THE PERFORMANCE OF POLITICS: CARIBBEAN MUSIC AND THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF VICTOR TURNER

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Cet article aborde l'un des problèmes centraux de la pensée anthropologique de Victor Turner: la dimension politique des rites, à la fois instruments de contrôle et moyen de libération. La tension engendrée par les deux pôles des structures et des anti-structures doit en effet être perpétuellement négociée. Les premières sont toujours promptes à corriger les déviations, les secondes à subvertir l'ordre établi en suscitant l'émergence d'un processus d'émancipation et de confusion (la "communitas"). Partant du concept de "drame social," modèle dynamique par lequel s'articule le jeu conflictuel de ces deux forces opposées, l'auteur propose une analyse de la vie politique dans les Caraïbes, et montre en particulier le rôle que joue la musique dans ce qu'il appelle un "état-théâtre."

This article addresses a central issue in Victor Turner's anthropological thought: the political dimension of rituals as both tools of social control and processes of emancipation. The ever-recurring tensions between repressive social structures and subversion brought about by the emergence of antistructures must be negotiated through a constant process of social adjustment. On the one hand, social structures are prone to redress deviations. On the other hand, "communitas" tends to dissolve separation, exclusion, and prohibition. Using the concept of social drama, the author analyzes aspects of political life in the Caribbean islands and shows the role played by music in what he calls "the theater state."

INTRODUCTION

Victor Turner began his career with a study of kinship and village politics in the forests of Ndembuland, and ended it with a study of *Carnaval* performances on the streets of Rio. Spanning his vast range of interests, as he would surely have agreed, was an underlying processual unity. The *framework* of this process is a continuing attentiveness to both politics and performance. At the same time, the *dynamic* of the process is a growing emphasis on the primacy, significance, and efficacy of performative genres, including ritual, drama, sport, festivity, and so on, within the political arena.

In Turner's first major book, Schism and Continuity in an African Society: A Study of Ndembu Village Life (1957), he saw ritual as a "redressive mechanism" which both restates and restores a sense of social solidarity that has been shattered by conflicts. Since there are no effective secular means of accomplishing these unifying objectives, ritual is recurrently performed (1957:288-331). Later, Turner emphasized that ritual is an important phase in both political and other social processes (1964:21; 1968:269-283); that the role of ritual is to "produce" and "instigate" action (1964:24, 39); and that under certain conditions, a religious ceremony might be termed "political" (1966:4). Even later, Turner developed his well-known ideas about liminal and liminoid performance genres. These genres were variously depicted as highlights of human experience, critiques of culture, sources of creativity, influences for political and social change, and crucial watersheds in long-term historical movements (1969, 1974, 1977, 1978). In some of Turner's final writings on theatre and festivity, he saw these and other ludic genres as cultural analogues of genetic mutation (1983b:223), and proposed that the Rio Carnaval is both "the creative antistructure of mechanized modernity" and a "kind of paradigm . . . for the whole modern and post-modern world" (1983a:124). Thus, Turner's thinking developed from regarding ritual performance as "redressive mechanism" which reinforces the structure of traditional societies, to regarding festival performance as an anti-structural critique of "mechanized" modern societies.

Although the philosophical idealism of Turner's position has made some critics uneasy (e.g., Horton 1964), there is no doubt that a sizable number of anthropologists have moved in a similar direction. Commenting on recent studies of how symbolic phenomena are related to history and political economy, MacAloon detects:

. . . increasing unease with endlessly repeated, jejune claims that symbolic forms and cultural performances "express," "depict," and "display" structural patterns and institutional interests. A growing number of studies have sought to demonstrate that ludic and ritual performances, for example, may play a primary role in constituting political formations and institutions in the first place, in actively making history rather than reactively expressing it. (1984:315)

In addition to citing Turner (1974), MacAloon also cites Appadurai (1981), Da Matta (1984), Geertz (1980), Gusfield (1981), and Sahlins (1981) as representative of this emphasis. He might also have mentioned comparable recent trends in British social anthropology, especially among those who are part of what I am tempted to term the "Manchester Diaspora." Of particular interest is the "two-dimensional" model of Abner Cohen, who was Turner's first student at the University of Manchester. For Cohen

(1974), popular performances not only have a cultural life of their own, but also play an instrumental role in political processes, where performance is politics in an aesthetic idiom.

