THE CALYPSO AS 'POLITICAL FOOTBALL' IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO: THE STATUS OF CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL COMMENTARY (A Work in Progress)

presented by

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INTRODUCTION:

Traditionally, the calypso, is one of the indigenous music forms of Trinidad and Tobago. Among its many functions, the calypso has played the role of unofficial political communicator for the masses of the society. Its lyrics can disseminate such significant messages to the population of Trinidad and Tobago, that people have come not only to listen to them purely for entertainment, but also for their instrumental value. They listen with the expectation of receiving and perceiving messages from the calypso on commentary about political, governmental and other topics, to which they could relate.

Specifically, in the areas of politics and government, when all is not well in those spheres, the calypsonian articulates this on behalf of the masses. The more there is dissatisfaction among the masses with the state of politics and government in the country, the more this is reflected in the calypso genre of political commentary. While this form of expression is being challenged by the present government since it came into power, certain machinations have been put in place by the government to use that genre self-servingly. Consequently, many calypsonians have begun to practise self-censorship, and both the artistes and the politicians are using the calypso for political expediency.

This paper will examine the contemporary status of the genre of political commentary in Trinidad and Tobago. It will look at a brief history of the influence of calypso in social and political communication, the present government's response to political commentary in recent times, examples of the use of calypso in the 1999 local and 2000 general elections, the 2001 national calypso monarch competition, and excerpts from lyrics of calypsoes for the 2001
carnival season, by two political commentators.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE INFLUENCE OF CALYPSO IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

As far back as during slavery, calypsonians seemed to have special powers through their songs to sway, control, and influence people around the slave masters. This ability earned them in some cases, special favors from their masters. After slavery, the power of persuasive communication remained a strength of the calypsonian. They were experts in their art form on the communication of political and other relevant topics to the population of Trinidad and Tobago.

Calypsonians were described as gunslinging balladeers whose weapons were quick wit, good voices, and a wide knowledge of the events of the land. They were the mouthpiece of the people. They were able to articulate for the population, their analysis, synthesis, and opinions on an extremely wide range of matters, both local and foreign, on social, economic, and political issues.

As time went along, the advent of the twentieth century brought with it further advancement for the calypsonian. The calypso began to receive such wide appeal, that calypsonians were given venues, which were called “tents”, the equivalent of miniature concert halls, to perform their work before the pre-Lenten festival of Carnival, in Trinidad and Tobago. These tents were set up right after Christmas or from the first weeks in the new year, until the Sunday before Carnival. The calypsonian, Chalkdust, in his calypso, “The Tent,” (Liverpool, 2001) describes the calypso tent as the people’s parliament, the calypsonians as the nation’s parliamentarians, and the calypso as an atomic bomb.

In 1914, an annual competition was introduced to choose a Calypso King, or Queen, from the finest singers from each tent. This still endures up to today. It is at this competition,
that the population is treated to social and political commentary at their very best. Political commentary in calypsoes has taken on many different forms. Some of the lyrics are blatant; some are in double entendre, some employ puns, satire, acerbic wit, pungent humor, and corrosive discourse. Some even become personal, and incorporate commentary about family members.

Albert Gomes, now deceased, a former head of state of Trinidad and Tobago during the years 1950 to 1956, firmly believed that the calypso was an important vehicle for communicating political messages. He states that:

The calypso is the most effective political weapon in Trinidad. The singers - all of them - are men reared in poverty and oppression and they sing of the life they know. Thus it is that even when cleverly camouflaged with wit and banter, the sharp tang (acridity) of social criticism is evident in their songs. Moreover, people go to the calypso tents (concert halls) to be entertained. What politician, who must harangue from the rostrum, can boast of a better opportunity for influencing people's minds? The fact that the tents are so sedulously supervised by the police reveals the extent to which the calypso singers influence political thought (Brown, 1987, pp. 251-252).

