

Influence of tassa drums on carnival and steelband

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. 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 potpourri — 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 Hindus and Roman Catholics in celebrating the feast of La Divina Pastora in Siparia, which Hindus call *Siparee ke Mai*.

The ease 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 some of its dance features, and its ganja, 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 papier-mache floats, personifications, parades, vulgarity, 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 Jattan of Orange Field Road has a pair intended to be beat-

en simultaneously on the ground.

The *tassa* drums, semi-oval in shape, consist of a metal, earthen or (now) plastic cylinder with the skin of a male goat stretched over one end and maintained by deerskin strings or *badhe*. The *tassa* choir consists of a set of at least four pieces, three different drums and the *ghanj* or large brass cymbals.

Renowned *tassa* drummers of the past include Chadee of Sangre Grande, Rasool of Arouca, John Sagram and "Moon" of Tacarigua, Jalim and "Golo" of Cumuto, Mansoor of Cu-repe, Harry Gulcharan of Chase Village, Sieudath of Carapichaima, Roopchand Sarju of McBean, Monwah, Jaglal and Chalow of Felicity, Jairam and Salam of San Juan, Kalal of Barataria, Jairam of Balmain, Jonas (an African) of Couva, Makon of St Joseph and Golam Hosein of St James.



There are over 75 *tassa* choirs in Trinidad and their 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

("hands") which are distinct — classical, wedding and *Hosay* hands that include *tumri*, *gazalol*, *durpat*, *tilana*, *tin-chupa*, *tikorra*, *chowhowlah*, *saadaa*, *madras*, *dingolay*, *nabesarbat*, *kabulkhana*, *seepar*, *kalinda* and steelband.

The *kalinda* is the simplest "hand" which informants knew from their earliest memories and which they believe was brought by their forefathers from India. There is documented ev-

idence, 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 "hand" was also an improvisation on the *tassa* in the 1930s.

Some simple tunes and rhymes can be played on the *tassa*, such as the wedding chant: "Nigger, nigger, come for *roti*, come for *roti*, come for *roti*; all the *roti* done. When 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. This improvisation in English, with its rhyme and rhythm, like the calypso, is singular to Trinidad.

In Trinidad, the Indian-Negro separatism began to disappear during the *Hosay* festival in the 1850s. 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 depreciating 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* (bass 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 10,000 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 consistent contact with Indian culture dating as far back as the 1850s is reason to believe that Carnival in general, and pan 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 re-created 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 J'Ouvert band in Port of Spain with music by Fireflight, 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 melodic 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 *tay-reen* type *tassa* in the foundry. It was the 1945 all-steel band "Bar-20" of Gonzalez which caused W. Austin Simmonds 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 Simmonds 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 bamboo-bamboo and part steel band of Limegrove.

"Its members included Sonny and Rupert Cope, Mussel-Rat, Cecil Elcock, Tommy Spike, Wellington "Killie" Harwood, Joby Wharton, Sousie Dean, Pascall Gonzalez and Oswal Campbell.

**TO BE CONTINUED
TOMORROW**

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 tambo-

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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 foute' and the boom.

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



WINSTON "SPREE" SIMON

where the kalinda "hand" of the tassa and the tambo-bamboo orchestras provided music for Gatka and Creole stick 'ight successively.

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

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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

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, she 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' Oliverre 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 'Toote' 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.

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 'Mafumba 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 tass-drummer and Roy Ramdoo were noted panmen 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 *Ramayana* (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-

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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.