The cultural style of the Caribbean makes it an appropriate context in which to examine the connection of performance and politics. Caribbean politicians, regardless of ideological persuasion, are characteristically flamboyant performers who creatively appropriate popular culture as the basis of spectacular and highly entertaining political dramas (cf. Stone 1974:18-19; Singham 1968:283; Manning 1980). But it is not simply that politics is suffused with performance. Conversely, performance genres are highly political, both in content and in terms of being actively engaged in the political arena. In short, the Caribbean is something of a theater state—not classic theater, as in Geertz's (1980) account of Balinese politics, but the theater of comedy, absurdity, and what West Indians call "pappyshow," a blend of foolishness and mockery.

In this paper I will examine the politics of calypso, one of the Caribbean's most colorful and ludic musical traditions. I will concentrate on Barbados, where the music has gained immense popularity within the past decade and taken on a distinctive national character. I will try to demonstrate that calypso is an important constituent of Barbadian politics and political culture, and further, that is has played a significant role as a critique of recent political events in the Caribbean, notably the controversial invasion of Grenada.

CALYPSO AND POLITICS

Calypso is a form of music which first appeared in the mid-nineteenth century among ex-slaves in Trinidad (Rohlehr 1972; Elder 1973). It is best known as a medium of topical commentary. The singers, or calypsonians, are social observers who usually employ a mode of satirical humor to lyricize about the everyday world around them. The calypsonian lampoons established authority, inverts normative systems in order to expose their underlying absurdity and injustice, and reveals the comic underpinnings and possibilities of situations which are usually taken seriously. In Turner's vocabulary, the calypsonian is a liminal or liminoid figure, a personal embodiment of social anti-structure.

Political issues and personalities have long been targets of the calypsonian's critique. In the mid-1940s, an early leader of the decolonization movement in Trinidad named Albert Gomes made the following observation:

The calypso is the most effective political weapon in Trinidad. The singers—all of them—are men reared in poverty and oppression, and they sing of the life they

know. Thus it is that even when cleverly camouflaged with wit and banter, the sharp tang of social criticism is evident in their songs. Moreover, people go to the calypso tents to be entertained. What politician, who must harangue from the rostrum, can boast of a better opportunity for influencing people's minds? The fact that the tents are so sedulously supervised by the police reveals the extent to which the calypso singers influence political thought. (Gomes, quoted in Warner 1983:61)

Ironically, Gomes knew of what he spoke. He was defeated a decade later by an Oxford-trained historian, Dr. Eric Williams, during an election campaign which the "Mighty Sparrow"—perhaps the greatest calypsonian of all time and a strong Williams supporter—described as a contest between "Big Brain" (Williams) and "Big Belly" (the portly Gomes):

I am sure you've heard the story about Big Brain and Big Belly Well, Sparrow ain't 'fraid to talk Who don't like it can take a walk Fight finish, no bruise, no cuts But a man fall down on he guts.

Like Gomes, Williams appreciated the political power of calypso. He spoke of it in his historical writings (1962) and sought to gain wider recognition for the music, once even delivering a three and one-half hour speech to the ruling party in which he quoted repeatedly from Black Stalin's calypso, "Caribbean Man" (Warner 1983:85).

While old and relatively obscure calypso traditions have been discerned in a number of West Indian islands (Quevado 1983:14-20), the music in what Elder (1973:31) calls its "modern" and "contemporary" forms was almost exclusively associated with Trinidad until the late 1950s. Since that time, the development of modified versions of the Trinidad Carnival in several eastern Caribbean countries has provided both a stimulus and a context for the emergence of local calypso forms. Today, a number of the Caribbean's best calypsonians come from the "small islands": Short Shirt, Obstinate, and Swallow (Antigua); Arrow (Montserrat); and Becket and Scorcher (St. Vincent).

