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Iron Heartbeat: The role of drums and the genesis of the steelpan in the fight for Black autonomy and identity in post-emancipation Trinidad

While authoring this essay on steelpan in post-emancipation Trinidadian society in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, I found much of the pertinent information through reading research done by historians documenting the social and cultural history of the island. A pannist's memoir of his time with the instrument at the dawn of its existence in the early 20th century, and the compiled interviews of pannists involved in the infancy of the instrument in Port of Spain (see Slater and McEachnie) also provided critical information from a personal perspective of the role that steelbands and the steelpan played in their lives and in the Trinidadian society of the early 20th century.

However, there was a missing link between these accounts and research on the steelpan and how it played against the backdrop of a Trinidad moving out of emancipation and towards independence. This essay will explore the origins of the steelpan in post-emancipation Port of Spain and its roots in kalinda and tambour bamboo, and will interrogate the conditions which allowed the emergence of the instrument as it became a fixture in Trinbagonian music and culture during a time when non-European cultural expression was met with disgust, disdain, fear and violence.

1. The Transportation of Bodies and Memory: The importance of drums in traditional African spirituality and leisure.

The twin island republic of Trinidad and Tobago passed the National Musical Instrument Bill in July of 2024 which named the steelpan its crown jewel. Mention of the instrument might conjure images of pannists jumping onstage with boundless energy while executing a complex panorama arrangement or a smooth jazz ensemble featuring a pan soloist, the distinct timbre of the notes floating weightlessly over the music. Though the instrument is a source of pride and elation for many, its history is steeped in the violent suppression and disenfranchisement of its inventors and nurturers.

The Taino and Kalinago tribes (sometimes called the Arawaks and Caribs) who once populated the island of Trinidad were almost entirely decimated soon after the arrival of Columbus in the 15th Century. Those responsible for this ethnic cleansing did very little in the name of cultural preservation, and the remains of Trinidad's first truly indigenous musical instruments made of wood and animal skins used by the Tainos and Kalinagos are degraded; we can only speculate what their music may have sounded like (Acosta 136).

With the arrival of Columbus, the passing of the island from hand to colonial hand, and the importation of human cargo from West Africa to the island, Trinidad's physical and social landscape drastically changed. Planters attracted to the island by its booming agricultural industry flocked from the metropoles, and many of them made their fortunes in the planting of sugarcane and cocoa.

Those West Africans brought to Trinidad were shipped across the Atlantic Ocean in near nudity, packed together with barely enough room to sit up straight or turn over. They brought with them only their memory and spirit.

In many West African traditions, it is customary for children to begin making their own musical instruments before the age of five (Smith 14). Music was a weft woven into everyday

life in many West African societies and was present in work and leisure, in jubilation and grief. Skilled drummers and *griots* (Acosta 124) garnered the almost reverent respect of their communities, as they were responsible for the survival of the oral histories of their people, and for ensuring that the song of their lives continued.

After their capture and forced journey through the Middle Passage, the West Africans taken from the continent were separated from those who came from the same tribe or spoke the same language before being sold off to the plantations (Smith 16). This was a measure taken by their captors to guard against any communication that might lead to insurrection or insubordination.

Though they spoke the language of the plantocracy, the enslaved people in Trinidad had in common their ancestral memory and their music. They made "talking" drums from wood and dried animal skins. While these served practical purposes of both providing music in leisure and celebrations on the plantations and as communication devices between plantations, they also served to retain and preserve the culture, memory, and identity of the people to whom they belonged.

Preceding the 18th century arrival of the French planters and free coloureds on the island, the martial art of *kalinda* rang out distinctly as stick cracked against stick, and stick cracked against bone, punctuating the songs of fighters' *chantuelles* and the feverish ensembles of drums, conch shells, and spoons against glass bottles played under the cover of night. A "blood hole" was often dug in the middle of the *gayelle* or arena for the collection of the blood shed by the fighters or *boismen* during these battles (Smith 25). Linked inextricably was the collective of fighter, drummer, and chantuelle; the violence of the art form seeped outside of the gayelles, and clashes between rivalling fighters or their supporters were not

unheard of. Vicious retaliation and suppression from overseers and planters meant a slow drifting away from the prominence of the artform, and the rising of Carnival in its place.

2. Colonial suppression and violence against practitioners and participants in Jammette Carnival.

The *Cedula de Populacion* implemented in Trinidad by the Spanish colonists began the exodus of free people of colour, French Catholics, and independent Black people to the island in the 19th Century (Sookdeo 44). The free coloured and creole people who were promised less land than their white counterparts were attracted by the opportunity to settle, plant, and populate the island all the same. The Catholics brought the festive celebration of Carnival to the cultural landscape of Trinidad (Smith 18), though it took on a drastically different form in their practice; after the enslaved people of Trinidad were emancipated in 1838, they thusly took to the streets with their own version of the Carnival festivities (Parris 49).

