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«Forged from the Love of Liberty»

Popular Music, Resistance, and Identity in Trinidad and Tobago's Carnival

In memory of Pat Bishop, her colours
and her notes.

«The drum does never forget»

RAWLE GIBBONS, *Ogun Iyan: As In Pan*

Starting an article with words as important as «Music, Resistance and Identity» in the subtitle immediately gives readers the impression that the writer's field of research should be immense; in these few pages I rather chose to embrace the small story of two small islands, though it is a small story with universal consequences. What I will argue in this paper is that the birth and the development of Trinidad and Tobago's popular music, of Carnival music in particular, is strictly connected to resistance to European colonization, and that it also was among the fundamental bases for the birth and the development of Trinbagonian identity. Music in Trinidad has in fact represented not only the expression of the thoughts of a nation, but something to fight for, and a fundamental weapon for the fight against colonialism, and for a new national identity.

The twin islands of Trinidad and Tobago celebrated their independence on August 31st 1962. Before that day, though, there was a long history of European colonialism: both islands, originally inhabited by the Caribs and the Arawaks, had in fact experienced dozens of consecutive colonizations, especially by the British, the Spanish, the French, and the Dutch. When the Spanish welcomed other European planters to the island in 1783, with the *Cédula de Población*, French planters from the neighbouring Caribbean Islands came and brought their rituals over, especially Carnival. The Trinbagonian Carnival tradition, though, is strongly influenced by the African masquerade, a fact we can also trace in its name, *mas*. In African masquerade, the social role of a person is strictly connected to his or her identity as a masquerader; it reflects people, rather than creating a new and false image. And just

like masquerade, Trinidad Carnival is a process of unmasking, rather than masking. Hollis Liverpool, a scholar better known by his Calypsonian name, Chalkdust, writes:

In essence, the Carnival tradition in Trinidad is indicative of the manner in which the cultural identity of Trinidadians unfolded. [...] Evidence surrounding the history and development of Carnival will show the fight by the Africans, in particular, and the Europeans, in general, to come to grips with the problem of cultural identity.¹

In Trinidad, Carnival is the best possible representation of time and space, not a time out of time or responsibility, and this country is deeply *in* Carnival, not just a country of Carnival, as Jorge Amado wrote about Brazil.² Trinidad's Carnival is a performative ritual of cultural resistance and awakening, claiming a space and celebrating freedom from any kind of oppression. Space and freedom are claimed and celebrated at the same time, through the performative acts of «swaying, jumping up and rolling on the ground that claim the horizontal and vertical dimensions of space».³ It is through this festive performance that Trinbagonians have come to build an identity of their own, and through this same performance they have fought to defend it. And music, leading rather than accompanying the physical appropriation of the street by the masqueraders, is fundamental for this performative ritual.

Just like the people of Trinidad and Tobago, the music of these islands has a history of *métissage*, of hybridization and cross-culturalism. Gordon Rohler, one of the most reputed scholars of Trinidadian music, told me in my first day on the island: «If you look at how our musical genres are mixing, you can actually see how our people and our different heritages are encountering each other».⁴ Most popular music in Trinidad is born directly in and for Carnival; Calypso, Soca, and all the sub-genres derived from them. The commercial influence of Carnival on Trinbagonian music is so strong, that even a genre like Rapso, «comparatively detached from the commercialized music competitions taking place during Carnival»,⁵ has at least to deal with the Carnival season boom in music industry. The most

¹ HOLLIS LIVERPOOL, *Rituals of Power and Rebellion: The Carnival Tradition in Trinidad & Tobago 1763-1962*, Chicago, Research Associates School Times Publications, 2001, p. XV.

² See JORGE AMADO, *O País do Carnaval*, Rio de Janeiro, Schmidt, 1931.

³ RAWLE GIBBONS, *Room to Pass: Carnival and Caribbean Aesthetics*, in *Enterprise of the Indies*, ed. George Lamming, Port of Spain, The Trinidad and Tobago Institute of the West Indies, 1999, p. 152.

