Influence of tassa drums on carnival and steelband

NOORKUMAR MAHABIR of the Caribbean Institute of Indian Studies and Research in Caripichaima prepared this research paper in two parts on the contribution of the East Indian tassa drum to the making of the steelband in Trinidad Carnival. The following article is excerpted from his paper.

THE TRINIDAD STEELBAND has been hailed as the greatest — indeed, the only — musical invention of the 20th century. Although it cannot have been invented more than 50 years ago, there is already widespread confusion about its history. Few researchers have traced the steelband's development along the lines of the ethnic and cultural pluralism unique to Trinidad society.

Yet the only way in which a viable attempt can be made to explain "an indigenous art form" is by stressing the need for an awareness among the diverse cultures of Trinidad.

The two major racial groups in the Trinidad population — Africans and East Indians — came into contact here for a longer time than they did in Guyana and Suriname, and this has bred some strange phenomena, for example, the syncretism of Hindu and Roman Catholicism in celebrating the feast of La Divina Pastora in Siparia, which Hindus call Siparaye ke Mai.

The case with which Indian musical rhythms have syncretised into calypso and soca illustrates the ability of Indian culture to adapt to alien ideas, harmonise contradictions and create new patterns.

In Jamaica, the East Indian migrant group has contributed its dance features, and its garia, Kali-invocation, chilam, dreadlocks and vegetarianism were incorporated into Rastafarianism in the 1930s.

The East Indians who came to Trinidad in such large numbers from 1845 with their repertoire of songs and music must have had an impact on the Creole culture. The annual Hosay celebration in St James in the late 1840s characterised the breaking of social barriers between Hindus and Muslims and late Africans; it included craftsmanship in the construction of paper-mache floats, pernigmatations, parades, vulgarities, tassa drumming, stick playing, songs and dances.

For instance Ramleela, a dance drama which required intricate wire-bending skill to construct huge effigies, was celebrated for five days in St James as early as 1896. Phagwa was no less influential with its bold use of colours and voices of scores of women singing songs of heroism. The musical instrument which linked all these festivals was tassa, and the Africans were invariably present as spectators and sometimes as participants.

Drums in Indian culture are basically used to communicate and in praise of God. Their making is considered sacred. The dholak, a double-ended drum, is the oldest musical instrument known to have been used by Indians in Trinidad. Successive waves of immigration brought the tabla, which produced a harmonic set of overtones. Medium-sized nagara drums found their way to Trinidad during indenture- ship, and a Mr Jatan of Orange Field Road has a pair intended to be beat simultaneously on the ground. The tassa drums, semi-oval in shape, consisted of a metal, earthen or wooden plastic cylinder with the skin of a male goat stretched over one end and maintained by deerskin strings or badha. The tassa choirs consist of a set of at least four pieces, three different drums and the tanga or large brass cymbals.

Renowned tassa drummers of the past included Chaddoo of Sangre Grande, Rosoo and Rosoo, John Sagram and "Moon" of Tacarigua, Jalim and "Golo" of Cunucu, Mannoor of Cupepe, Harry Gulcharan of Clax Village, Sindhus of Caripichaima, Hooghierand Sanju of Paria, Jaloo of Balasar, Saram of Balisari, Don (an African) and Dowlal, Makon of St Joseph and Golem Hosein of St James.

There are over 75 tassa choirs in Trinidad and they services are in great demand for weddings, Phagwa, Ramleela and Hosay. It was during Hosay institutionalised in St James, which increasingly drew the African community of Port of Spain, that these drums rose to prominence.

The tassa has not yet been fully explored as a percussion instrument. There are, however, certain rhythmic patterns ("chahns") which are distinct — classical, wedding and Hosay bands that include tumbi, gudhel, dupat, tilana, tin, chapa, lhora, chowshoulah, saadna matrada, dophai, tebe, sarbat, kabulikana, secap, kalinda and steelband.

The kalinda is the simplest "chah" which informants knew from their earliest memories and which they believe was brought by their forefathers from India. There is documented evidence, however, to the contrary, that kalinda rhythms were played by Africans during West Indian slavery. This adoption of an African rhythm to an Indian drum speaks of an early social and cultural contact and exchange. The steelband "chah" was also an abbreviation on the tassa in the 1930s.

Some simple tunes and hymns can be played on the tassa, such as the wedding chant: "Nigger, nigger, come for roti, come for roti, all the roti down. The coolie raise the gun, all the nigger ha' to run."

This chant was set to the quick, rolling beat of the tassa with the last word of each verse resounding with the dhol. It reveals that there was some kind of cultural contact between the two ethnic tribes in the early days of our history. The improvisation in English, with its rhyme and rhythm, like the calypso, is singular to Trinidad.

In Trinidad, the Indian-Negro separation began to disappear during the Hosay festival in the 1860s. One writer believed that the Africans' love of novelty led them to play tassa during the annual processions. The "thousands of low-class Creoles" were at first held in low regard and their unscheduled participation was thought to have a deprecating effect on the procession.

