

# REDEFINING TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO'S CULTURAL BOUNDARIES

## THROUGH ITS PERFORMING ARTS OF MUSIC & DANCE: 1962-2012



**DR SATNARINE  
BALKARANSINGH**

Scholar and Specialist in  
Indian Dance and Culture,  
Trinidad

The year 2012, marks a milestone in the history of independent Trinidad and Tobago (T&T). The twin-island state celebrates its 50th anniversary as an independent nation, a young Republic. The people of T&T belong to separate and distinct ancestries; they come from distinctly different geopolitical and historical areas, both in the old and the new world – from South America, North America, Europe, the ancient civilisations of Africa, the Middle East, Asia and China. The convergence of all these cultures and peoples thus reflects a mosaic of races and ethnicities, colours and hues, each with their distinct and separate cultural practices, customs, rituals and festivals. The T&T society is young and fragile, emerging from a colonial construct, created by African slaves whose cultural values were more or less beaten and psychologically wrenched out of them; by indentured labourers from Portuguese territories, from India and China who basically had faint memories of their antecedents and whose mother countries were themselves being socially and psychologically refashioned and reformed. In India, the reformation was engineered by wave after wave of colonialism and physical bifurcation. The Portuguese and Chinese progeny on the islands, just like their Indian counterparts, had forgotten the culture of their homelands. In addition to this, entrepreneurs and cavaliers from Europe, Scotland, Ireland and North America came into the mix. The native sons and daughters of the country, the indigenous tribes, provided no major backbone or contribution to the development of an indigenous culture. They had long been slaughtered and decimated by the first known 'discoverers'. The country displayed streams of socio-cultural dualism: Saxon, African and Indian parallel streams existed side by side.

This colonial construct also provided a bureaucracy with its attendant hierarchy of laws, rules, practices and attitudes designed to keep the

colonial rulers at the helm of governance. British colonialism, especially in the socio-economic, educational and cultural fields, was profoundly manifested in every aspect of daily life – in value systems, norms, behavioural patterns and attitudes to arts and culture, that is, European culture. Notwithstanding the colonial value system, the various cultural streams manifested themselves in various ways.

By the middle of the 19th Century, the country displayed a significant assortment of art forms including music and dance forms derived from these various cultures that had been 'brought' or 'arrived' as part of human baggage and established over generations, and were effectively being practised. With this compendium of experiences derived from the plantation economy, slavery, bonded labour, foreign dominance and some entrepreneurship, the young society was energised into seeking – but it did not even know what it was seeking out, save for the fact that it was overawed with the concept and prospect of self governance; it was searching for a new way, a new deal for its self governance, for charting a new course and looking for new directions.

On the eve of our Independence, the country possessed a significant array of the creative and performing traditions, vocal and instrumental music and dance forms inherited from our various legacies.<sup>1</sup> Folk music, dance and village theatre had survived colonialism and was an integral part of everyday life. These art forms had helped to transcend socio-political and economic boundaries of the (basically) plantation economy, serving as diffusers of whatever divisions presented themselves in the structure of the community. They were woven into the very fabric of the society.

The Spanish legacy included the musical genre of the *Parang* "the colloquial term for *Parran*, the abbreviation for *Parranda*, the Spanish word which means a spree, or carousel, or a group of more than four people (*paranderos*) who go

out at night singing to the accompaniment of musical instruments.”<sup>22</sup> They performed a full repertoire of songs appropriate for the occasion. Accompanying the music were dance forms such as *Joropo*, *Castilian*, *Manzanares* and the *Pasillo*. The *Sebucan* also referred to as the Maypole had its own musical accompaniment. While the *Parang* and its accompanying dances were popular during the Christmas festivities, the *Sebucan* was performed both for Carnival as well as during the fiestas and fairs in the month of May.

The French legacy, which dates back to the 18th Century following the signing of the *Cedula de Población* (1783), included the introduction of the courtly dance of the *European Minuet*, which in a folk setting became the *Bele*, or *Bel Air* and later developed variations of its original presentation. The country inherited the *Pique*, the *Chiffone* and the ritual festivity of *Carnival* from the French planters. Carnival, which was initially celebrated locally as exclusive masked balls of the elite had, by 1962, undergone several incarnations; from parading through the streets in open vehicles, to moving on foot, chipping down the streets of the towns and cities in the masquerade bands behind locomoted steel bands and brass bands with a two-step shuffle and swaying hips to the music of the calypso, a social commentary on the times. Other masked characters, introduced at varying periods into the Carnival pot pourri included sailors (king sailor, drunken sailor, stoker and fireman), *Jab Jabs*, *Jab Molasi* and *Moko Jumbies*, dragons, bats and imps, *Bookmen*, *Minstrels*, *Tobago Speech Bands*, *Burroquite* and *Burokit* (*Sumerie* or *Kat Ghora* [wooden horse]), warriors (Africans, *Warahouns* and Red Indians), *Midnight Robbers*, *Baby Dolls*, *Dame Lorraines* and *Police and Thief*. Most of these characters displayed unique forms of both verbal and physical presentations in their stylised portrayals of the respective characters. In the *Pretty Mas* category, the costume designs and fabrics were elaborate and rich, varying from

historic and contemporary to futuristic themes.