The most recent West Indian country to adopt calypso as a national rhythm was Barbados. During the latter half of the 1970s, Barbadian interest in calypso developed slowly and was coincident with the introduction of a carnival-style festival known as Crop Over. The first Crop Over calypso contest was held in 1980. In 1981, radio stations in Barbados began to tape Crop Over performances in the "tents" where calypso shows were being held (the word "tent" refers to any location where calypso shows

are held; today, most "tents" in the Caribbean are meeting halls or auditoriums which are rented for the season). In 1983, television stations began covering Crop Over performances. During this period, press coverage of calypso expanded and included reviews of tent shows, interviews with calypsonians, editorial comments by entertainment writers, and the like. In 1984, nine tents were open during the two-month Crop Over season in Barbados, and about 150 calypsonians registered for the competition. Clearly, Barbados calypso is now one of the most exciting developments in West Indian popular culture.

The florescence of calypso in Barbados is somewhat of a cultural paradox. As the Caribbean's most restrained, Protestant, and smugly "English" society, Barbados would seem to be an unlikely environment for a music which is suffused with the ludic, licensed ethos which made Trinidad famous. Indeed, before the current calypso "boom," popular music in Barbados consisted mostly of gospel, ballads, and sedate imitations of American soul.

The Barbadian resolution of this cultural paradox has been the development of a lyrical tradition in calypso which is both serious and morally engaged. Themes of reform, retribution, judgment, justice, and accountability are recurrent. The role or even "duty" of the calypsonian is to exhort and educate as well as to entertain. This role is consistent with both conventional Protestant values and Barbadians' cherished view of themselves as the scholars and teachers of the Caribbean (Lewis 1968:226).

The best-known feature of Barbadian calypso is undoubtedly its penchant for strident political criticism. A major target of this criticism has been the government of Prime Minister Tom Adams, which was elected in 1976 and reelected in 1981. The competitive struggle for public support between Adams and his calypso critics is a striking example of how a performance genre can become an active and influential agent in a society's political life.

THE MIGHTY GABBY

The volume of calypso which has been produced in Barbados is too vast to discuss in one essay. For that reason, this paper will focus primarily on a star performer named Anthony Carter (better known as "The Mighty Gabby") who exemplifies, and transcends, the genre of calypso. Gabby is a veteran of the Barbados Theatre Workshop in New York and a sometime folk singer inspired by the "protest" music of the Vietnam War. During the late 1970s, he produced a number of calypsos which were known for their blunt political criticism and their rhythmic innovations, notably a Nigerian-style, six-eight beat. In 1982, Gabby's big breakthrough occurred in the form of a hit song titled "Jack."

This song was aimed at Jack Dear, the Chairman of the Barbados Tourist Board, who mooted recommendations to allow hotels to own private beaches and to have the government restrict the activities of vendors at other beaches. Gabby's strident defiance of Dear, whom he maligned as a non-Barbadian of uncertain parentage, struck a responsive chord in the Barbados public. The song became a smash hit in tent shows, sold a huge number of records, and was the year's "Tune of the Crop" (i.e., a Barbados version of a road march).

In 1983, Gabby released his now classic song, "Boots," which was a frontal attack on Barbados' militarization policy. By the summer of 1983, the Barbados Defense Force had undergone a sizable expansion. A few years earlier, deployment of the Barbados Defense Force in St. Vincent to quell a Rastafarian uprising on Union Island had also aroused controversy. Gabby built his song on a series of rhetorical questions in a style which is reminiscent of both pulpit and classroom. These rhetorical questions are answered by his chorus:

Can we afford to feed that army
While so many children go naked and hungry?
No, no, no, no! (choral refrain)
Can we afford to remain passive
While that soldier army grow so massive?
No, no, no, no! (choral refrain)
Well don't tell me, tell Tommy
He giving them four square meals,
Some of them so fat, they could hardly run
And they shooting bull's eyes with automatic gun.

Like "Jack" and several of Gabby's other songs, "Boots" was banned from the government-owned Caribbean Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) radio—a move which Gabby gleefully maintains fired public interest and spurred record sales. However, the song's major international publicity was generated by the event which it foreshadowed—the invasion of Grenada in Fall 1983. Even Time magazine noticed Gabby, one of the few occasions when a calypsonian has enjoyed that dubious distinction!