Gomes, as an early politician, expressed a truth about the potency of the calypso. Other politicians recognized this, but it was not until the United National Congress came into power in 1995, that overt, and insidious attempts have been made to censor calypso, which commented candidly about political and governmental issues.

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO POLITICAL COMMENTARY

The present United National Congress (UNC) government is now in its second term, having won the 2000 elections. It has been averse to calypsonians who sing critically about the Prime Minister or the government’s performance, to the extent that a proposed bill, Clause 7, was drawn up in an attempt to silence the calypsonians. Clause 7 aims at making legislation to censor calypsoes. It
should be noted that no government of Trinidad and Tobago has ever escaped the pen of the calypsonian. Lyrics of calypsoes pertaining to government and politics have always either been invective or complimentary in their satirical or blatant commentaries. The UNC government, though, has been the first to try to muzzle the calypsonian.

For the year 2000, for the calypso competition, the then Minister of Culture laid down certain criteria for acceptable lyrics of calypsoes for the National Calypso competition. A local newspaper editorialises about this action.

Prime Minister Basdeo Panday, it seems, has wisely abandoned his plans to pass laws against calypsoes, which he deems to be offensive. Is that why Culture Minister Daphne Phillips is now trying to achieve the same by other means? Because that is precisely what she is doing when she threatens to pull funding from Tuco (Trinidad and Tobago United Calypsonians Organization) if Sugar Aloes is allowed to compete. ...

As we have stated before, Mr. Panday has every right as a citizen of this country to object to any calypso. If he considers it defamatory he has the legal right to bring its perpetrator to court and claim any of several remedies.

Apart from his understandable dislike for specific calypsoes by specific calypsonians, such as “Why I Stay” by Sugar Aloes, which after all targets both Mr. and Mrs. Panday, the Prime Minister seems to hold strong opinions on matters related to what is good form and what is not in cultural matters. ...

But to seek to ban calypsoes and calypsonians (the aim of Dr. Phillips’ threat) from the national competition because the Prime Minister does not like them - is unacceptable.

It’s unconstitutional and not in the interests of either our democracy or our culture (Sunday Express, March 5, 2000, p.12).

This editorial points out the fear that the government has concerning the potency of the art form of the calypso as a vehicle for political commentary. The government is prepared to use its
power to stifle expressions not complimentary to its administration, by way of the calypso.

The calypsoes presented at the 2001 Calypso Monarch contest, as will be discussed later in the paper, reflects adherence to the “criteria” laid down by the Minister of Culture in the year 2000.

...some calypsonians are afraid to deliver caustic political commentaries for fear of offending certain politicians who may not allow them to escape unscathed. Indeed, Prime Minister Panday, himself, has been an avid critic of calypsoes which he views as “belittling and denigrating citizens and dividing the races in the country”.

Since 1997, he had declared that his Government “would not sit idly by and allow this practice to continue”. (Rampersad, p. 14)

This threat appears to have had a possible “chilling effect” on some calypsonians, fearing reprisals by the government. Panday, apparently, is accomplishing his mission.

It is understandable why the government fears the calypso because of its power in the communication of political issues. The population listens, and perceives the messages (Lashley, 1996). This however, does not mean that the government should use intimidating tactics and measures to suppress the artistes’ expression.

In a study on the perception of lyrics of calypsoes, it was reported that a large part of the population paid attention to the political messages conveyed therein.

When the lyrics express political messages, they are received by a large part of the population of Trinidad and Tobago: 92 percent of the respondents stated that they are aware of the political messages. The degree of awareness differs with the nature of the messages. Messages, which themes deal with the performance of the government, seem to be most readily comprehended. Specifically, 41 percent of the respondents to the question regarding the transmission of political messages said they learned a lot in that regard. On the other hand, only 19 percent indicated that they learned much about government policies. Still, some Trinidadians learn as much about government from calypso as from other media. When asked to name the kinds of information obtained from calypso and the other media, half of the respondents cited information about the government (Lashley, 1996, p. 125)
Undoubtedly, the calypso has been proven to be a vital tool in political communication in Trinidad and Tobago, as exemplified in its uses in the 1999 local elections, and the 2000 general elections in Trinidad and Tobago.

