

NOORKUMAR 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 bamboo-bamboo ('tambour',

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 bamboo-bamboo band are dated as 1910, with some opinions saying 1890. It is obvious that the bamboo-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.

Influence of tassa drums

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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 bamboo-bamboo orchestras provided music for Gatka and Creole stick fight successively.

The bamboo-bamboo band was not (as many writers would like us to believe) as influential to the making of the steelband as the tassa. The bamboo-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

be honoured for being the first man to beat out a recognisable tune on pan?

It is maintained by most researchers that when Winston 'Spree' Simon was pounding the inside of his damaged kettle-drum with a stone he accidentally discovered various sounds and pitches. But Sonny Roach informs us that he taught 'Spree' how to play pan; and old veterans like 'Red' Oswald Campbell, Oscar Pile and Emmanuel Kamps are convinced that 'Spree' is not the inventor.

Andrew 'Pan' de La-bastide, who now resides in the U.S., is also hailed as the first inventor of pan. He started his work in 1943 or 1944 and it is reported that he taught, encouraged and sold a



WINSTON "SPREE" SIMON

pan to 'Spree' Simon for 24 cents.

A bass-bamboo man known as 'Mussel-Rat' is also recorded as the first person to start the pan revolution when he accidentally started striking a gas tank of an old chassis in 1945.

Another version is that Victor 'Mando' Wilson pioneered steelband music when, by accident he lost his bamboo 'cutter' while playing in the 1934 Newtown Bamboo-Bamboo band, and started to beat a paint pan. Everyone, he says, was so intrigued by its melody that they obtained pans from the Harbour Scheme, now called Docksite, as a substitute for the bamboo *foule* while old biscuit drums were substituted for the bamboo-boom.

Neville Jules of Hell Yard who allegedly first played the calypso,

"Whopsin! Whopsin!" is another contender, as are Rudolph 'Fish-eye' Oliver of Hell Yard, Elie Manette of 'Invaders', Sonny Roach of 'Sun Valley', Oscar Pile and Patsy Haynes of 'Casablanca', 'Patch-eye Pajotte', of 'Hill Sixty', Anthony Williams, Bertie Marshall, Aulrick Springer and Victor 'Totee' Lewis.

Hanson and Dash claim that by 1932 'Alexander's Ragtime Band' of Woodbrook led by Carlton Forde and followed by 'Lumper', Freddy Maroon, Jikes Basawan, 'Judge', 'Benbow' and Hamburg, 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 because they were also using the tubes as weapons.

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Another claimant for the change to metal instruments was 'The Gonzalez Place Bamboo Band' of 1936 whose members were Sousie Dean, Rannie Taylor, Killi, and 'Mussel-Rat'. And members of 'Ma-fumba Band' of George Street led by Edward Ford contend that they began beating dustbins in 1932-33 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 Harpe. Some place the true rise of pan 'Behind the Bridge' in East Port of Spain. In London in 1959 Boots Davidson wrote a long account for a BBC broadcast of the beginning of the steelband as he experienced it around Basilion Street.

Newspaper reports state however that as early as the Carnival of 1849 the "tin-kettle" was included in band-music. In 1911 and 1912 "tin-pans" were included in the bamboo, bottle-and-spoon 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. The steelband movement was a national community effort which bore fruits after more than a decade of evolution. And no amount of information could give a true account of the history of pan until researchers pay cognisance to tassa drumming which was played during Carnival and Hosay to the delight and awe of Afro-Trinidadians since 1845.

The Samaroo kids are among the first Indians to start a steelband in 1967. Jit Samaroo is the arranger for AMOCO Renegades.

Cyril Ramon of Belmont is the first known tassa-drummer to play an Indian melody on pan. Boy Blue, who now resides in Germany, was a member of Casablanca since the early 1940's. Raphael Samuel is also remembered for his contribution.

John Mahatan, a tassa-drummer and Roy Ramdoo were noted pan-men of St James' Sun Valley during World War II. Selwyn Taradath, who is PRO of Phase II Pan Grove of St James, symbolises that social and cultural cross-fertilisation.

Cavaliers led by Lennox Bobby Mohammed, won the first prize in 1965 and 1967 Panorama steelband competition and were second in 1966 and 1969. Bobby Mohammed is now the arranger of Amral Khan's Cavaliers. Victor Sammy is another Indian in the same band which performed in Canada and U.S., East Africa, Paki-

stan, India, Malaysia and Europe.

The fact that Hayden Ramnarine graduated into the finals of the Indian-oriented 1982 Mastana Bahar competition with a musical rendition of the Ramayan (Hindu 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 its own 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. If Indian musicians have to rock the Western world with rhythm something dynamic has to be worked out. Probably a new challenge to experimen-

tation 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 God-

dard 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.