In 1983, Gabby's opposition to Barbados Prime Minister Tom Adams took on a more personal tone in another of his hit songs, titled "Mr. T." Although Gabby wrote this song for the calypsonian "Grynner," who recorded it, the authorship of the song was so openly known that it was generally considered to be Gabby's calypso. Skillfully presenting himself as the voice of the public, Gabby opens by citing his gullibility in marking an "X" beside the name of "Mr. T." on an election ballot:

I was so dumb, When you come with rum, To steal my "X" from me You came with big tricks Corned beef and biscuits To rob my democracy.

As the song continues, Gabby gains political wisdom and pleads to be released from Mr. T's fold:

Look, I learn my lesson well
You can't trick me again
No more rice grain
Can turn my brain
So "T," I dropping out and saying . . .
"T," lemme go, don't hold me
Lemme go, unfold me, lemme go
"T," lemme go, don't hold me
Lemme go, I aiming now to be free.

Following this refrain, Gabby intensifies his opposition to "Mr. T." and hopes to bring him down through public humiliation and subsequently at the ballot box, a fitting defeat in the only West Indian country where the "Westminster system" of politics has been more-or-less consistent with British practice:

I goin' rip yuh pants
I goin' make yuh dance
You will know that I
Is a nest of ants
I goin' milk yuh goat
I goin' sink yuh boat
And next, I goin' get yuh with my "X."

During several in-person conversations, Gabby has articulated a world view based on revivalism and social reform, twin themes with deep roots in black Barbadian history.

"We have a situation in the Caribbean that is very disturbing," he once said. "We used to be a people who were so serene. Now, all of a sudden, we're breaking heads." Then he continued in rhyme: "We used to have visitors who came for the sun. Now we have visitors who come with the gun." With the zealous dedication of a crusader, Gabby vows to set matters right regardless of the cost: "A calypsonian is a social commentator, and he has got to do that . . . Me, Gabby, I cannot be bought. And nothing can stop me from saying what I have to say. I'll say it regardless. There's no way to stop me—except by physical death."

The 1984 Crop Over season saw Gabby deal explicitly with the Grenada controversy. One calypso song, titled "Dem Poor Grenadians," began with a declaration of conscience which Gabby embellished with homiletic gestures of righteous anger in his tent performance:

They want me to say I agree with Tom and Eugenia (Note 1)
They want me to say I agree with that Eddie Seaga (Note 2)
They want me to stifle my conscience
None of that nonsense
I am not their convenience
And if they claim they all for democracy
Why they invade Grenada to bring back that Gairy? (Note 3)
I was never for the invasion
Military occupation
No kind of intervention
Of a nation by a nation
But indirect economic sanctions
Coupled with other actions
Would have been enough injections
To save dem poor Grenadians.

In comparing this song to some of the more equivocal commentaries on Grenada by Trinidadian calypsonians, we see that Gabby evoked a fundamentalist rationale to explain his stance: "Every artist has a different approach. Mine is straightforward and blunt and to the point. I have no kind of nice casing to put on anything, and no icing. I am going to the heart and root of this problem, to get it finished with."

In 1984, Gabby's biggest hits were the two songs that he recorded, "One Day Coming Soon" and "Cadavers." "One Day Coming Soon" forecasts an imminent mass uprising against politicians and the "ruling class," and is filled with abundant millennial images. It predicts that wicked people will be "running, stumbling... sliding, hiding, ... bawling, crawling." They will be "begging we ... to ease the pain"; but it will be "too late."

"Cadavers" was a stinging attack on one of the controversial consequences of the Grenada invasion, the establishment of a campus of the St. George's University Medical School in Barbados. The medical profession in Barbados strongly opposed this move, and there were persistent rumors that the venture was financed by underworld money. Dressed in a skeleton costume, Gabby focused on an issue which deeply stirred public imagination—the school's practice of importing corpses for medical analysis:

Barbados is a big joke
To them big boys, in their big tie and coat
We barely got space to bury
Anybody in we cementary [sic]
But just to put pressure on all of we
Them fellas importing duppy (Note 4).

Just go to your butcher He will sell you a piece of cadaver Look under your cellar They hiding another cadaver I tell you, Ahhhhhhh! Them importing dracula. Ahhhhhhhhhhhh! Them importing dracula.

Who is this jackass, who is this fool
That bring to Bimshire, St. George's Medical School?
Who tell them we want in Barbados
All them skeleton, obeah (Note 5) bone, and duppy?
Who tell them to bring in the Mafia money?
I hope it is not that Tommy.

