category at 18.5 percent (Central Statistical Office, 2000). Since the onset of colonialism, there has been no ethnic group that could claim a clear majority in Trinidad and Tobago. This reality has made for a nation-building project which has been fraught with complexity and conflict. The emergence of a significant new diaspora in recent decades due to outward migration and the influx of new peoples to the island, have only further complicated the questions of race, power, and representation already so central to national and political discourse.

This ethnic conundrum in Trinidad and Tobago was best described by Cyril L.R. James, noted Trinidadian historian and West Indian intellectual in the following manner:

“Trinidad and Tobago has always been part of the international ...albeit, *global* frame of reference because of the history of its population and the ways in which the island has been peopled. This history of the receipt of transplanted peoples from neighbouring islands in the Caribbean and mainland territories within the region prevented the development of ideologies of a specific bounded culture since cultural norms and values were inextricably linked to many other nationalisms the world over.” (1993: 11)

### **Soca music in Trinidad and Tobago**

In Trinidad and Tobago, soca music, said to be the indigenous music of the twin-island Republic, has been diversified into music genres which are representative of the ethnic groups in the island. The soca music genres under review in this paper are: ‘regular’ soca, chutney soca and ragga soca.

‘**Regular**’ soca music is the ‘soul calypso’ offspring of calypso proper and the dominant carnival music of the past two decades or so, and is widely acknowledged to be a melding of calypso and East Indian forms. Most agree that the birth of soca took place during the oil boom period and can be traced to the calypsonian Lord Shorty.

Lord Shorty hailed from South Trinidad which has traditionally been known to have a larger East Indian descended than African descended population. His African ancestry together with his East Indian points of reference are said to be the central ingredients of his innovative musical style that added Indian rhythms to a sped-up mix of calypso music (Regis, 1999). Major artistes associated with this kind of music are Machel Montano (especially his early work), Shurwayne Winchester and Destra Garcia.

Since the Indian cultural revival of the 1990s, regular soca has been joined by the much more self-consciously Indian genre of '**chutney soca**' which exploded onto the Carnival Scene in 1996. The development of chutney soca came hot on the heels of the emergence of pitchakaree in 1990, which in turn was associated with the important springtime phagwa festival. Chutney soca has been termed a sort of Indian calypso. The advent of chutney soca came not long after the establishment of Radio Masala, the first all-Indian national radio station in 1994. Prior to this all Indian music traditionally sung in Hindi only was often relegated to the occasional time slot for 'ethnic music' on non-Indian radio stations. Initially, chutney soca was sung in Hindi only. However, as its popularity grew and it became more and more of a participatory type of music, English phrases were mixed in and today it is a hybrid of both languages forms in one musical genre. Popular artistes who perform within this genre are Triveni, Rikki Jai, Hunter and Dil E Nadan.

268

**Ragga soca** music is yet another aspect of the soca music scene which seeks to represent yet another ethnic group within the Trinidad and Tobago landscape. Strictly speaking, ragga soca mixes Jamaican type chanting rhythms with the rhythms of regular soca music to form a hybrid sound. The spectacular rise in the popularity of ragga soca began approximately ten years ago with the advent of dub-calypso sampling and was maintained by collaborative work by artistes such as Machel Montano recording together with Jamaican artistes like Shaggy, Red Rat and Beenie Man. These early mixed music recordings have given way today to further hybrids where artistes like Bunji Garlin and other members of his Asylum Band are the main proponents as along with Benjai, Treason and Scarface.

### **Music and ethnic identity. Whose affiliation?**

The popular myths surrounding the birth of calypso, soca and steelband music in the streets Port-of-Spain all more or less trace the origin of these musical genres to "purely" Afro-Trinidadian roots. This reinforces the dominant regional discourses which tend towards an African focus in mapping the emergence of music as culture in Trinidad and Tobago (Stuempfle, 1995).

The globalisation of music and its attendant sell-ability in local, regional and international markets has generated much acrimonious debate. Traditionally, regular soca music's ability to cross-over and reach the diaspora beyond the shores of Trinidad and Tobago has been limited and not as powerful as Jamaican popular genres like dub and dancehall. However, crossover mixes such as chutney soca and ragga soca have had the effect of extending the reach of soca music. Currently traditional soca artistes like Machel Montano, Destra Garcia and Shurwayne Winchester, while remaining regular soca artistes, have opted to include songs on their albums which integrate ragga soca rhythms, chutney elements and even Latin elements like reggaeton, which has opened new markets to their music.