The African performative traditions in T&T, travelling through time from the African continent, came to our shores as ritual music and dances from its various tribes: the Yoruba tribe from Nigeria, Rada from Dahomey (Benin), Mandingoes from Senegal, the Congolese from Zaire and Angola, Sierra Leone, the Guinea Coast and Ghana. They practised the *Bongo*, *Nation Dances* such as the *Saraka* from Yoruba land in Nigeria, the *Ibo* and *Nago* of Nigeria, the *Manding* from Senegal, *Temne* of Sierra Leone, *Rada* of Benin (formerly Dahomey), *Koromantees* from Guinea, the *Kalinda* a martial art of stick fighting and the *Limbo*. Each of these performing traditions carried their unique presentational forms of dancing, drumming and chanting.

Commencing from 1845 onward to 1917, waves of Portuguese, Chinese and Indian indentured labourers arrived on these shores. They, the East Indians more so, brought their folk traditions so that by 1962 there was a vibrant array of Chinese and Indian folk music and dance forms. Most popular were the Dragon and Fan dances of the Chinese. The East Indians performed the Jharoo

On the eve of our Independence, the country possessed a significant array of the creative and performing traditions inherited from our various legacies

Indian dancer at the Diwali celebrations



All photographs by Stephen Broadridge

From 1845 onwards to 1917, waves of Portuguese, Chinese and Indian indentured labourers arrived on these shores, so that by 1962 there was a vibrant array of Chinese and Indian folk music and dance forms

(broom), Rumal (scarves), the Banjara (gypsy), Ras Leela, Dandia or Kollatam (stick dances) and the Nagara or Ahirwa. The folk melodies of each dance form were different. The Biraha, an extempore folk music, accompanied the Nagara dance. There were pure and interpretative dances for the various festivals such as Phagwa and Diwali, for the festive occasions of jagnas or bhatwan (the night before an Indian wedding) nights; Chatti and Barahi (the sixth and twelfth day after the birth of babies). The observance of the commemorative ritual of Muharram or Hosay had its own unique art forms – ritual music and dance, including the Gatka a martial arts form, Banaithe (twirling of fire staves around the body), the ‘firepass’ and the moon ‘dancers’. The Indians also performed an array of dance dramas: Indar Sabha, Harishchandra, Sarwaneer (Sarwan Kumar), Ramleela, Krishna Leela, Gopiechand and Bhakta Prahalad. Each of these village theatrical productions carried their own unique musical accompaniment.

By the 1960s, dozens of Indian orchestras and many *filmi* dancers had established themselves. *Mastana Bahar* (enjoyment galore), the competitive local television programme established after Independence derived the majority of its participants from the performers of *filmi* music and dance.

Simultaneously with this Bollywood trend was the performance of the very popular folk music genre referred to as *local Indian Classical* music. With no memory of its original structure, rules of grammar, syntax, and no properly trained bards, either in the music or the language of its rendition, it did not conform to the rules of the classical music from the mother (and now grand- and great-grandmother) country. Still it was referred to as *local Indian Classical* music.

But the euphoria of the celebrations of attainment of independent status from colonialism soon passed. The country was still managed as if it was being ‘overseered’ for the external master, engaging

in planning but psychologically unable to take the appropriate decisions for self development. Such had been the level of indoctrination through this acculturation process. The development in the cultural field continued to be lopsided. Notwithstanding the official policy, the arts and artistic expressions, being a people-centred institution, continued to grow, not because of, but in spite of State intervention. Shortly after Independence, the National Council for Indian Music and Drama, was founded – 1964 and later underwent a name change to the National Council for Indian Culture (Council for Indian Culture Ltd). The National Cultural Council was also established under the directorship of musician, Marjorie Padmore.

The inherited performing arts and the performative traditions within our rituals and festivals were the platforms on which our current performing art forms were being propagated and on which many new musical genres and movements germinated. By the 1970s several genres of music were either being developed or sharpened: Calypso, Rock Steady, Rhythm and Blues, Jazz, Kaiso-Jazz, Indian folk, Chutney, film music and the local Indian Classical music. The steel bands, that powerful magnetic force, invented and innovated upon by many artistes including the Manette brothers, Bertie Marshall, Rudolph Charles, Anthony Williams and Pete Simon, attracted large numbers throughout the country and whole communities formed themselves under the Steelband Association and later under Pan Trinbago. This movement developed as a formidable musical force with significant negotiating capability. The bands played the western classics, Calypso and popular contemporary music with sprinkling of Indian tunes. The Indian orchestras performed Indian *filmi* music coming out of the Bollywood film industry. Authentic Indian classical music, introduced in the 1960s by Professor H.S. Adesh, was being taught on a regular basis.

