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Calypso and the Bacchanal Connection

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Calypso and the Bacchanal Connection¹

Calypsonians really ketch hell for a long time
To associate your self with them was a big crime.
If your sister talked to a steelband man
The family want to break she hand
Put she out, lick out every teeth in she mouth. Pass
You outcast! (The Mighty Sparrow, “Outcast”)

This calypso, “Outcast” by The Mighty Sparrow tells the story of calypso and of calypso’s men and women as undesirables, at that time relegated by society to what I call the bacchanal space, the jamette or underworld space in the Creole culture of Trinidad and Tobago.² It was sung sometime in the sixties. So a conference like this on calypso forty years later indicates to us the distance that we have travelled. We owe debts of gratitude to calypsonians like Sparrow, Kitchener, Chalkdust, Shadow, and Rudder, but are specially grateful to people like Gordon Rohlehr, Chalkdust, and Louis Regis, to name a few, who have brought home to us the wealth of calypso production, the variety of its concerns and its significance to us as achievement and history.

I myself have had a long relationship with calypso and if I had been bold-faced enough I might have become a calypsonian. My calypso name was Lord Farmer. I was working in the late fifties in the Agricultural Department at the government farm in Rio Claro, when it was given to me by Lord Blakey, who had come up to Rio Claro to visit Supey, Lord Superior, who is from Rio Claro. The highlight of my possible career was as a backup singer for Bas of Rio Claro. Bas is Lord Superior’s brother, and a very good calypso singer, in fact Bas could sing anybody’s calypso very well but he wasn’t very much of a composer. He had great presence, great voice, and Supey agrees that if Bas had taken this calypso singing seriously he would have been very successful. I was backup for him in a competition in Rio Claro, I believe at Railway View Hall where fetes were held in those days. Bas himself was a favourite citizen of the town, a limer and a livewire, a footballer, sprinter and a great humorist and storyteller, I mean, Bas could really tell you stories. I am a joke compared to him. And Bas himself was the subject of his most humorous stories. Many of them were connected with his adventures as an events and fete promoter. On one occasion, Bas had organized things well, had a good band—Joey Lewis or Clarence Curvan or Dutchy Brothers or Fitz-Vaughn Bryan—and had sent out invitations far and wide. Everything set. Fellars ready. Girls dressed. People on their way to the fete. And then rain. People right next door to the fete just a few yards away and rain falling so heavy that they can’t move. The rain fall whole night, not letting up for anybody to move. Another time, the weather good, fete start; fight. The fete mash up. It was these among many disappointments, which led him to migrate.

So I was a backup singer for Bas in a competition in which he sang two songs. One was a composition of mine and the other one was his. My composition—and I remember these things from then—was kind of topical. Saliah had a parlour in Rio Claro that had just been broken into and there was much speculation as to who was responsible for the break in. This is what I remember of my song:

When you have you news that you want to spread
About who getting married or who is dead
Don't tell me at all
Leave me out of that
Go and tell your story
To Tom, Dick, or Harry
Or tell your good friend Parrot
I don't want to know who frenin with Miss Olga
... Something or other ...
Or who break Saliah parlour
I'm not inquisitive
Of that I'm positive
When your have your news
Put it in your shoes

And Bas who was equally talented, had his song. This is what I remember of it:

Don't look for help from me
See the Salvation Army
Don't look for help from me
See the Salvation Army
When you and your man was going okay
Your didn't have one damn thing to say
Now he kick your and he buss your face
Your coming home to my place
Get out my place Miss Emily
I don't want your here
Get out my place Miss Emily
This thing go cost your damn dear
Stick to your man doo-doo la
Stick to the end
I am your enemy
Run by your friend

That competition took place in Rio Claro. The other competitors included the late Zandolie, Michael Anthony's brother from Mayaro and McGruff from Dades Trace. I believe it

is the same McGruff who came out with a song either this year, or last year. Bas the hometown boy was placed third, McGruff was second, and Zandolie won the competition with two calypsos, which later became well known on the national stage. One was “The Jockey” in which he said, (Gordon [Rohlehr] do you remember it?) “I ride cow, goat, horse, sheep, jackass and all / and up to now I never fall,” or something like that.³ And the other was called “Man Family” in which the calypsonian found that his woman, Millicent, was always bringing to their house strange men whom she claimed to be relatives.⁴ As far as he was concerned that was a bit unnatural, she had too many male relatives. He had never met a woman like that who all her family is man. So he said:

Millicent, like you take me for Mickey Mouse
 Always bringing man in my house
 And they always with the government
 Either police or regiment
 I don't want to break your jaw
 I don't want to tangle with the law
 So I want you to write all your family name
 on a piece of paper for me.

