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Trinidadians culturally confused

By DEBORAH JOHN

TRINIDADIANs are confused right now about what their culture really is, because they have been looking at India and Africa for a cultural identity. The point was made by Rawle Gibbon, director, Creative Arts Centre, University of the West Indies, St Augustine on Wednesday night at a panel discussion on Culture, Politics and People, organised by the Birdsong steelband as part of its 14th anniversary celebrations.

The venue was the new Birdsong Pan Theatre, Tunapuna. Other speakers were David Rudder, calypsonian; and Nestor Sullivan of Pan Trinbago. Andre Moses was moderator.

Gibbon traced what he termed the existing confusion, to the way in which the two races had been introduced into the society. The Indian came through indentureship. The African came through slavery. The Indian was allowed to keep his cultural traditions. The African was not.

"But both groups suffered cultural displacement and they were now in an environment where the dominant culture was European. What was white had more value. But this was just one aspect of the inequitable relationships that continue up to today," Gibbon said.

'Only pan is ours'

He noted that self-government had served to "marginalise" these cultural relationships.

"The African and the Indian cultures have now been co-existing, but this has not been based on understanding of each other, but through a tacit agreement to maintain each other's boundaries," he said.

Gibbon noted that now that the country has a government which seems to "accommodate" both cultures, with Caroni and Port of Spain voting for one party, the crossing of these boundaries had only served "to widen the inner distances."

Gibbon said that if the Trinidadian is to define what he is "culturally", he had to use "frames of reference" which have been developed here. Because of the nature of the African's passage, his references

have been developed here. The Indian, because of the nature of his coming here, had his "frames of reference" from India.

Speaking about the meaning of culture Sullivan said that "culture must mean a struggle to form a new democracy."

Rudder noted that without people there could be no politics or culture. He gave a historical account of the development of our culture, which, had resulted in "pockets of culture", "not even calypso was solely ours, only pan can be described as ours."

He noted that as a result of 1970, much cultural change had taken place in the society. He disagreed with a certain perceived train of thought which says that the change which

came with the 1986 general election was similar to 1970.

He said: "The change of 1986 could not start to match 1970."

In terms of our own references, the three panelists saw "pan" as an indigenous cultural reference which has mass appeal, which the country should continue to develop, and they cited a similarity of purpose on the part of the then ruling colonial powers, in the suppression of the Cannibolay, and later the Muslim Hosay festival.

Co-ordinator Andre Moses in summarising, noted that it was ironic that Pat Bishop, who is a cultural worker, could not take part in the discussion as scheduled because of the loss of her job at The Solid Waste Management Company, where she had worked since its inception.