The Indians, however, felt some measure of relief in designating the Africans to do the lowly task of playing the dhol (tassa drum) for which they were paid rum or cash. This created a craving in the Africans for playing a smaller drum with two sticks which could produce a melody.

The beating of drums at night attracted more than 15,000 spectators to one Hosay venue alone in 1931. The stream of Africans in the Hosay processions thickened over time so much that they now almost dominate tassa drumming in St James. Their consistsence with Indian culture dating as far back as the 1850s is reason to believe that Carnival in general, and in Trinidad in particular, drew some
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of its features from Hosay.

East Indian indentured labourers who arrived in Trinidad in 1845 worked on the Peru sugar cane estate in St James and in neighbouring Woodbrook. They recreated India in their new world as expressed in the street names, and kept the Muharram celebration alive with its accompanying tarzias.

When Carnival came, the Indian tassa drummers saw an opportunity to extend their music-making for the first time into a secular affair. This practice has been retained in St James and in some parts of South and Central Trinidad.

The announcement this year that there would be a launching of a Jouvert band in Port of Spain with music by Firelight, Pan Vibes and St James Tassa Drummers (as was Peter Minshall’s “The River” last year with a Barataria tassa group) is more symbolic than new. The anthropologist would have seen the cultural syncretism in one procession, the common man must have been rudely awakened to the similarities between the two sticks, the posture of the musicians and the tassa round the neck and wonder if one could not have possibly influenced the other.

St James, home of the annual Port of Spain Hosay, has a history of proliferation of steelband movements. There were Sun Valley, North Stars, Cross Fire, Symphonites, Vat 19 Tripoli, Cross Roads, Cairo, Del Vikings, Pandemonics, West Side Symphony and the surviving Phase II Pan Groove and Third World. The possibility existed that some features of Hosay would rub off on the Carnival, especially when participants and venue were more or less the same.

Belmont, which had a substantial enough number of Indians to support a Hindi class in the late 1930s, was also a nucleus for the meeting and inter-marriage of Indian and African cultures. Though the tassa has been acculturated into the steelband, today IS COTT Casablanca of Belmont finds it necessary to retain the dhol in its pure form.

Africans participated in playing the tassa during Hosay, especially when African drumming in public was banned after Emancipation and when Carnival was suspended as a security measure during World War II. The seed of the steelband was then nurtured by the search for a new cultural form related to, but not the same as, tassa drumming.

The tassa was a limited musical device because of its inability to keep a permanent tone without constant heating, its limited range of notes and the unavailability of goat and deer skins in such large quantities in the city. The alternative lay in the metal containers obtained from the Rising Sun Biscuit Company factory on Duncan Street, from an oil factory in Sea Lots, from the Harbour Scheme, now called the Docksite, and from a nearby abattoir.

What went on was a process of long and laboured experiments with drums, oil drums, buckets, dustbins, biscuit drums and cooking-oil pans, no doubt inspired by the form and sound of the tassa. The East Indian influence in the use of the biscuit drum for the shell of the dhol is seen in the African application of it for the slap bass in Carnival music in the 1930s.

From the 1930s to the 1940s there was a progressive change from the too-malleable paint, biscuit and disinfectant pans to the tough, ringing oil drums.

Whether or not it is true that “Spree” Simon produced the first melody pan is of less significance here than the fact that its convex face drew its physical form from the daboo type tassa of Hosay. The oil drums used by Simon were smaller than the ones we have today, which makes them closer to the size of the tassa. Continuous innovation in the embryonic stages turned out a metallic version or adaptation of the tassa, which was still played with two sticks and hung from a strap around the neck for convenience in parading.

The technique of tuning a pan with heat had its origin in the tassa and did not come about by accident as many try lamely to explain. To achieve a definite pitch, both tassa and panman had to have a good musical ear.

Anthony Williams’ experiment in the St James band to produce pans in hoops and then weld them together is really an old method employed to construct the copper shell of the tayreen type tassa in the foundry. It was the 1945 all-steel band “Bar-20” of Gonzalez which caused W. Austin Simmons of UNESCO to note the East Indian contribution:

And into steelband history came the Taza of the Indian Festival when “Scribo” Maloney of Bar-20 hanged a sawed-off pan around his middle, and with a pair of drum-sticks rolled his famous “cut-and-tumble” beat. By V-J Day, Bar-20 was the most talked-about steelband.

Dr J.D. Elder concurs with Simmons on the point that pan, like Carnival and calypso, “is a result of cultural mixtures of European, Asiatic and African strains. Bar-20 of Bath Street, Gonzalez, grew out of Gonzalez’ First Eleven which was part tamboo-bamboo and part steel band of Limegrove.

“Tasmen included Sonny and Rupert Cope, Mussel-Rat, Cecil Elcock, Tommy Spike, Wellington “Killie” Harewood, Joby Wharton, Susie Dean, Pascall Gonzalez and Oswal Campbell.

