

Trinidad and Tobago is still to see itself in competition for pan, against people much better endowed with money, organisation, technology, vision and commitment. Pan still is seen here as a kind of mystic possession, an icon of Caribbean 'civilisation', a gift from the Almighty.

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Where pan reach: At last, we know

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A column By Lennox Grant

A LITTLE NOTED commemoration over the Independence weekend was a sombre update on the status, on a world scale, of the national instrument.

That opening sentence compresses assumptions which might never occur to people who don't know, remember, or care that

a) Pan (steelband or the insurgent term "steelpan") was officially designated the "national instrument" when the Patrick Manning PNM was in office; and

b) Pan has evolved, without much reference to Trinidad and Tobago, into an international utility—hence "world scale".

What could be a "c)" to follow the above is that the commemoration in question was a long article published in the *Express* between August 29 and September 2. It was written by two veteran panmen and students of pan, Nestor Sullivan and Teddy Ian Belgrave.

They didn't explicitly offer the article as any "commemoration" timed for the Independence anniversary. The coincidence of the publication and the August 31 weekend prompted my own interpretation.

Even at the quasi-festival season of Independence, however, the article confirmed that the Trinidad and Tobago story of pan is like a song of the blues. It's a continuing bitter-sweet lament about what might have been, with wistful yearning for what might yet be.

What is this thing called pan? It is, now more clearly than ever, more than one nation's instrument. Pan is also a "movement" with institutional points of reference, such as Pan Trinidad. But pan is also the stuff of a kind of religious doctrine, the inspiration of psalm-like exaltations in song, and the subject of endless annotation, exegesis and exhortation.

So there is pan the Instrument. And pan the Movement. And pan the Word.

It's in the third category that the Sullivan and Belgrave article belongs. Within the world of pan, let me identify for the moment two discrete functions—that of beating the pan; and that of talking the talk.

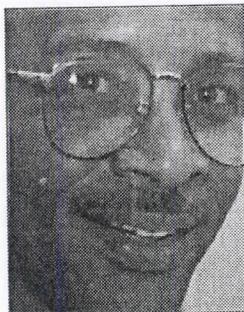
Sullivan and Belgrave, of course, perform both functions. They disavow any "recourse to false patriotism". But their article does uphold pan as "in a sense encompassing symbolically all the struggles of our people to define a legitimate civilisation in a world where, in so many other ways, we do not count". To me, that sounds patriotic enough.

For what the article expresses most forcefully is the soulful lament that pan gone; we lost it; we blew it;

it's now the property of Europe, Asia, or North America.

As one who has heard such wailing in song and in print over decades, I have to ask: where is the news?

The news, a reading of Sullivan and Belgrave discloses, is that the worst fears have all but come to pass: "We have forfeited the derived value that the status of monopolist would have brought us...in what has



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now become a multi-billion-dollar industry... Moreover, the danger remains that we might "give it away completely and gain nothing".

The article cites much items of evidence. Among them:

- At full-fledged pan factories in Switzerland and the US, research and development proceed at a "fantastic pace".
- In Berne, Switzerland, site of one such plant, the drums now used in T&T steelbands are on display as "historical artifacts".
- As research and development goes on, "new tuning methods and techniques are constantly under review, with the use of the most modern technologies".
- T&T bands are even being squeezed out of European and North African concert circuit—"only a very tiny share of this international market for steelband performances".
- The Japanese just launched a new pan publication *Pantasia*.
- Foreign pannists are mastering scored Panorama arrangements by Jit Samaroo, Boogie Sharpe and Godwin Bowen.

Such is the update. Already, in the world-scale profile of pan, the Trinidad and Tobago status quo is candidly assigned the status of a museum piece.

What does it prove? To my mind, that we in Trinidad and Tobago can never do enough for pan. The Trinity Cross for Pan Trinbago, the national instrument designation, patent registration, Pan Week, State subventions, corporate sponsorships are all rearguard actions.

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Most of what we have to offer are sacramental occasions and festive seasons. The annual Panorama devotions absorb huge amounts of

national energy and financial resources.

To what end? Panorama amounts to an expensive exercise in national self-indulgence. (I call it "national" if only because of the vast amount of State funds expended on it.) In vain have knowledgeable observers concluded that Panorama contributes little or nothing to the development of pan as an instrument, to the advancement of pan music, or to the material means of the pan movement.

In those parts of the rest of the world where pan is prospering, they appear to get by well enough without a Panorama. But the gross domestic product of Trinidad and Tobago pan amounts to the bottom line deficit of Panorama, the annual festival of Sweet Pan.

"Sweet pan" is a single concept carried by two words yoked together as inseparably as "hot roti".

What makes roti "hot" is commonplace folk knowledge. Sullivan and Belgrave remind us that the making of pan, and the refinement of the character to make it "sweet", are now for us inaccessible high-tech.

The article points out the T&T contribution to these foreign advances. A 17-year-old Swiss was apprenticed to Trinidadian tuner Roland Harrigin here for five months. Harrigin himself was later hired by the Swiss as a technical consultant.

I'm struck by the finding that the modern international taste for pan "rejects the European classics as a legitimate medium through which the steelband voice could be accepted". While steelband music festivals here still emphasise European classics, European pan players are demanding other music written for pan.

Pan has become, or is promising to become, a "multi-billion dollar industry". Reporting this, Sullivan and Belgrave still write as if we can realistically hope to "maintain leadership" in the expanding pan world.

Since when has this country been able to compete in the multi-billion dollar industry league? World developments unfolding as they do, we should be able to win investment for an export processing zone or two for pan.

At the pan centre in Switzerland, all tuning skills are taught, together with other areas of related activities such as computer science.

This approach recalls Lloyd Best's idea of pan in school and school in pan. Decades before, Mr Best had envisioned that the panmen would move from making motorised pan stands to making a car. Now that we don't even assemble cars here any more, can the importation of pans too be far in the future?