Within the folk theatre fraternity the government had introduced the Prime Minister's *Best Village* programme. Television programmes such as *Mastana Bahar* and its counterpart *Scouting for Talent* became popular with local audiences. Choirs were formed and attracted large memberships and audiences. The light Operatic Society and other theatrical and drama companies including the San Fernando Theatre Guild, Freddy Kissoon and the Strolling Players, the Yard Theatre and the Trinidad Theatre Workshop founded by poet and playwright Derek Walcott were developing actors and the theatre audiences. The National Drama and Dance Associations were duly formed.

**Current situation: The influence of music and dances on the rituals and festivals – Carnival dances, weddings, births and other ceremonies of our peoples**

Being a new plural society – for 50 years is new in the history of civilisation – Trinidad and Tobago continues to forge its own identity, character and hence destiny while influencing other identities. Today it is very difficult to explain to a foreign visitor to Trinidad who comes to enjoy our cricket why we use drums, blow conch shells and dance while enjoying this seemingly normal, sporting activity, how we 'dance' down the pitch to wallop the ball, and in these actions we have distorted, denigrated and converted the experience into a new phenomenon, the formerly sober, prim and proper, British-invented game of cricket, now has our image and identity on this reincarnated sport.

Similar to the innovative experience that we bring to the game of cricket, other new innovations of the post-independence era within the performing arts have taken root and continue to develop into distinct genres and styles of performances. Within 50 years these familiar sights of masqueraders chipping to the calypso beats have been replaced by Disc Jockeys (DJs) mounted on huge transport lorries,

blasting sounds at decibels capable of damaging the ear drums. The DJs now play an assortment of musical genres. The uncomplicated, two-step shuffle of the clothed masqueraders have been replaced with the skimpy-wear of thousands of masqueraders, who seize every opportunity for engaging in movements of pelvic thrusts, bumping, grinding, wining and gyrating.

The *Bele* or *Bel Air* dance has developed variations (Grand Bele and Congo Bele) to its presentation. Many of the folk dances have also undergone technique and presentational changes. Some of these changes have not been in conformity with the original intent and purposes of the original forms.

Trinidad has become the Mecca of pan music, with pan musicians making the annual trek from across the globe to seize the opportunity to perform with steel bands in the annual Panorama festival for Carnival.

The 'High Life' music found in the west coast of Africa, especially Nigeria and Ghana, is said to be influenced by the Trinidad calypso, and was introduced by West Indian sailors who comprised largely sailors from Trinidad and Tobago.



**Being a new plural society – for 50 years is new in the history of civilisation – Trinidad and Tobago continues to forge its own identity, character and hence destiny while influencing other identities**

Carnival Queen costume



Within the folk theatre fraternity the government introduced the Prime Minister's Best Village programme. Television programmes such as *Mastana Bahar* and its counterpart *Scouting for Talent* became popular with local audiences

The Rocksteady beat that emerged out of Jamaica was a creation of Trinidadian Nearlin Taitt. Researcher Kim Johnson records that Taitt, a pannist from the steel band *Seabees of San Fernando*, slowed down Ska music to arrive at the Rocksteady which later "paved the way for reggae."<sup>3</sup>

The Soca beat, according to its creator Ras Shorty I, is a crossover of Indian and African rhythms, the result of Shorty's neighbourhood influences in Indo-Trinidadian Barrackpore. It spawned Bollywood's famous *Om Shanti Om*, originally introduced there by playback singer Kishore Kumar, after his visit to Trinidad and his meeting with Ras Shorty I.<sup>4</sup> People of the Trinidadian and West Indian Diaspora are enjoying *Chutney* music and dance in their new environments, never mind the quality of its offerings.

On the other hand the performing arts of vocal and instrumental music, dance and folk theatre, inherited at the dawn of Independence have lost many of their uniqueness, becoming more or less at present, functioning as merely religious manifestations, pastimes or professions of entertainers, sanitised and devoid of their initial charm. Our current, formal institutions of learning more or less have been substituted for and conform to the models and the structures put in place by the metropolis that used to govern the colonial system. Thus, a fair amount of the arts in T&T, having moved from their original places of performance – the village setting – and away from their old custodians, unto the proscenium stages, have lost their intent and purposes and hence their uniqueness, their very souls, in the evolutionary processes and indeed in the current anthological study of the different styles of dance and genres of music. Because of our history of colonisation moving into neo-colonisation, neo-liberalism and an increasingly globalised economy, the reality of the global village and its effect on our social and cultural values continue to render

our performing arts very fragile, even distorting them. Many art forms are rapidly dying, the result of neglect and lopsided development, placing their development in the wrong hands, with insensitive bureaucrats plus uneducated, uninitiated practitioners who do not fully comprehend their initial intent and purposes and hence their values and roles in national development. This needs to be redressed.