**EXAMPLES OF THE USE OF CALYPSO IN THE 1999 LOCAL ELECTIONS AND 2000 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO**

The lyrics of calypsoes, either unintentional/incidental or intentional, are able to convey significant political messages. The former occurs when the politician uses a calypso that was not originally composed or sung by the calypsonian for use either affirmatively or negatively in a political context. These calypsoes that were not meant for the political arena have been politicized, because their lyrics somehow lend themselves to manipulation and conversion for political usage. The latter occurs when the artiste composes and/or sings a calypso with the intention of purposefully having the lyrics convey either a positive or negative message about politics and government in Trinidad and Tobago. It is very noteworthy that in the 1999 local elections in Trinidad and Tobago, both the People's National Movement (PNM), the opposition party and the United National Congress (UNC), the government party, used calypsoes that were not originally composed for use in the political arena, as theme songs in their campaigns.

The refrain, “Dust Dem Away,” from the calypso, “The Bees in Town,” by Kurt Allen, was used as the PNM’s theme song. Some of the lyrics are: “Dust dem away with your rag. Dust dem away with your flag.” The original intention of that calypso was to encourage people while they were dancing, as a signal that they were enjoying themselves, to wave a rag (handkerchief) or a flag in the air, in the manner in which bees are warded off when they are buzzing around. The calypso was composed as a tune for dancing with reckless abandon. It was not meant to have
any political implication, or overtone. "Dust Dem Away" was politicized by the PNM to exhort the voters to dust away/, defeat/chase away, the UNC government, in the same manner as one would do with bees.

"One Nation", a tune by another calypsonian, David Rudder, was used by the UNC as their campaign theme song. Rudder sang this tune to emphasize unity between the people of African and East Indian descent in Trinidad and Tobago, because of the new tense climate that has emerged in the country between the two groups, since the UNC government came into power. Traditionally, there has always been a cleavage in the voting patterns of these two groups; race has always determined voting behavior. The majority of the African Trinidadian community, and other racial groups, perceive the present predominantly East Indian government as racist. The UNC is well aware of the alienation of the support of the African and other racial groups, for that party. In an attempt to shore up some support from that community, the UNC chose Rudder's tune about national unity to redeem itself from its characterization as a racist government. Part of the lyrics speaks about the meeting of the Ganges and Nile rivers. This is to symbolize unity between the Afro- and Indo-Trinidadian, the two largest racial groups in the country. Again, like Curt Allen's tune, Rudder did not compose his calypso for political purposes. Rudder's tune dealt with social commentary, the state of race relations in the country. Besides the use of calypsoes not originally meant for political commentary, there is also the use of calypsoes composed intentionally for that purpose.

The intentional use of the calypso in political communication, took a different twist for the 2000 general elections. The UNC government, the quintessential foe of political commentary in calypso, employed the art form in both ancillary and adversarial roles in their campaigns. As a whole,
Calypso has always played a great role in campaigns for general elections in Trinidad and Tobago. The 2000 elections, however, saw an increase (Joseph, 2000).

Calypsonians have lyrically risen to the challenge of an added opportunity to showcase their skills and are also enjoying the unbridled license to put in stout defences of their political beliefs.

Many of them have voluntarily supplied songs of support to fuel the propaganda machinery of preferred parties.

The strategy first witnessed in 1986, when the National Alliance for Reconstruction (NAR) commissioned calypsonian Deple to sing “Vote Them Out” has proven successful. Now, both major parties, the People’s National Movement (PNM) and the United National Congress (UNC) have hired professional wordsmiths to pen pieces and popular performers to render them. (Joseph, 2000) p. 1.