⁴ Interview with Gordon Rohler, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, 15 October 2008, in GIUSEPPE SOFO, *Jouvay of a Culture: Risveglio e resistenza culturale nel teatro di carnevale a Trinidad*, tesi di laurea specialistica (master's thesis), Università di Bologna, Facoltà di Lingue e letterature straniere, a. a. 2007-2008, p. 185.

⁵ MAIKE LENGEMANN, «Did you know? Did you know? Dis Trini could flow»: *Mobilizing Sociolinguistic Resources in Trinidadian Rapso Music*, «Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik», LX, 3 (2012), p. 227 (Special Issue *Authenticity in Creole-Speaking Contexts*, eds. Véronique Lacoste and Christian Mair).

traditional music genre of Trinidad, Calypso, comes directly from the West African cry «kaiso!», shouted in sign of appreciation of a griot's song, mediated by the voice of the *chantwell*, «whose sole duty was to keep the men working together by singing short, measured songs», and to whose «high-pitched chants» the labourers would answer «with deep-sounding drawn-out grunts of “heaves” as they executed their movements». ⁶ «It originated as a song of resistance on the plantation among the slaves», tells us Savory, «and behind this is probably an ancestry in satirical African orature», ⁷ but it would be wrong to see contemporary Calypso as a solely African-influenced genre:

Calypso singers have borrowed songs from a wide range of sources. Many tunes and lyrics came from other islands or from the South American mainland. After emancipation, Afro-French songs drifted in from Grenada, Carriacou, St. Lucia, Dominica, and Guadeloupe. British Creole migrants brought songs from Barbados, St. Vincent, and Tobago. And late in the nineteenth century, the sound of the string band blew in from the Spanish Main. There is ample evidence of the contribution of Patois and French songs to Calypso in the 1890s and 1900s. ⁸

The voice of the *chantwell* is the first voice of the nation, preceding the Calypsonian, and leading the *kalinda* ritual and the *canboulay* bands, which have allowed music to become one of the most effective means of resistance to cultural oppression. The French-imported ritual became Trinidadian *mas*, when the people of African descent started to gain control over it, strictly connecting its celebrations to freedom and emancipation. One thing that must be clarified, though, is that Carnival and *canboulay* are not the same festival, but two distinct festivals which later came to be celebrated together, when *canboulay* «appropriated Carnival festive space, even before emancipation», ⁹ a fact that is rarely acknowledged. And the unification of these festivals did not originate from an imitation of European Carnival, as it is always said, because these people «were playing their own masquerades», «they were playing themselves, they were not imitating European masquerades». ¹⁰ What is sure, though, is that after emancipation the African population of Trinidad was in control of the

⁶ LISE WINER, *Dictionary of the English/Creole of Trinidad & Tobago on Historical Principles*, Montreal, McGill-Queens University Press, 2009, p. 191.

⁷ ELAINE SAVORY, *Strategies for Survival: Anti-Imperialist Theatrical Forms in the Anglophone Caribbean*, in *Imperialism and Theatre: Essays on World Theatre, Drama and Performance 1795-1995*, ed. J. Ellen Gainor, London – New York, Routledge, 1995, p. 239.

⁸ DONALD R. HILL, *Calypso Calaloo: Early Carnival Music in Trinidad*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1993, p. 8.

⁹ LOUIS REGIS, Presentation at the Think Forum on «Carnival, Multiculturalism, and Cultural Policy» at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad & Tobago, 11 February 2011. Available online: Trini Data, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=paK4j1imx18> (5 May 2013).

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

Carnival space, and that from 1834 and 1838 on, the year of the actual liberation of most slaves, performing *canboulay* and Carnival meant to celebrate not a temporary freedom, but a real and finally unmasked cultural freedom.

The name of *canboulay* comes from the French *cannes brûlées*, burnt canes, and it indicates a reenactment ritual of one of the most common scenes in colonial history: when a fire occurred in the sugar cane plantations, to save as much sugar as possible, the planters summoned all their slaves and the slaves of the neighbouring plantations. But we also know that «in the more remote parts of the island, the burning of the cane signalled to the slaves that a forbidden *Shango* ceremony was in progress».¹¹ The historian and former Police chief Lionel Fraser gives us a description of what happened at *cannes brûlées*, revealing the musical force of this Carnival ritual:

The slaves on the surrounding properties were immediately mustered and marched to the spot, horns and shells were blown to collect them and the gangs were followed by the drivers cracking their whips and urging them with cries and blows to their work.¹²

For the slaves, this was the first opportunity to meet other enslaved people, a reason for which we know that they actually set fire on purpose to the cane, in order to make *cannes brûlées* happen, thus lighting up the first flame of resistance; the reason for which its reenactment, *canboulay*, has always been a performing ritual of resistance.