**The dimming of lines of 'pure' introduced cultures and their respective rituals and festivals into new idioms in our performative traditions: Redefining the new idioms**

Notwithstanding the above developments, there are a number of positives aspects to our current situation. Cultural syncretism today is a fact of our existence. The Orisha and Baptist faiths use the same implements of worship, the *tharia* and *lota* (brass plate and cup), as the Hindus. The bells are rung in the worship of the Hindus, the Baptists and the Orishas. Incense is a common feature of the worship in all the religions in T&T – Christianity, Hinduism, African-inspired religions, Islam, and Buddhism. Orisha and Voudoun gods are equated with the saints of the Christian faith and the gods of the Hindu pantheon. Siparia's La Divina Pastora of the Roman Catholics or Soparee Mai of the Hindus is the same divinity that manifests to the Orishas. Orishas and Baptists plant specially consecrated prayer flags or Jhandis; pennants on long bamboo poles, just as the Hindus, or the Kali/Mariayama worshippers of south Indian ancestry.

**Issues and perspectives for the 21st Century**

T&T continues to remain a very unique area where music, dance and folk theatrical traditions still exist. People are still connected to it through its rhythm and spirituality. It runs in our genetic structure, so to speak. It is part of our ancestry and tradition and as such, if properly handled it can help in stemming the tide of violence,

dependence on illicit drugs and purposelessness to which our youths seem addicted at the moment and hence the proliferation of criminal activity. In this regard, the arts can be a vehicle to retrain the youth into developing discipline, focus, purpose and a holistic (left brain, right brain development) education with a new way of looking at life – change the way we look at things and the very things we look at will change.

Music has a significant impact on the mind. The powerful magnetism of the steelband music, the Indian orchestras, the choirs, music ensembles and dance schools and other performing companies to which people have gravitated must be harnessed, individually and collectively, for redirecting energies of anger, frustration, hopelessness and community helplessness into positive and sobering thoughts and actions. Its growth and development can be planned effectively and with sensitivity to improve the socio-economic returns to the country by its contribution through the entertainment sector, our tourism offerings and invisible trade.

The role and functions of our rituals and festivals need to be re-examined for their further propagation and development and their showcasing in their natural environments, the communities. In this regard the cultural icons and living mentors in these fields must be sought out for their respective expertise and experiences and engaged, in a respectful way, to assist in the further development of this sector. The benefits to this approach are many: The perpetuation of our cultural uniqueness; the people will have a stake in its survival, improvement and development; T&T will be a heaven for research scholars in socio-cultural anthropology, cultural studies, and investigating the concepts of cultural persistence and the emergence of unique societies; and it would attract and encourage further development in the film and documentary production, research and artistic publications. This of

course will require serious, systematic and sustained planning and implementation with the collaboration of the State machinery, the artistes and cultural practitioners.

The country has so far not yet begun to understand the proactive role that our arts can play in the geopolitical diplomacy of other nations. This country needs to explore the latent strength of this sector in consolidating, expanding and strengthening our diplomatic relations internationally.

What is critically required at the moment is a proper, transparent mechanism – planning, administrative and funding mechanism such as a National Commission on Culture – to be established, implemented, monitored and constantly evaluated so that our performing arts, and indeed all of our art forms continue to flourish or they will flounder in the current quagmire of missteps and dead habit. ■

1. Molly Ahye, *Golden Heritage, The Dance in Trinidad and Tobago*. Trinidad 1978. Also see M.P. Alladin. *Folk Dances of Trinidad and Tobago*. Trinidad: N.P., 1970 and *The Monstrous Angel -Forty Poems*. Trinidad: N.P., 1969.
2. Daphne Pawan - Taylor, *Parang of Trinidad* (Trinidad: National Cultural Council, 1977)8
3. Kim Johnson, *The Illustrated Story of Pan*. Trinidad : UTT 2011. p91
4. Debbie Jacob, "Vulgarity is killing the Music- Interview with Ras Shorty I," *Trinidad Express*, 26 Feb. 1996: 15

**The Soca beat, according to its creator Ras Shorty I, is a crossover of Indian and African rhythms, the result of Shorty's neighbourhood influences in Indo-Trinidadian Barrackpore**

Panorama steel drum competition finals