Joseph’s observations demonstrate the currency of the calypso for political expediency in Trinidad and Tobago.

For the 2000 general elections, the UNC commissioned two calypsonians, Gregory “GB” Ballantyne, and Mba to come up with campaign calypsoes. GB’s tune, “Double or Nothing” deals with UNC achievements during the party’s stewardship (Joseph, 2000).

Ballantyne is praising the performance of the UNC. He speaks of the progress that has been made in Trinidad and Tobago under the UNC administration. He says:

It was in a ole parlour
Ah listening two neighbour
While a nex’ one sitting on de fence
One say 30 years I here
Yuh now come and yuh gone clear
Yuh build police station Ah hah! Ah hah!
Introduce minimum wage
On crime yuh take advantage
And I was de one who had money in a rage
CHORUS

Is double or nothing
Doh mind how dey plotting
We pass de test
We show dis nation progress
Is a double on de run
For de Rising Sun
De sun to hot, town say
We go bun 'way de balisier
All de people
Shoutin' double
Man in trouble
If he cyar hear
All de people
Shoutin' double
Cause we gone clear (Joseph, 2000, pp. 6-7)

What he is saying is that since the UNC came into power, old-age pension has increased, there is minimum wage legislation, crime is down. He is saying that the UNC would have double success, meaning that the government would be back for a second term, because the nation has progressed under them. GB puns on the symbol of the UNC – the Rising Sun. He says that the sun will burn away the balisier, the symbol of the PNM, the opposition party. He says that people are saying that they want the government for another term, and that the UNC is assured of victory.

GB defends his making a calypso in support of the government. He says: “The constitution defends freedom of choice and my profession does not debar me from working for anyone.” (Joseph, 2000, p.3)

M’ba, the other calypsonian, commissioned by the UNC, came up with “Put We Back,” which was also used as one of the favourite theme songs at UNC political meetings. Some of the lyrics were used as paid radio advertising by the party (Joseph, 2000). This again affirms the power of the calypso as a vehicle for use in political communication in Trinidad and Tobago. The
present government is determined to use the calypso for its political expediency, while at the same time abridging the free speech of the calypsonian. As far as the UNC is concerned, the calypso is to be only used for affirmative commentary about its administration, but not for candid commentary about anything negative about the government or its politicians. The 2001 National Calypso Monarch Competition seems to bear out the government's success in achieving its goal.

**CALYPSOES FOR THE 2001 NATIONAL CALYPSO MONARCH COMPETITION**

As has been mentioned, the calypso public in Trinidad and Tobago has always looked forward to the government-subsidized National Calypso Monarch Competition on the Sunday before Carnival, because it is at that venue that calypsonians present political commentary at its best. Whatever is currently politically-relevant in the country, is sung about, most of which is laced with corrosive humor. Since the 2000 competition, however, political commentary has been waning as an acceptable genre for presentation at that forum.

In 2000, general elections were expected, and some calypsonians did not want to risk alienation, should the present government be returned to power. Since the predominantly East Indian UNC government took control, the calypsonians, most of whom are African-Trinidadians, tended to sing about what they perceived as the racist practices against their group. As has been stated in the paper previously, some calypsonians have ceased singing those types of calypsoes, because they are afraid of political reprisals. It appears for this reason that at the 2000 National Calypso Monarch competition calypsoes did not “carry the same caustic political sting as in the last few years.” (Rampersad, 2000, p. 14) In other words, some calypsonians practised self-censorship. The calypso public was not treated to the usual fare of humorous, vituperative commentary about the government and this has held true for the 2001 competition.
Surprisingly, for the 2001 Calypso Monarch competition, despite the events surrounding the 2000 general elections – voter padding, Elections and Boundaries irregularities, falsification of citizenship by two successful candidates, no contestant touched on any of those subjects. The competition “was perhaps one of the most apathetic and unexciting of recent times. Not only was it sadly lacking in good Trini humor, but the stinging political commentaries were not as prevalent as in previous years.” (Rampersad, 2001, p.14).