Gabby's political stance is echoed by other prominent calypsonians. "Red Plastic Bag," who has regularly won the "Pic O'de Crop" (Barbados' equivalent of Calypso Monarch) title since the early 1980s, makes a thoroughgoing criticism of the political status quo in his 1984 winning song, "Bim." This song also raises the issue of cadavers: "Even if them Yankees bring in cadavers to frighten me/They can't move me, I ain't leaving this country." Besides singing "Mr. T." in 1983, the Barbados calypsonian "Grynner" won the 1984 "Tune of the Crop" title with "Stinging Bees," a song which identified Prime Minister Tom Adams, his cabinet, and several like-minded politicians elsewhere in the Caribbean as "bees, stinging you and me." The calypsonian "Young Blood" sang "Sport Billie," a thoroughgoing attack on the Barbados Minister of Education, replete with allusions to sexual perversion. At about the same time, "Invader No. 3" sang "Politician's Dream," a song which accused incumbent politicians of dreaming of Caribbean unity while practicing narrow selfinterest "when they wake up." Meanwhile, the calypsonian "Black Pawn" shifted Gabby's apocalyptic theme into a Rastafarian context and predicted in a song called "Judgment Day" that there will be a millennium when "wickedness," "inequality," and "oppression" will be revealed and rectified.

In addition to his detractors, Prime Minister Adams also has calypsonian supporters, although none of these have achieved the success or popularity of some of the detractors. Adams' best-known supporter is "Serenader," who praised him in a 1984 calypso titled "Tom is de Man":

Who is the man with all the brain? I don't like to call no name Let me hear you loud and plain It is Tom (choral refrain).

Who is the man we read about That make Coard (Note 6) shut up he mout'? Let me hear you loud, and shout "It is Tom" (choral refrain).

POLITICS IN ANOTHER MODE

Lyrical content aside, what is the political role of Barbadian calypso? An ethnographic clue to this question emerged during the 1983 Crop Over season in an extraordinary debate on calypso in the Barbados House of Assembly. This debate was instigated by Opposition questions about the censorship of Gabby's top calypsos. Prime Minister Adams' masterful. contradictory, reply was that it was not the Barbados Government which was under attack, but tourists, soldiers, and other innocent people. Adams cautioned that calypso filled with hatred needlessly injured these people and also caused resentment and hostility throughout Barbados society. Then, in a humorous vein, Adams advised calypsonians not to take themselves too seriously, and to avoid singing songs that politicians had written for them (a reference to his earlier contention that members of the Opposition were writing calypsos). Estimating that eighty to ninety percent of Barbados calypso deals with political themes, Adams proposed that the theme of politics reflects the serious "Barbados spirit," just as the sexual preoccupation of Trinidadian calypso reflects that country's basic concerns. He went on to tell an uproarious chamber and gallery that one does not expect to hear a song like "Ma Ma Look Ah Boo Boo Deh" (a classic Trinidadian calypso) in Barbados.

This debate had important implications. First, by debating calypso, Barbados politicians not only acknowledged its impact, but also gave it a certain legitimacy. Second, in the symmetrical, rational logic for which Barbadians—who are steeped in the classics—are famous, if it is appropriate for politicians to criticize calypso in Parliament, then it is equally appropriate for calypsonians to criticize politics in the tents.

Gabby responded to the House of Assembly debate by ridiculing and reversing Adams' admonition to calypsonians about taking themselves too seriously. He told me his statement was a "joke:"

When the Prime Minister said that calypsonians should not take themselves seriously, I thought it was one of the biggest jokes I have ever heard. What he was telling me—and telling the rest of the world—is that Shakespeare should not take himself seriously. I consider myself as much a poet as William Shakespeare

If the politicians don't take us seriously, we're going to cause them an awful lot of problems—not in terms of violence, but in terms of telling the people what we know . . .

The following year, the conflict between Adams and Gabby escalated. Gabby's songs were again banned from air play, and as a result of what one astute informant calls "executive action," his music was also removed from the shelves of Barbadian record stores. In addition, Adams took personal legal action against Gabby for defamation in a charge which was specifically tied to the song, "Cadavers."