TO BE CONTINUED TOMORROW
NOOR KUMAR MAHABIR of the Caribbean Institute of Indian Studies and Research in Carapichaima prepared a research paper in two parts on the contribution of the East Indian tassa drum to the making of the steelband in Trinidad Carnival. This is the conclusion of an article excerpted from his paper.

BAR-20, later succeeded by Casablanca, was led by Carlton "Ziguli" Barrow and included the late James "Batman" Anderson, Battersby, John "Red Pops" Smith, Tola, Daniel "Big Dick" Barker, Oswald "Red Ozzie" Campbell, Long Grant, "Big-Head" John Pierre, "Bajan Muriel" White and "Scribo" Maloney.

The burning of canes before reaping was celebrated during slavery by the beating of drums during the cannes brulee or Canboulay procession. But after the emancipation of slaves in 1838, the banning of drums was rigidly enforced.

The status of drumming in Trinidad at that time was confined to two major groups, persons of East Indian origin who came here as labourers and the religious sect with strong African ties, the Shango.

Then came the other phase of Trinidad band music — the tamboo-bamboo ("tambour", the French word for drum). These musical instruments are parts of bamboo trunks of various diameters and length. A rhythmic clatter was produced when a person thumped the open end of the trunk on the ground or knocked it with a stick. There was no melody or harmony but each stroke kept "time". Each piece of instrument can be classified into one of the three groups according to function: the cutter, the fuller or foule' and the boom.

The origins of tamboo-bamboo band are dated as 1910, with some opinions saying 1890. It is obvious that the tamboo-bamboo came after the introduction of tassa bands by East Indian labourers in 1845. The three types of bamboo instruments correspond in musical structure and names to the three types of tassa drums.

Although certain types of bamboo bands are known to exist in West Africa and Haiti, there was clearly some sort of cultural dialogue taking place in Trinidad. The common ground for the meeting of the two cultures was Carnival, where the kalinda "hand" of the tassa and the tamboo-bamboo orchestras provided music for Gatka and Creole stick fight successively.

The tamboo-bamboo band was not (as many writers would like us to believe) as influential to the making of the steelband as the tassa. The tamboo-bamboo and the steelband were poles apart. The tassa around-the-neck, made of metal cylinder and played with two sticks, was closer to the pan than even the huge shango drums which are stationary and beaten with bare hands. But the tempo of the times demanded that melody be played on a more durable and lasting device.

Great controversy rages as to the origins of the steelband. Who must
Newspaper reports state however that as early as the Carnival of 1849 the "tassa-drummer" was included in band-music. In 1911 and 1912 "tins" were included in the bamboo, bottle-and-dustbins bands. According to the Port of Spain Gazette of Feb 25, 1941 Carnival music was supplied by the beating of "biscuit-drums and dustbins" orchestras.

Another claimant for the change to metal instruments was "The Gonzalez Place Bamboo Band" of 1936 whose members were Souzie Dean, Rannie Taylor, Killi, and "Mussel-Rat." Also members of "Mamba Band" of George Street led by Edward Ford contended that they began beating dustbins in 1933-32 as part of their bamboo-and-bottle music.

Some informants swear that New Town was the original home of the steelband movement; others that La Cou Harbour Scheme, now the Bamboo Boom, had already discarded the bamboo because the trees could now be found only far up the hills and the police bore down harder on bamboo players. Some informants were also using the tubes as weapons.

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The fact that Hayden Rambanaram graduated into the finals of the Indian-oriented 1982 Mastana Bahar competition with a musical rendition of "Rama Ramam" (Hindi epic) on steelband, indicates to what degree pan has become accepted in the Indian community.

Indian culture in Trinidad has never been seriously considered outside the sphere of involvement. Tassa in particular has not yet gained recognition in concerts at home and overseas. Meanwhile, its players need to develop more polish and style and explore its full range as a percussion instrument. Indian musicians have to rock the Western world with rhythm something dynamic and new can truly bring home to the world. Probably a new challenge to experiment.

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ation awaits them if they can incorporate the drums (like the use of the dholak in Sparrow's calypso Maharajin) into classical and western orchestras and military music.

Some people dismiss the fact that the tassa was influential in the making of the pan with such hostility that solid research and logical argument would even prove futile. George Goddard was the first to react emotionally to this disturbing truth when it was presented in a historical account by W. Austin Simmonds, who lived in Gonzalez among the pioneers, and who later wrote for UNESCO and was supported by Dr J.D. Elder. Part of Goddard's tirade reads:

One local writer who probably needed psychiatric treatment had not only the bold audacity and impertinence of adding into his children bed time story that the West Indian tassa drums played a part in the progress and development of steelband. Goddard who is very unpopular with panmen, does not himself advance an explanation as to the existence of steelband in Trinidad, but repeatedly denounces Simmonds' report as "worthless and ridiculous" and ironically accuses him of being "selfish".

But the artefactual elements of the tassa is still visible in the steelband's two sticks; metal cylinder; the heating to provide tonal quality; the posture of the musician; and of late, the thong around-the-neck. The steelband is related but does not belong to the family of African or Indian drums. It is a product of Trinidad of which we, as Indians and Africans should all be proud.