Earlier in the paper, it was mentioned that the past Minister of Culture had threatened to pull funding from the Trinidad and Tobago Unified Calypsonians’s Association, if calypsonians continued to attack the government’s performance. This might have had a possible “chilling effect” on some calypsonians. Could this threat have been a factor in the calypsonians’ unwillingness to speak out about political matters via their calypsoes for the 2001 Calypso Monarch competition?

Another factor worth considering is the attractive monetary and material compensation now being offered for the Calypso Monarch contest. For the 2001 competition, each of the twelve finalists, according to his or her place, received cash prizes from $10,000 to $100,000. Besides the cash, the first place winner received a motor car. The 2001 winner happened to be a female, Denise Plummer, who also received another car for the title of National Calypso Queen. She also won Best Social Commentary. She has won “something in the region of $300,000 if we estimate each of her two cars to be valued at $100,000.” (Sunday Express, March 4, 2001). These are substantial gifts, and most calypsonians would like to have a chance to obtain such largesse. In addition, there is the status that goes with being in the national finals, which lends prestige and validation to those who make it there. Appearing at the finals defines the worth of the
These reasons might be deterrents, and unwittingly or deliberately, calypsonians are practising self-censorship, if they want to aspire to be finalists.

The calypsonian, Michael Osuna, who goes by the sobriquet of Sugar Aloes, himself one of the three top stalwarts of political commentary, and who placed third in the 2001 competition, only sang one of his usual genres, “I Plead the Fifth”, benign in comparison with his renditions of the past. What one sees here is that Aloes has cleverly detoured from blatantly attacking the government. The general elections were fraught with irregularities, which allegedly contributed to the victory of the UNC. He does not mention anything about this, but instead lays the blame on the African Trinidadian people for returning the UNC to power. Indirectly, he does the government a favor, by legitimizing their success at the polls, whether he believes it or not. Instead, he mostly attacks his people, and sparingly hits out at the government. The lyrics of Aloes’ calypso seem to be,

... a tacit acceptance that the UNC is here to stay. While he pathetically chastised “his people” for voting the UNC, he admitted at the same time that the UNC’s victory in the last general election was not to be blamed on the EBC or voter padding but on “his people’s” ‘treachery’ (Rampersad, 2001, p. 14).

These are some of the lyrics of “I Plead The Fifth”:

Ah was t’inkin’ what kin’ ah song to write for the year two thousand and one
Should ah compose a nationbuilding song or just blaze dem politicians
Buh when ah hear Panday get 19 seats and he run and give a speech of victory
Ah tell mehself somet’ing wrong so I compose this song for kinky haired people like me
Because ah do’ understan’ what’s really happenin’
For years me Crocs [Cro Cro] an’ Panther was bu’s’ing we liver string
Well I bytes’ly believe the message was loud and clear
Buh the results of the elections prove to me, stick break in black man ear
Dey do’ hear
So do’ expect me to jam yuh Prime Minister
Ah stop drinkin’ bush tea for your fever
‘Cause you ain’t do it once, buh you did it twice
Elections gone, is you choose Barabbas in front ah Chris’…

CHORUS

My personal comments I will reserve, you get a government you deserve
To complain to me now boy you got some nerve, you get a government you deserve (Sugar Aloes, 2001)

Is this a departure for Aloes?

The Prime Minister, in the past, has on many occasions, openly attacked Sugar Aloes, for singing about the political issues affecting Trinidad and Tobago. Sugar Aloes, states in a newspaper interview:

I am not an exterior or interior decorator so I don’t dress up the issues I sing about. I put in melody the same comments I hear from people in society. My work is simply a compilation of national issues. Much of the information I gather from the weekly talk shows, such as Issues Live, I just give it back the way I get it. My comments are made by respected speakers and casual observers. How the people feel on social and political matters are the indicators for composing my songs (Findlay, 1998, p.7.)