To check, I suppose, on whether they were all really bona fide relatives.

As I said Bas was an organizer and in a spirit of entrepreneurship he organized a roving calypso tent and asked me to be a member. Principal participants of this tent were fellows from the same team I played football for, Penetrators. Bas was the right-winger and really loved to play he had speed and determination but he only kicked effectively with his right foot. Once he got injured and we wanted to drop him and he decided no, he was fit to play. I was the captain of the team at that time. So I say, you're injured, your foot not good. He said, no, no, no. I alright. Okay, I said, let us run a race, if I beat you, you can't play, if you win, you play. I was a pretty fast runner, but Bas was a real sprinter. So we lined up in the road in the night. I said Go, and we take off. I had beaten Bas. He say, no, no, no, false start, so we went again about three times until finally Bas kind of edged me on the tape, or told me that he kind of edged me on the tape, and so he played.

With us at that time also was Aji and Lord Shoes. Shoes is a character that appears in *A Brief Conversion and Other Stories*.⁵ He was given the name Shoes because he was the first person in Rio Claro to wear a blue shoes among the fellows so they called him Blue Shoes at first and then they shortened it to Shoes. Shoes used to dance on broken bottle and eat fire. He was quite an intriguing guy and I wrote about him in “The Fire Eater.”⁶ He had come to Port of Spain with BoyBoy and Toy a half-Chinese acrobat, and BoyBoy also was an acrobat who later I was told settled in Britain as an obeah man. Shoes became a calypsonian, at least in Rio Claro. He never wrote anything, he just got on the stage and he started to sing a song about a Chinese fellow and all the words he had were: “Chung, chickee, Chung, chickee, Chung.” He managed to

have people collapsing with laughter, and became a star in Navet, Tabaquite and the places where the tent went.

At Rio Claro, I was also involved in stickfight. There was a lot of stickfighting on the Mayaro road in front of Khandan shop as well as on the road to Biche, with stickmen like Short Boy and Seven Days John. Seven Days John was so named because he was a Seven Days Adventist. I don't know how he became a stickfighter. He was a man with massive forearms and when he made a blow, it looked like the force would break the stick his opponent was parrying with. He was really powerful. Other stickfighters included Panther and Garbo, both from Mayaro. They played football for us too, for Penetrators. I remember going to stick fights, standing up behind the drummers and learning the lavways and singing. One of the songs, which you all may know was: "Crow, crow, jumbie bird crow / jumbie bird wouldn't crow." It is about a jumbie bird that fancies himself a fighting cock, a song in which one fighter ridicules others as they hesitate to come into the gayelle. And you may know this chant, "mooma, mooma, your son in de grave already;" and this, "mooma, mooma pigeon flying, / O Lord, pigeon flying today;" and, "Joe Pringay, lend me your bois to play."

I saw stickfighters, saw the dances, heard the chants, and came to note that every stickman had not only his own chant, but his own special movements, and I recognized the influence of Shango on stickfight. Later I would conclude that much of what Africans brought by way of religion—this may seem like somewhat of a jump but later it will become clear—did not die but were taken into the secular domain. And it is my view that much of what we have now in what is called the Creole culture came out of African religious and cultural forms, principally because there was no other outlet in which they (Africans) could legitimately express self.

As we know, apart from the few Amerindians native to this country, everybody else came here or was brought here. I have taken the view that there were two basic spaces we entered when we came to this country: one I call the Ethnic Space, in which members of a group carried on the religion and cultural practices they brought with them, and the other the Creole Space, the general meeting place of cultures. Every group but the African was allowed an Ethnic space in which they could maintain the religion and culture they had come with. Cultural and religious forms that were African were all banned at one point or another, and so that in order for Africans to express self they had either to abandon their gods or find ways to bring religion and culture into what was legitimate. So nearly everything they had brought had to be poured into the secular space, often not as a whole but as fragments. Carnival would become one such space because it was a legal and legitimate festival, and what might now seem to be independent activities—calypso, stickfight, the carnival characters, were, I suggest, linked to a larger cultural/religious whole. Recently someone told me that she had gone to an egungun festival—in Trinidad—where the masks were the carnival characters baby doll and jab molassie and blue-devils, etc. I remember going to Carriacou (at that time I had no idea of the connectedness between Shango and stickfight), so I went to Carriacou to witness the Big Drum Dance or Nation Dance as it is called, and I went with great anticipation to see all these African survivals that had been kept

alive in dance. And when they started to play the drums and to dance, I recognized all the dances from the stickfights that I had seen over the years in Rio Claro and Grande and Mayaro. I always knew that every stickman entered the ring with his own chant, moved with his peculiar movements just as you see with calypsonians, each had his own rhythm, his own movements. It was then it struck me that these movements, these dances of the stickfighters—there is a word for it that escapes me now—represented the different nation dances. So it seems that even while Africans transcended tribe here in Trinidad and Tobago and in the Caribbean, they retained (without necessarily recognizing it) particular tribal songs and dances and movements.