Trinidad's popular music is born from the celebration of *canboulay*, which Errol Hill has described as the «ritual beginning»¹³ of Carnival itself, from the *canboulay* bands preceding and opening the space for today's Carnival bands. The *chantwell*, the forefather of the Calypsonian and of the Soca artist, had a major role in the celebrations, which included a dancing and fighting ritual called *kalinda*, in which the quality of the fight and its aesthetic value are equally important, and «this union of dance and fight is a key expression of Caribbean culture».¹⁴ *Kalinda* is accompanied by the rhythms of African drums and the voice of the *chantwell*, encouraging the stickfighter. However, it would be very reductive to see the *chantwell* only as a performer. According to Liverpool, «in the confused Post-emancipa-

¹¹ DICK HEBDIGE, *Cut 'n' Mix: Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music*, London – New York, Routledge, 1987, p. 18.

¹² LIONEL M. FRASER, *History of the Origin of the Carnival*, «Colonial Office Correspondence», C.O. 295/289, n. 6460, Trinidad and Tobago, 16 March 1881.

¹³ ERROL HILL, *The Trinidad Carnival: Mandate for a National Theatre*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1972, pp. 23-31.

¹⁴ Statement of Rawle Gibbons in GIUSEPPE SOFO, *Trinidad & Tobago: Carnevale, fango e colori*, Torino, Miraggi Edizioni, 2011, p. 90.

tion society, the chantuelle was the most important person»,¹⁵ because he «echoed the political feelings of the African population». ¹⁶Rohler tells us even more, the *chantwell*, «as a possessor of the word, and as a spokesman for the group, occupied a position of supreme importance», and he also had to «reinforce obeah with verbal magic». ¹⁷Through *canboulay* and *kalinda*, the people of African descent were able to take the control of Carnival. And if the *chantwells* and their music were crucial in this battle for Carnival, they became even more important when the Europeans decided to reduce the connotations of resistance Carnival had taken, and tried to suppress some of the rituals, especially *canboulay*.

The *canboulay* riots of 1881 to 1884 were fundamental for the history of Trinidad and Tobago's Carnival. When the British colonial police realized the power of *canboulay*, and realized that every African drum that was played produced a sound of resistance, they decided to ban both. According to Bridget Brereton, «between 1879 and 1884 a determined effort was made by the authorities to purge all features which they considered objectionable, by force if necessary»,¹⁸ and in these times «canboulay became illegal». ¹⁹In 1877, Captain Baker became Inspector-Commandant of Police and decided to put Carnival under control, suppressing *canboulay* in 1880:

He called on the marchers to surrender their torches, staves, and drums; probably taken by surprise, for the move had not been publicly announced, they did so without resistance.²⁰

The following year, though, Trinbagonians were ready to show Captain Baker and the world how important Carnival and *canboulay* were for them. From the words of Lennox Pierre, retelling the story of the eyewitness Frances Edwards, we will read what happened that night:

¹⁵ H. LIVERPOOL, *Rituals of Power and Rebellion*, cit., p. 226.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ GORDON ROHLER, *Calypso and Society in Pre-Independence Trinidad*, Tunapuna, Gordon Rohler, 1990, p. 52.

¹⁸ BRIDGET BRERETON, *The Trinidad Carnival in the Late Nineteenth Century*, in *Carnival: Culture in Action - The Trinidad Experience*, ed. Milla C. Riggio, London - New York, Routledge, 2004, p. 53.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ BRIDGET BRERETON, *Race Relations in Colonial Trinidad: 1870-1900*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979, p. 171.