This statement further confirms the role the calypsonian ought to play in political communication.

Sugar Aloes (Osuna, 2001), said that in 1998, he was approached by a government official, who asked him to take out certain lyrics from his calypso, and in return, he would be guaranteed to win the Calypso Monarch contest. He refused to do it, and had remained a thorn in the side of the government. It is noteworthy that since 1996, under the UNC government, even though he had always been a finalist, Sugar Aloes has never been able to place high, despite his great performances in the calypso competitions. For 2001, however, he changed his style, and placed third. Like Sugar Aloes, the rest of the finalists realize that political commentary has now become passé.

The titles of some of the calypsoes sung in the 2001 competition such as, “Good Father,” “Women their own worst Enemy,” “Empowerment,” “Stranger,” “Radio T&T”, “Heroes,” “Nah
Leaving,” were bereft of political commentary. Three of the tunes paid tribute to the late calypso great, Lord Kitchener, “Panorama without Kitch,” “Golden Memories,” (by Sugar Aloes), and “Kitchener Say.” It is obvious that all the competitors stayed away from political controversy in their calypsoes (See Appendix I). The contest was listless, devoid of substantive political commentary. This has been corroborated by the observations in newspaper reports.

... the Calypso Monarch contest was flat. ...
... instead there was much high-minded preaching. ...

It seemed the Calypso Monarch contest was on the cusp of change.

Aloes asked himself: “Should I compose a nation-building song or blaze the politician and dem?” He made the wrong choice: nation-building songs are the way forward.

...Things change up, indeed. (Raymond, 2001, p.5)

Another article states:

Given the myriad of political events which have been unfolding at such a breathtaking pace even since before last December’s general election, one would imagine that the calypsonians would have much to sing about. But the lacklustre spectacle at the Savannah was not expressive of the volatile political scenario.

To what can we attribute the dreary display of calypso at the Dimanche Gras last Sunday? Some may contend that recent politics have taken its toll on the entire Carnival season resulting not only in poor quality calypsoes but also in fewer patrons at the tents, ... (Rampersad, 2001, p. 14)

The tunes offered at the competition ignored the present tense political climate in Trinidad and Tobago. What was sung seemed oblivious to that fact. The calypsoes were like a salve trying to cover the many political wounds still festering in the country. There was that pretense, for example, that no one in the population was concerned about the results, and carryings-on of the last election. The reality of the general elections was not borne out in most of the calypsoes,
even in Sugar Aloes "I Plead De Fifth". That calypso did not dwell on the chicanery surrounding the last elections.

The 2001 National Calypso Monarch competition, clearly demonstrates that the calypsonians who “tell it like it is,” about the nation’s government and politics, would be systematically debarred from this contest, one of the best milieus for using the calypso to speak out on such issues. Some of the excerpts of lyrics of the political commentaries presented by two of the top three commentators for the 2001 carnival season, would be briefly analyzed. The calypsonians did not make it to the finals for the 2001 National Calypso Monarch competition.

EXCERPTS FROM CALYPSOES FOR 2001 BY TWO POLITICAL COMMENTATORS

Sugar Aloes, Weston Rawlins, known as Cro Cro in the calypso world, and Eric Taylor, whose sobriquet is Pink Panther, have emerged as the top political commentators in calypso. Sugar Aloes, and Cro Cro, have always employed brazen lyrics in their calypsoes, while Pink Panther, has always been subtle, using double entendre, satire. It is glaring that Cro Cro and Pink Panther, who have usually appeared as finalists, were not chosen.