Not only did the forms move into the secular area, it seems that the spirit did as well. I am referring to spirit possession. Now, I used to think of possession as occurring in a Shango palais brought on by the influence of the drums, the beat to a particular Orisha, and I have witnessed in a Shango ceremony someone possessed exhibiting extraordinary strength and balance which he could not have had without being possessed. I have seen actually, a small man, carrying a big woman on his back while dancing and moving and stopping and darting. I believe that this extraordinary strength by means of possession is the same kind of strength a man displays when he is possessed, when he has a spirit on him. It is the same thing. The people know it. They say so and so has a spirit on him to fight. And so you will see a single man so strong that it will take seven men to hold him down. Shango (if it is Shango doing the possessing) has moved from the religious to the secular space.

And I also attended wakes, which were great social events in the countryside. In Valencia, I remember a fellow there, Sam Primus, who *could* sing. At wakes, Sam was a star, and he always had a little pleasant smile as if he was very conscious of his star status. And I remember him at a wake singing what was literally the test piece for wake singers:

And thou, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah
art not the least among the princes of Judah
for out of thee shall come a governor
and he shall rule thy people Israel.

And the chant that followed:

Aunty Rachel oh,
Aunty Rachel oh, she big and she able
Bring de bottle and she put it on the table
Whole night we going to sing,
Aunty Rachel sing for joy ...

And of course, there was also fine play, which consisted of games and songs: “I have a tree to cut, Zelina / Woy woy, wop, Zelina.” And of course, as well there was bongo at a wake. In Rio Claro I got to know Sylvan who was the champion bongo dancer, who had a voice like a bell and

who was also a good singer, a good chantwell. And these are some of the chants that I remember very fondly,

When de corporal dead and gone,
the place was in a mourn
nobody know
where de corporal dead and go.

And there was another one in which the call and response motif is clear:

When I sol
far sol,
when I dead,
bury me,
in Marabella
Junction,
in Marabella
Junction,
in Marabella
Junction

And there was parang for Christmas and we would go around singing if not the Spanish, which was sung by my neighbour, a county councillor I think his name was Fuentes, old calypsos, or sentimental songs that we liked. One was “Lady in Red” with Tommy on the guitar and others of us with whatever instrument we could make from Christmas toys, bottle and spoon, tins, boxes. Later, I would see the Bel Air dances in Mayaro taken there by Aldwyn Boynes, himself a dancer, and so on. What I have been describing are my first hand experiences of cultural forms within the Creole culture.

Now from these experiences, I have come to see calypso not only as a song, but as a voice emerging from the Creole world, indeed the voice of the Creole world in which the ordinary people lived, in which they celebrated themselves, their heroes, recalled important events, and expressed attitudes to life and the world. There were of course the elements of double entendre as well as the singing of sexually suggestive wake songs, for example:

the bull, the bull, the bull jump the woman in the open savannah,
when he take out his pistle, he make the woman whistle
the bull, the bull jump de woman ...

One can note that there is a whole body, if you want, a base of different types of songs that would influence calypso. But the calypso was not the only voice of that world. We had Sam Cooke, Elvis Presley, Bing Crosby, Nat King Cole, Ella Fitzgerald, Ray Charles. And I don't think we should forget that because that too is part of what influenced us in the Creole world.

How then did Calypso arrive at the outcast status alluded to by Sparrow? We have to remember that before the negative treatment of calypso and calypsonians, the same treatment—indeed worse—was meted out to the Shouters, the Shango and the stickfight—all of them were banned, drumming was banned. But calypso was a powerful force. It was linked to Carnival which was already in the bad books of the colonial authorities and which from the 1840's onwards the press made an all out drive to stop, describing it as *a relic of barbarism and the annual abomination* and so on. Calypso could not be banned, it could be limited, and the most effective way of limiting calypso was to demonize it, to link it to carnival and to bacchanal. This didn't require any fresh imagination. Shango and the Shouters had already been demonized; so in linking calypso to the bacchanal aspect of Carnival or to the idea of Carnival as bacchanal, both Carnival and calypso were consolidated in the Trinidadian's consciousness as bacchanal.