Aside from significant economic and artistic considerations, we can observe that what we term 'Trinidadian music' is becoming more and more creolised in form. As fluid expressions from the street, Trinidadian musical traditions increasingly reflect the constant and ever-increasing mixing of populations of differing ethnic background and identity. The commercial viability of integrated forms, alongside the actual segregation of people at home and in the diaspora helps to create an interesting paradox. For even as the respective musics of African descended and East Indian descended Trinidadians become more and more indistinguishable, the dichotomous ethnic militancy of life means that people of both African and East Indian descent base their vociferous claims to authentic and singular cultural identities on these same musical forms of ever lessening differentiation.

This process of musical hybridisation is reflective a greater Caribbean reality, that of creolisation.

### **Some Preliminary Findings**

At this early stage, it is only possible to provide the following brief but interesting excerpts from the interviews that we conducted to evoke the lived experience of being in the soca, chutney soca and ragga soca music industries. The data listed below shows how artistes and their patrons from each of the three different soca genres under study in this paper characterize the significance of their respective genre in relation to their sense of belonging, ownership, and identity:

#### ***'Regular' Soca***

- Yes I love soca music. It is my life! It has given me to the opportunity to be a catalyst for change and to put my country's music on the map.
- Part of my ancestry
- Calypso taken to whole new level
- We ting.
- Everybody like it. It is essentially Trinidadian

- Black, White, Indian, Chinese like it. Music is infectious and reached everybody
- Money-making industry. Millions to be made internationally.

### *Chutney Soca*

- Indian music
- Indian soca vibes. We-ting finally
- Indian and Soca mix. I feel most at home when I listen to this as opposed to hardcore Hindi music. I do not speak Hindi even though I am a Hindu and so this music reflects my two ancestries
- Gives me a sense of identity
- I can relate to it. Not too Trini, not too Indian.
- Overseas markets appreciating it more and more

### *Ragga Soca*

- Love de Jamaican vibes
- Nice mix of music. Dancehall elements and Soca mix. Sweetttt.
- Music for younger people. Too fast for me.
- Too much chanting. I prefer singing in Soca. I love to sing along with the tunes.
- We ting. Trini people ting
- Have far to go internationally. Real cross-over music

### **Conclusion**

It appears that two contradictory processes are taking place at the same. While we Trinidadians are holding firm to our increasingly cross-ethnic identities and music, we are simultaneously using these same musical genres to fortify our separate Afro-Trinidadian versus Indo-Trinidadian ethnic identities. This is happening within a context where globalisation, circular migration, instantaneous communication, and ever-increasing interaction and social equity among contending ethnic groups in Trinidad and Tobago have all facilitated the development of new and different cross-influenced creolised forms of our cultures. Yet the central paradox around current processes of creolisation is that throughout the Trinidad home and diaspora spaces the respective cultural representations of both Afro- and Indo-Trinidadian-ness have become increasingly visible and distinct.

Within the music genre of soca, the concepts of nation, ethnicity and identity have come to take on a global significance while at the same time adhering to the mystique of the local. In short, Caribbean multi-ethnic societies such as that found in Trinidad

and Tobago, must be seen as dynamic expressions of both centrifugal, pluralistic, and culturally heterogeneous tendencies as well as centripetal, hybridizing, and homogenizing tendencies. In this way, Trinidadian society, both at home and in the diaspora has mobilized its soca music genres to accomplish two apparently opposing objectives: (1) to be inclusive when it is culturally and economically viable and expedient to do so and (2) to be exclusive when assaults on what is traditionally 'ours' or 'we ting' is either under threat or needs to be re-asserted vis-à-vis a homogenizing dominant national or international globalized culture.

## REFERENCES

- Allahar, Anton L. & Shona N. Jackson (2005). *Ethnicity, Class and Nationalism: Caribbean and Extra-Caribbean Dimensions*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Central Statistical Office (2000). *Trinidad & Tobago Housing and Population Census*.
- Chirot, Daniel (1977). *Social Change in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanich.
- Furnivall, John S. (1963, [1948]). *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Geertz, Clifford (1975). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Giddens, Anthony (1984). *The Constitution of Society. Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- James, Cyril L.R. (1993, [1963]). *Beyond a Boundary*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Regis, Louis (1999). *The Political Calypso: True Opposition in Trinidad and Tobago 1962 – 1987*. Mona: University of the West Indies Press.
- Smith, Anthony D. (1998). *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism*. London: Routledge.
- Stuempfle, Stephen (1995). *The Steelband Movement: the Forging of a National Art in Trinidad and Tobago*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