As this "social drama" continues to unfold, it suggests that Gabby is a key figure in the Barbadian political arena, and that he is playing a role accentuated by the name of his tent, "Battleground," as well as by the tent's location in the headquarters of the "official" Opposition Party! Gabby has been mooted as a political candidate, and Adams himself says that he expects Gabby to run against him. As a precedent, the Trinidadian calypsonian "Attila the Hun" ran successfully for the Port of Spain City Council in 1946. A half-century earlier, colonial authorities had threatened to abolish the Port of Spain City Council until another calypsonian, Richard Coeur de Leon, mustered massive public opinion against the move. Like a great number of calypsonians, "Attila the Hun" is often cited in parliamentary debates (Warner 1983:60). Meanwhile, Gabby denies an interest in elective office while wryly observing that calypsonians have more power than politicians.

Warner stated that calypso is a "mirror for the society" (1983:87). However, the present case takes us beyond this conventional position. In Barbados, calypso not only reflects the political process; it is also an integral and influential part of that process. Tent shows, censorship controversies, epic "Gabby and Tom" battles, and calypso debates in Parliament are crucial, and even central, ethnographic components of contemporary Barbadian politics. While reactively depicting and distilling political realities, calypso is actively engaged in the creation of those realities.

THE CULTURAL FORCE OF PERFORMANCE

In From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play, Victor Turner proposed:

Where social dramas find their cultural "doubles" . . . in aesthetic dramas and other genres of cultural performance, there may well develop, as Richard Schechner has argued, a convergence between them, so that the processual form of social dramas is implicit in aesthetic dramas (even if only by reversal or negation) while the *rhetoric* [his emphasis] of social dramas—and hence the shape of argument—is drawn from cultural performances. There was a lot of Perry Mason in Watergate! (1982:90)

Under what circumstances does a cultural performance shape the "argumentative" form of a social or political drama/process? The Barbadian case offers a clue to this important question. In Barbados, the censorship of calypsos is politically problematic because it contradicts the popular and deeply-ingrained belief of Barbadians that they have inherited British civil rights and freedoms. Barbados is, after all, the Caribbean's famed "little England." Ironically, this belief is often cited as one of the factors which encouraged political calypso. As a Barbadian journalist once told me: "We've always talked about being the freest country in the world, having total freedom of speech and expression. The calypsonians take this as license to be as seriously critical as they care to be." Thus, calypso represents a basic political value which the "official" political system is supposed to embody and expound, but which in practice is compromised and contravened by the political system.

A corroborative example of this comes from MacAloon's study of another performance tradition in another Caribbean country: international amateur sport in Puerto Rico (1984). In the context of discussing the "systematic interconnectedness" and "mutual structuring" of sport and politics, MacAloon argues that the Puerto Rican "mania" for international sport bears heavily on the question of statehood as the central issue of politics. If Puerto Rico becomes a U.S. state, it would lose its eligibility for separate competition in international athletic events, which are the only arenas where Puerto Rico can represent itself as a nation among nations. This gives sport a profound and powerful significance vis-a-vis politics (in the conventional sense). "In politics the status of Puerto Rico as a nation is ambiguous, conflicted, disputed; in international Olympic sport, it is not" (1984:326).

These observations suggest that popular performance forms can be a rather "pure" version of the ideals which give a society its distinctive self-awareness. Ideals with that type of significance are likely to be a powerful cultural force, particularly in domains of social life where normative standards are diluted, obscured, or transgressed. The capacity of religious ritual to exert precisely this sort of force in traditional societies has long been appreciated. Through the work of Victor Turner, we are beginning to see how performance genres of a most secular and profane nature can "play" a comparable role in the modern and modernizing world.

NOTES

- 1. Eugenia Charles, the Prime Minister of Dominica.
- 2. The Prime Minister of Jamaica.

- 3. Eric Gairy, the former Prime Minister of Grenada who was deposed during the 1979 revolution.
- 4. "Duppy" is a general term for a ghost or spirit.
- 5. "Obeah" is a form of divinatory and manipulative magic with sinister connotations.
- 6. Bernard Coard, leader of the faction which ousted former Grenadian Prime Minister Maurice Bishop in 1983.

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