As we know, Carnival was one thing for the black masses and another thing for the whites and mulattoes, one growing out of the Camboulay (cannes brules) and the emancipation struggles, and the other out of the French masked balls and festivities, one on the street and the other in ballrooms. It was the African inspired Carnival that was blasted by the press with a characterization that was so off-putting that until very recently—indeed even now—black people associated with mas have been contemptuously referred to as having a carnival mentality, an attitude to the world that emphasizes wastefulness, revelry, lack of discipline and whatever else is unseemly and unwelcome. And I think that in promoting the idea of Carnival and calypso as bacchanal was one way of discouraging the assigning of too great an importance to them and maintaining them in a nether world of social acceptability. Having calypso identified with bacchanal meant that calypso was linked and limited to the bacchanal season of Carnival. Once Carnival was done, Lent came in and we went back to Nat King Cole and Bing Crosby and others. We were not allowed to sing calypsos in Lent, so imagine the frustration. You dying to tell someone about a calypso you had heard or a band you had seen in Carnival, and you couldn't speak. Now I wasn't a Catholic but somehow the law extended to me. Until Kitchener sang: "Ah go dance in Lent I don't care who say / ... I can't wait until Glorious Saturday." Because I remember that in those days you had to wait until Glorious Saturday which was sometime in the middle of the Lenten season which lasted for forty days, which by the time it came to an end, Carnival would be a thing of the past.⁷

The development of soca calypso that limits itself exclusively to Carnivals has helped to link calypso even more firmly to Carnival and to bacchanal, and to justify calypso's appearance on radio as a strictly seasonal thing. Soca of course does not provide the social challenges that calypso has always done and that is fine with those who see Carnival as bacchanal and calypso/soca as functioning in its service.

And today you have a new song, I don't know whether you call it raga soca or what exactly it is, but it presents a fast paced frenzied beat, guttural sound, an aggressive tone and a performed militancy—I don't know that these fellas stand up for anything that I know—and it occurred to me—we were talking about this, this morning—that this form of music might be

mirroring the harshness in the society or be somehow connected to it. There is a lack of humour, lack of balance. I mean, when Gordon (Rohlehr) was talking about Sparrow's "The Congo Man" yesterday, there were aspects of it that were difficult to swallow, still, the calypso in the end with its humour, made it a little easier for us to relate to each other and understand each other and to come to grips with whatever problems we were having.

I was saying that we have come from disparate places to this country and have had to occupy two spaces: the ethnic space and the Creole space, and that Africans have poured a lot of themselves into that Creole space because they were denied a legitimate ethnic space. I think that makes them therefore very responsible for seeing that this space is made into a real meeting place for all. We all have a lot to lose if that space becomes corrupted, bacchanalized, rendered impotent. The idea of having ethnic spaces as reference points has many merits in what is still very much a Eurocentric world, but the vision of ethnic spaces as a retreat from the bacchanal of the Creole world is a temptation we must resist. The space for adventure, for newness, for growth is the Creole space. It is this space that we have to get right. It is here we have to challenge definitions and pose questions and utilize what we have inherited to shape a real space of our own.

I am thinking that calypso represents the promise and confusion of the Creole culture. There is a lot more to be said and I am about to end now. I think we have some good signs on the horizon, actually not on the horizon but very present, for example, we have Three Canal and Brother Resistance and a whole brigade of young rapso people who have in a way taken the responsibility that this is their place and who understand what has gone on and that we have to go beyond the bacchanal space by continuing to define who we are, to reclaim the fullness of our experience and not to persist with an identity imposed on us by a colonial order whose objective was to keep us on the cultural defensive, the better to sustain its rule. We have to re-examine the history and present as well a vision of the past that impels to our future. We cannot have a past in which we are going to get stuck; it's like writing, you have to start from where you could go forward. We have to answer questions, at least: Who we are? What kind of society we want? How to treat the poor, if we want the poor at all? What rules do we want to live by? What it means to be human in this world? We are not living in a borrowed culture, but one that we are creating, against a background of a lot of struggles an important one of which is to disengage from the bacchanal characterization that began in colonialism and create a self confident culture of our own.

Notes

¹Keynote Address, Conference on Calypso and the Caribbean Literary Imagination, University of Miami, 18th March 2005.

²The Might Sparrow (Slinger Francisco), “Outcast” or “The Outcast,” *The Outcast* LP National NLP 4199, 1964.

³Mighty Zandolie (Sylvester Anthony), “The Jockey,” not commercially recorded, no date.

⁴Mighty Zandolie (Sylvester Anthony), “Man Family” or “Too Much Man Family,” *Too Much Man Family/Merchant of Venice. 7*” National NSP 167, 1968.

⁵Earl Lovelace, *Brief Conversion and Other Stories* (London: Heinemann, 1988).

⁶There are two such stories in *Brief Conversion and Other Stories*: “The Fire Eater’s Journey” and “The Fire Eater’s Return.”

⁷Glorious Saturday actually comes at the end of the Lenten period.