The canboulay revellers from districts outside Port of Spain came into Port of Spain. [...] When 12 midnight struck that year, 1881, the canboulay revellers moved out from Medical Corner, and the band moved in darkness and without drums. [...] There was an old patois woman at the front of the band. And she called out «Mssrs, Captain Baker et tout l'homme» (and all his men) «au cour de la rue» (at the corner of the street), just about where All Star [steel orchestra] have their headquarters now. And at that signal the fellow light their torches and start up the drums and went for Baker. [...] The canboulay revellers swept the ground with the police.²¹

The British colonial police was swept away by a performing army of people, encouraged by the sound of African drums and by the singing of the *chantwells*. Guns were fought with sticks and music, and the latter won. We also know that this army moved each step together, as Pierre tells us that «each stickman had a *flambeau* in his left hand, and that left hand was interlaced with the right hand of the man next to him».²² After the *canboulay* riots, a true performative ritual of cultural and political resistance, Carnival was free, and the rights achieved by the people in Carnival were valid for every person and every day of the year. This event showed, according to Rawle Gibbons, that «the people were actually ready to die to defend these traditions».²³

Canboulay, however, was not the only thing the British police tried to ban. In the years following the *canboulay* riots the attention moved to the leading energy of *canboulay* and of all Caribbean performance: drums. The role of African drums has been widely discussed, but it is very important to stress that the people of Indian descent had also brought their own drum culture with them, a reason for which both the Trinbagonians of African descent and those of Indian descent fought against the attempt of banning the drums by the British police, between 1881 and 1891. These revolts were actually the first occasion for Africans and East Indians to fight together for a common cause, opening the space for the interethnic peace and the cross-culturalism which is at the basis of Trinbagonian culture. Fighting together to defend drums meant for both ethnicities to defend freedom and to defend a link with their past, but it also represented the first step towards the building of a future common identity.

When drums were banned, Trinbagonians obviously started beating them underground, but then they found another, more creative solution: the tamboo bamboo, whose name derives from bamboo and the French word for drum, *tambour*. This new

²¹ Interview by Tony Hall with Lennox Pierre in JACOB D. ELDER, *Cannes Brûlées*, «The Drama Review», XLII, 3 (1998), p. 41.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ Interview with Rawle Gibbons, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, 24 October 2008, in G. SOFO, *Jouvay of a Culture*, cit., p. 200.

instrument served as a replacement for the skin drums, and it consisted of a bamboo cane beaten on the ground, and whose tone depended on the length of the cane. This difference in the sounds allowed the formation of the tamboo bamboo bands, groups of musicians playing bamboo canes of different sizes, in order to have as many different tones as possible. Inside the houses, things got even more interesting, and Trinbagonians gave birth to another instrument, called bottle-and-spoon: nothing else than a glass bottle, filled with water at different levels and played with a metal spoon, once again giving different tones and proving to be the perfect instrument for house parties and improvisations.

It did not take long until the British realized that tamboo bamboo had substituted the skin drum not only for the sounds, but especially for its role of cultural resistance. Therefore, the tamboo bamboos were also banned, formally around 1937. The Trinbagonian response to this new censorship was again an effort of creativity, which shows one of the main characteristics of this people, who have always found their way around censorship: in fact, «African forms of expression, love of the word and the inventive use of music, masking, dance, possession and ritual survived in the Caribbean despite attempts on the part of colonial authorities to eradicate them».²⁴ In Trinidad, not only this is absolutely true, but it has also been accompanied by the ability to transform the waste of empire into art: from the iron coming from paint pans, butter tins, garbage cans, oil cans and cement drums, were in fact born the new drums that allowed Trinidad to go on celebrating Carnival. The cement drums, coming from the construction sites of Port of Spain's harbour, and the oil drum, coming from the American bases in Trinidad, were the first step towards the creation of the only non-electronic instrument invented in the twentieth century, the steelpan, national instrument of Trinidad and Tobago. Liverpool must be quoted at length here, because in a few lines he sums up the whole irony of the steelpan's history:

Hemmed in by poverty and unable to purchase European instruments, the young lads showed the industrial world that their freedom to enjoy themselves through musical expressions could not be bought or controlled. They replaced their banned African drums with discarded "British" drums to show the British that laws could not place limits on their God-given freedoms. They thus dared the British to ban their British constructs. In many ways, then, the steelband reflects the visible remnants and discards of an industrial world and an industrial world economy based mostly on oil exploration and refining.²⁵

Born to substitute the African skin drums and the tamboo bamboo, the steelpan was also influenced by the Indian Tassa drums. This is why we can say that steelpan is one of the

²⁴ E. SAVORY, *Strategies for Survival*, cit., p. 238.

