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Commentary

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Birdsong takes politics out of pan

THE solidly constructed, spacious, and beautiful new Birdsong Pan Theatre in Tunapuna was perhaps the most suitable of venues for a discussion on *Culture, Politics and People*. Suitable, because any valid discussions on our still evolving culture and its status cannot only be conducted among intellectuals and policy makers, the ordinary man in the street must be allowed to contribute in a meaningful way, and hopefully, the discussion that started on Wednesday evening will continue in pan theatres throughout the land, wherever they may exist.

Sitting there, looking at the comfortably filled arena, and the gleaming pans neatly stacked against the walls, it occurred to me that the fact that we had come to a pan theatre to talk about culture and the people, was a testimony of faith, an affirmation of commitment to the steelpan which was born out of struggle about 45 years ago.

Twenty-five years ago there was certainly no erection that could be described as a pan theatre. And depending on where the steelband was located, a pan-yard had a kind of nuisance value. People didn't mind jumping to the music on Carnival Day, but the noise of practice was something else again.

With all of this in mind it was not surprising that the discussion that evening kept coming back to pan. The consensus emerging from the panel—Rawle Gibbon, director of the Creative Arts Centre, University of the West Indies, St Augustine, David Rudder, calypsonian, and Nestor Sullivan of Pan

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Trinbago—was that the steelpan, by its very nature, defines our culture.

Gibbon felt that if the Trinidadian and Tobagonian is to define what he is culturally, he has to use "frames of reference" which have been developed here. He also felt that the nature of the African-Trinidadian's passage to Trinidad,

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that is through slavery, and the well-documented suppression of his culture, has resulted in his developing frames of reference which have roots here. He noted that while the Indian-Trinidadian had also suffered cultural displacement, his norms and his values were allowed to remain intact by the colonising power, and he was able to draw his "frames of reference" from India.

Gibbon went on to say that although it now seems as though those boundaries have been crossed, "the inner distances between the races have now been widened." Trinidadians are now con-

fused, he said, because they keep looking to Africa and India for cultural references, when those references are right here. That reference, the panel concluded, is pan, which was developed here, and which has indigenous mass appeal.

While none of these ideas are new, and it is generally accepted that most Trinidadians love pan, what really emerged from the discussion is that we have to do more than just love pan, and go to Panorama and Pan Festival.

How strong is our commitment to pan really? We cannot all be panmen and panwomen, but the commitment that by now should have made pan recognised worldwide as our thing, is still missing. It is not so much a case of a "lack of commitment," but more one of "not enough commitment."

And when you think about it really, it is not the fault of the people, or even of the policy makers, because the policy makers are part of the people, and the people in the final analysis are the product of the society in which we live.

If it is that our commitment is lukewarm, it is because there has been no serious analysis at a national level on how culture should have proceeded in the post colonial era. To paraphrase the words of Prof. Rex Nettleford: *The argument that a commitment to an indigenous cultural ethos is a vital necessity for building a nation or achieving national unity, has got to be put, before the matter of the preservation and further development of cultural values can be seriously considered. For the questions that must be asked are: Whose and what cultural values must be preserved and for whom and what must they be developed?*