Outside the walls of decorated ballrooms and extravagant outfits donned by the masqueraders of the plantocracy and upper classes, those formerly enslaved people took to the streets in their own celebration. They wore the clothes that they had and played improvised musical instruments; drums, tins, sticks and their voices coming together to make a sound of carefree leisure, a respite from the gruelling conditions of a life in the chains of enslavement. Their festivities were disparaged by the upper classes, and Smith quotes an article from the time as saying,

"…we will say at once that the custom of keeping Carnival, by allowing the / lower order of society to run about the streets in wretched masquerade, / belongs to other days and ought to be abolished in our own (21)."

This street fête was called *jammette* Carnival. *Jammette* was unmistakably an expression of selfhood and of autonomy; a taking up of physical space that scared the upper classes. This loud and unashamed expression of culture deviated markedly from the ethnocentric efforts of the plantocracy to take the West African and East Indian culture away from the society of Trinidad and instead implant in it a reflection of its Christian, European metropole; a

deviation that made the upper classes extremely uneasy. To see those workers in a context outside of their dehumanising work- in the context of leisure and celebration- meant that at any moment it was possible that they realise the power that they held in their numbers, in their collective oppression, in their humanity, and in their will to express themselves (Sookdeo 203, 220).

A ban was codified into the laws governing the country in 1883 which forbade "the beating of any drum, the blowing of any horn, or the use of any other noisy instrument" (Smith 29).

At this, the areas of Eastern Port of Spain settled by majority Black populations were centres of resistance of this law. John John and Laventille were among those communities who refused to give up the music of their lives to colonial law.

There were some who chose to retain the artform in the iteration of wood and animal skins, even under the threat of criminal prosecution and violent retaliation and drumming subsequently went underground (Smith 29). Others, with the spirit of improvisation and resourcefulness, began experimenting with dried and hollowed bamboo stalks of varying sizes, making them produce sound by striking them with sticks on the sides, or dragging them against the ground. These were the inventors of the *tambour bamboo* bands of the mid to late 19th century; those who were influenced by, and often were themselves members or former members of kalinda bands (Smith 30).

The orchestration of the tambour bamboo bands echoes that of drumming ensembles, and the spirits of both remain in the orchestration of steel bands. According to Smith, the largest stalk, the "boom," was stamped upright to provide the bass that grounded the sound of the band (30). Slightly smaller and shorter stalks called "fullers" and "chandlers" played just above the sound of the boom, while the "cutter" was the smallest stalk of all, and it was played over the shoulder with a stick or mallet struck against the length of the bamboo stalk.

Terms like “fuller” and “cutter” can still be heard used today in drumming ensembles in Trinidad, referring to the drums which perform similar roles.

Both the potent cultural retention and the moulding of customs to fit the conditions of the society that they lived in were a testament to the unwillingness of the Black people of Trinidad to part with the culture of their ancestors entirely.

The torchbearers of the artform of tambour bamboo came from communities which were in the 1870s, and remain until the time of writing, deeply neglected areas. The communities of East and Southeast Port of Spain were known for high rates of crime and poverty; areas which were overcrowded and overlooked (Gift and Kenyatta 100).

Being thusly treated by those in power and by those in closer proximity alike led to a sort of cultural insulation that allowed for near pristine cultural and musical preservation that lives on even through the inventions conceptualised in Trinidad.

As with kalinda, it was common for rivalry between tambour bamboo bands to result in violent clashes. The stigma of the violence that coexisted with kalinda and with tambour bamboo persisted into the birth of the steelpan, as many of those first panmen of East and Southeast Port of Spain were themselves involved with tambour bamboo bands or were the descendants of those who were before them.

3. Iron Heartbeat: The emergence of the steelpan from tambour bamboo in the early 20th Century and the changing industry of post-emancipation Trinidad.

> "But Carnival and Hosay represented an arena / in which the disenfranchised majority insisted on shaping its life / out of the wreckage of slavery and indenture. They continue to do / so, irrespective of whether we call the process negotiation, a search / for human dignity or cultural persistence" (Sookdeo 248).

As Black Trinidadians held on tightly to their culture and rituals, they found safety in their own communities (Gift and Kenyatta 95). The areas of East and Southeast Port of Spain were populated heavily by direct descendants of formerly enslaved people who came to Trinidad from West Africa. In other words, many of those living in these areas in the early 20th century were effectively first-generation or second-generation Trinidadians. They practised the religion of their parentage in resistance to the laws against them (Gift and Kenyatta 100).

"Shango tents" (Slater 2) constructed with bamboo stalks and coconut fronds were scattered through these communities and served as literal and metaphorical cover for the religious rituals practised by those known as Shango Baptists or orisha devotees. Shango, the orisha of steel and thunder, was present indeed when these religious gatherings shook the rafters of those around, the sounds of drums, bottle and spoon, shells and bells rolling down from hill to valley, and rising on the hot Trinidadian wind.

According to Slater, these tents were his introduction to music as a young boy from "behind 'd bridge" in Port of Spain in the early 1930s (2). In the face of prohibition, the "self-determinists" (Gift and Kenyatta 100) who followed the Yoruba religion did not deny themselves the pillars of their spirituality; music, singing and dancing.