This has been the second successive year that Cro Cro has not made it to the finals for the calypso Monarch contest. He has had a record of making it to eleven finals consecutively, has won the title three times, and has placed second on five occasions, under three different government administrations. He says that he knows that he has not been picked for the finals for the past two years, because of what he persists in singing – commentary of governmental and political issues. Cro Cro says, however, that he does not care, because he is committed to singing about the plight of the future of the African masses under the present oppressive conditions of the UNC administration (Rawlins, 2001).
Two of Cro Cro’s calypsoes for this year, addressed the irregularities and shenanigans of the last general elections. “Gypsy Yuh Wrong” comments on two of the candidates who contested the elections, despite holding citizenship for two foreign countries, the U.S. and Canada. Section 48 of the Trinidad and Tobago constitution clearly prohibits one from being elected to the House of Representatives who “is a citizen of a country other than Trinidad and Tobago, having become such a citizen voluntarily, or who is under a declaration of allegiance to such a country.” Both candidates were successful at the polls, and a matter is now before the Supreme Court to declare their victories null and void. One of the two, coincidentally, was a former calypsonian, Winston Peters, known in the calypso world as “Gypsy”. Cro Cro discusses this:

Ah comin’ down de highway, humming ah nice ole Kitchener song
Just so ah tu’n roun’, ah police wid a motor-bike flag meh down
Since de election and de paddin’, ah real easy to get vex
De man say how he’s Cons’able Rex and how ah doing twelve miles in excess
As a law abidin’ citizen, ah take meh ticket an’ went an’ pay
De same day, De very same day
De reason why ah tellin’ yuh meh business, is dat ah want yuh to see clearly
Dat dey have ah law for me, an’ anuder one for Chaitan an’ Gypsy

CHORUS
But de law should be for everybody
It is plain to see UNC hi-jack de democracy
An’ ah blamin’ Isaac Hyatali
‘Cause is he who condone padding at de E.B.C.
Still, Gypsy yuh wrong
Is you sign de form
Wheedder PNM or UNC
Yuh should respec’ de democracy
Look Gypsy yuh wrong
Yuh sign ah false declaration
Dem kind ah illegal t’ing dat yuh do
Yuh stealin’ de soul ah de nation too (Cro Cro, 2001)
Cro Cro has conveyed his feelings about that issue, angrily, and clamorously. Of course, this calypso about the government would not have made Cro Cro eligible to be chosen as a finalist for the Calypso Monarch competition.

Cro Cro’s other tune “Dey Padding”, comments on the voter padding that took place in the recent general elections. He incorporates the witty, risqué metaphorical characteristics of the genre of political commentaries.

Ah hear ah vagrant say on de pavement
UNC is ah female gover’ment
Dey boasting how dey win de election
But de election was lace’ wid corruption
Dey bring commonwealt’ people to observe
Dey drink plenty liquor and eat plenty hors d’oeuvres
He say, “Cro Cro doh care wha’ dey say
Sing dis Mantra on Carnival day

CHORUS

In San Fernando, dey paddin’
In Mayaro dey paddin’
Barataria dey paddin’
Dese people like dey born corrup’
Dey buy out all de Stayfree in de shop
Like dey come out to foul we up
Ah say dis blasted nonsense mus’ stop
Siparia dey paddin’
Moruga dey paddin’
Las’ election check dem ministers
Dey paddin’ like dey seeing dey periods (Cro Cro, 2001)

Cro Cro’s two calypsoes, without a doubt, because of the modus operandi of the present government, would never have qualified him as a finalist for the Calypso Monarch competition. His other compatriot, Pink Panther suffered the same fate.

Pink Panther perfects the art of political satire, and double entendre. He admits that he
found that niche after trying all other types of calypso, since he started singing in 1979. Panther says that political commentary has made him acceptable. He says that he researches the political issues in the land, does his unscientific surveys by speaking to people about these issues, and receiving their feedback. Panther says that double entendre is light, yet heavy on political commentary. He sees calypsoes as a form of entertainment, even though they should be informative. Serious messages could be conveyed with humor, rather than making a speech in song (Taylor, 2001).