²⁵ H. LIVERPOOL, *Rituals of Power and Rebellion*, cit., p. 469.

best images of how Trinbagonians of every descent were able to unite and perform a common political and cultural resistance to European colonialism and oppression through music, and for music. Even more than that, the steelpan and the steelbands movement became actively part of the following decolonization process:

In terms of nationalism and political freedom, the steelband movement grew side by side with the decolonization movement of the early 1950s and the rising nationalism of the late 1950s and early 1960s. [...] As a national symbol and a unifying force, many middle-class politicians in the 1950s and 60s [...] began to use steelband music at their rallies and party gatherings to gain political support. [...] Most persons associated the steelband and steelbandsmen's fight for social acceptance with the growing nationalism of the 1950s and 60s. This nationalism formed the basis of the country's demand for independence in 1962. Accordingly, the birth of the nation of Trinidad and Tobago was identified culturally with the rise of the steelband which gave a distinctive identity to Trinidadians as a newly-emancipated people. In short, the steelband movement of the 1950-1962 era was a movement of freedom.²⁶

We also know it was the new *chantwells*, the Calypsonians, who celebrated independence and freedom from the very first moment it was achieved, and even before. Two weeks before Trinidad and Tobago's «red, white and black flag [...] replaced the British Union Jack», in fact, Port of Spain hosted the «first Independence Calypso King competition», giving voice to those who more than everybody else had «championed the national forces and movements agitating for self-rule and statehood».²⁷ Music in Trinidad has been, as Shannon Dudley writes, referring to the steelband movement, the «arena for the coming together of high and low, local and foreign, presentation and participation», and it «created space in the national dialogue for people who did not presume to control their world but who engaged life with a spirit of striving and play».²⁸

At the beginning of this article, I wrote that I was going to give readers a small story of two small islands with universal consequences. This story is the history of Carnival music, of the *chantwells* and Calypsonians, and of the development from the African skin drums and the Indian Tassa drums to the steelpan, which show us that the common identity of Trinbagonians was born through music, and to defend music. Pat Bishop, a Trinidadian artist (painter, musician, writer, performer, and much more), who has worked for Carnival all her life, said that the «Carnavalesque has a lot to do with identity», and that «it has

²⁶ Ivi, pp. 472-473.

²⁷ LOUIS REGIS, *The Political Calypso: True Opposition in Trinidad and Tobago 1962-1987*, Mona, The Press University of the West Indies, 1999, p. IX.

²⁸ SHANNON DUDLEY, *Music from Behind the Bridge: Steelband Spirit and Politics in Trinidad and Tobago*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 274.

allowed Trinidad's barriers to fracture».²⁹ This fracture, allowing not to destroy those barriers, but to see that they existed, also allowed the construction of a shared space, a shared identity, and a new nation.

The voice of the *chantwell*-Calypsonian and the sound of the steelpan are instruments of cultural resistance, and they are the creating forces that have driven the shaping of a national identity, drawing their energy from performance. The cultural and political resistance of Trinbagonians has been not only accompanied but often caused by a fight for music and for Carnival. That is why Popular Music, Resistance and Identity are so strictly connected in Trinidad and Tobago, and that is why (although a lot of work is yet to be done for a real interethnic peace and for a real improvement of the people's quality of life), we can use the first line of the twin islands' national anthem, to say that the steelpan, Carnival music and the nation of Trinidad and Tobago were «forged from the love of liberty».

NOTE

Some words contained in the paper exist with different spellings, especially those coming from Trinidadian creole (kalinda/calinda/kalenda, chantwell/chantwel/chantuelle...). In my writing, I chose only one version of each word, but other spellings of the same word have been kept in the quotes by other authors.

²⁹ Interview with Pat Bishop, Woodbrook (Port of Spain), Trinidad and Tobago, 10 November 2008, in G. SOFO, *Jouvay of a Culture*, cit., p. 226.