Those who still played in tambour bamboo bands had begun moving towards a different sound during the depression of the 1930s (Parris 52) and there was a steadily growing

number of percussion bands who used improvised instruments made of steel; these were the earliest panmen who made up the earliest steelbands.

Hailing from Newtown, Alexander's Ragtime Band was a popular collective of percussionists in the 1930s, and according to Slater, was among the first to use a pan that was "beaten similar to the caustic soda container" (4) which was commonly used by other steelbands. This same band has been said to have directly influenced the formation of the Oval Boys (which eventually became Shell Invaders Steel Orchestra), as the Mannette boys who started tinkering with steel objects and containers did so after seeing Alexander's Ragtime Band playing in the band's yard, only a stone's throw away from their home opposite the Queen's Park Oval on Tragarete Road.

The quest shared by the inhabitants of the young capital to find a new sound to accompany their revelry coincided with the growing oil industry, and according to the Geological Society of Trinidad and Tobago, several companies were drawn to Trinidad in the early 1900s to begin the highly lucrative endeavour of drilling for oil, "including Apex, Kern and Trinidad Petroleum Development Co. (TPD)" (par. 8).

Percussion bands shifted to "beating pan" in quite a literal sense, and Slater recalls using broom sticks to produce sound from the metal containers that they used from 1938 to 1946 (7).

The colonial government was no more amused by the emerging pan and steelbands than it had been with tambour bamboo and kalinda before that.

There was a perception that these collectives were dangerous and troublesome, and they were often met with brute force by the police if they disobeyed the ban on pans- they took to the streets with their instruments anyway.

In 1942, during the second World War, the government proclaimed that Carnival would take place neither that year nor would it for the foreseeable future. According to Slater, on Carnival Monday of the same year, one band took to the hills of East Port of Spain to play their pans and when they were met with the police who intended to cull this celebration, one pannist "grabbed the revolver" from the grasp of the commanding officer and disposed of it in a nearby cesspit (13).

Many pannists were known to have frequent run-ins with the law, as they played on the streets illegally. There is no way to be stealthy while beating on repurposed biscuit tins and caustic soda containers and dustbins worn around the neck (McEachnie 25); a steelband could be heard for miles around.

Colonial law was an obstacle with little meaning to pannists and pan-lovers and they, like their parents and grandparents, took to the streets to celebrate anyway in a thunderous and bold-faced reclamation of their humanity and joy, opposing the dehumanising and oppressive system which mandated that they serve no purpose outside of working; that they stayed exactly where they were on the lowest rungs of Trinidadian society.

The frustration brewed in the cage of poverty and rising unemployment of the 1930s spelled disaster, and steelband clashes were incidents of concern for the government. McEachnie quotes George Goddard's "Forty Years of Steelband" and surmises that the clashes between these bands, resembling something of gang warfare, were the direct effects of feelings of powerlessness and ire as the authorities repeatedly banned and retaliated against their musical and cultural expression; the turning against each other "in the senseless act of fighting and wounding" (53) had everything to do with the stifling of expression and a desperate fight to regain power, worth, and humanity.

The proximity of many pannists to steel factories, auto shops, and discarded oil drums, paired with the free time of those who had unstable employment as skilled steel workers or who had no employment at all meant that there was ample time and opportunity to pay attention to the budding artform. Panmen meticulously experimented with the number of notes in each pan, with making the belly concave instead of convex (McEachnie 74), and using oil barrels instead of the paint tins, biscuit tins, and other materials they had used before. The hub cap, or the "iron" has remained a part of the steelband. All other instruments evolved into the shape and size of the oil drums cut that were cut, sunken and burned, the notes hammered to the perfect pitch by its tuners.

Efforts by the government and authorities of Trinidad to snuff out the growing flame of steelpan were notably led at one point by Sir Ellis Clarke, who served as governor-general and eventually authored the Republic and Independence Constitutions of Trinidad and Tobago (McEachnie 53). The police and the courts played major roles in the prosecution of pannists arrested for fighting and unlawful gathering.

With continued tenacity, rebellion and love of music, the steelpan movement of Trinidad gained momentum and became a phenomenon known around the globe. Those pannists who resisted, supported by "Albert Gomes the Chief Minister, Norman Tang the Mayor of Port of Spain (McEachnie 53)" and many powerful others, shed blood, sweat and tears in the fight for the right of the artform to flourish.

We must never forget the beginnings of the steelpan and its incredible role in the fight for Black and Brown humanity, autonomy, culture, and memory in the face of brutal and bloody oppression. The swelling joy bursting from the bellies and chests of the listeners was once tainted with fear of violence, overridden by the red-hot will to play anyway; to sing and dance and *be* anyway.

I, Najja Sampong, hereby certify that I am the author of the attached essay and that I have properly acknowledged all sources and references which I used. I certify that this essay contains no plagiarised material. This essay is my own work, and I did not receive any unfair or unauthorised assistance or collaboration in its preparation and completion.

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