For this calypso season, Panther was at his best, bringing down the house every time he sang two of his calypsoes at the tent. "The Constitution" and "The Electors", discuss topics related to the last general election. Pink Panther, who has made it to the finals for the past five years, however, did not make it to the 2001 Calypso Monarch contest. Pink Panther strayed from his usual satire/double entendre in his lyrics this year. He blatantly sang about issues related to the general elections, and he paid dearly for this. "The Constitution" addresses the refusal by the President of Trinidad and Tobago to swear in seven candidates who were unsuccessful at the general elections, as part of the government. He applauds the President for his stance, and sings about it.

Have you heard de news
Yes, de President refuse
To appoint seven candidates dat lose
He said plain, today is seven
Tomorrow might be fourteen
So Mr. Robinson say he is not goin' to swear dem in
Well yuh know how we Trini
How we like we t'ing a'ready
We tu'n lawyers overnight
Some sayin' dat he wrong
Some sayin' dat he right
Buh hear what ah tell yuh
CHORUS

Frien’s before we start to grumble
We should take a look at de preamble
And if we do, we might understan’
The true spirit of the Constitution.
We can’t allow people to do as dey please
Streams run into rivers and den into seas
For taking such a courageous stan’
May God bless Arthur Napoleon (Pink Panther, 2001)

Panther’s other tune, “The Electors,” talks about the irresponsible voting behavior of the electorate of Trinidad and Tobago. He berated the machinations employed by the UNC to persuade some of the population to vote for the party. He chides the electoriate for not taking the right to vote seriously. This calypso would definitely not have been approved for the Calypso Monarch contest because of its candid lyrics, exacerbated by the use of the word “coolie”, to which the present administration is sensitive. (The use of the word has been outlawed). These are some of the excerpts from the calypso:

In 1946 we get adult suffrage
Nigger and Coolie get de right to vote
But de way some ah we does use this privilege
Like we doh really know what it’s wort’
We doh care about manifesto
Sometime we doh even know who’s the candidate
But if ah nex’ election call tomorrow
Yuh know we runnin’ to participate
Yuh know why

CHORUS

Some vote for party
Some vote for race
Dey doh care about dis country
An’ de problems dat we face
Some vote for roti
Some will vote for alcohol
Some will vote for a jersey
An’ some doh vote at all (Pink Panther, 2001)

Cro Cro and Panther suffered the consequences of daring to speak out about political issues that relate to the society. In this case, it was about the irregularities that surrounded the 2000 general elections. What then is happening to political commentary in calypso?

The 2001 National Calypso Monarch competition did not feature any calypsonian who dealt with serious commentary on politics and government. The Prime Minister has followed through on his statement, that he would not sit idly by and allow this practice of political commentary to continue. He has succeeded to a great extent.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS:

The paper has presented a brief history of the tradition behind the calypso and social and political commentary, how the new government is using certain stratagems to break this tradition in calypso, and its impact on calypsonians. This research clearly illustrates the various exploits of the calypso in contemporary political communication. Both the calypsonian and the politician now seem to use the calypso as a vehicle to advance their agenda. The calypsonian and politician are now using the calypso for politicing.

As can be seen from the 2001 Calypso Monarch contest, the overwhelming majority of the contestants sang tunes other than blunt political commentary. The absence was markedly so, even in the face of the recent events surrounding the last general elections. The Calypso Monarch contest seems to be no longer the forum for political commentary. Are we seeing the beginning of a subtle abridgement of freedom of speech in Trinidad and Tobago?

The intrepid commentators, Cro Cro and Pink Panther, and their likes, would never be
among the finalists at a Calypso Monarch competition, the paramount forum for their genre of outspoken political commentary, as long as the present government remains in power. The only avenue for such expression would remain at the tents. Commentary about political matters in Trinidad and Tobago, through calypso is now being self-censored by calypsonians. It can be concluded, therefore, that calypso has now become a “political football”, being kicked around by both politicians and calypsonians in Trinidad and Tobago, for political expediency.

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