
The Honourable Wade Mark, Speaker of the House of Representatives

Honourable Ministers of Government

Your Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corps

Our kind hosts, Mrs Liseli Daaga, CARICOM Cultural Ambassador and; Chairman Aieyegoro Ome and other members of the Executive of the National Action Cultural Committee

Brother Harry of the Inter-Religious Organisation

Former Ministers of Government

Our distinguished honourees

Members of the Calypso fraternity and leaders of other cultural bodies

Kind sponsors

Specially invited Guests

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen all.
First of all, let me thank you for your very kind introduction, Masters of Ceremonies, although I feel that nothing you have said qualifies me for this very special role this evening. Nevertheless I consider it an extraordinary privilege to be invited to help to honour the achievement of so many artistes, many of whom the NACC has nurtured through its very special efforts over the years, and who have become stars worthy to occupy this stage which you have been constructing these past 26 years in pursuit of excellence in and the preservation of calypso: our premiere indigenous art form

It is this voluntary but most laudable remit, rooted in a belief that it is in the arts that the spirit of our people would emerge and be created, that has prompted my presence here this evening, and I thank you all most sincerely for your kind invitation, thankfully not to sing, but to say a few words on the occasion of the National Action Cultural Committee’s 26th Annual Top 20 Stars of Gold and Calypso of the Year Award Ceremony.

That you have been able to organize such a function successfully over 26 years is indeed a remarkable achievement. It should also help debunk the notion that Calypso is dead or dying. As you know, we are very quick here in Trinidad and Tobago to kill off our age old traditions with all their historic values and significance whenever what is new and what has been made popular dominates our attention.

Indeed, we have to accept that Calypso, as known and appreciated by a generation or two ago, is threatened with that fate in the popular electronic media and in most outdoor settings. But your efforts at the level of the NACC, have allowed it to survive and occupy its own very special space among the treasured cultural expressions that have helped to shape and define us as a people.

In his seminal study of early carnival music in Trinidad and Tobago, Professor of Anthropology, Donald Hill, recounts for us the indoor and outdoor settings in which Calypso thrived in the
early 1900s. Catchy compositions were created specially for the street, and, just as today’s genre of wine and jam, they were replete with allusions to abandonment or what we now call bacchanal, sexual activity, excessive drinking and eating, heightened power assuming mystical proportions as characterized by the stick fighters, identification with Africa, use of patois, and a clear anti-establishment, clearly anti-British tone. This was an important ‘pressure relief valve’ in the context of a harshly repressive society.

Indoor calypso on the other hand emphasised lyrics over melody, storytelling incorporating a broad choice of subject matter, and use of Standard English. Hill notes that some masters of the double-tone and ballad calypsos were school teachers, so that artistes like Chalkdust, Shortpants and Luta - all of them teachers at some time during their respective diverse and colourful careers - are simply carrying on a tradition, although calypsonians of that era came primarily from what was described then as the lower class.

The indoor, according to Hill, also included, at least, mastery of hyperbole, observing that if hyperbole is ever a virtue, it is in the hands of a good calypsonian. There was selective use of Patois and/or standardized English, critical commentary on the social order expressed with devastating surgical precision - a kind of early twitter if you will - and finally, where external context overrode local concerns as during the last World War, elaborate praise of the mother country, again, Great Britain.

Then as now, both genres have a role to play.

Those of us who cast ourselves as traditionalists, or more controversially, ‘purists,’ forget the complex interaction that music, song and performance artistes have with any culture in the dual roles of shapers and barometers of our lived reality. Our lived reality will always evolve. So I am not going to enter any debate about where calypso is going, and what is good and what is bad. Instead I will offer some brief reflections on the critical importance of what you are doing.
Just as today, the audience for outdoor calypso was the Carnival reveler. The audience for the indoor calypso included the singer’s sponsoring organisation such as a masquerade band or a group of stick fighters, or eventually the ticket-buying public which consisted of Trinidadians of all classes, as well as tourists.

So it seems as if we too are re-living a tradition this evening as we gather indoor, under the roof of this significant home of culture, Queen’s Hall, to honour the Calypso stars of gold, and to also award the Calypso of the Year. I am sure you will want to join me in commending the National Action Cultural Committee for this initiative, and to acknowledge that they have every reason to be proud of their achievement in influencing the retention of what I will refer to as indoor Calypso as a vital aspect of our national culture, and reducing the threats of its extinction by the dramatic evolution of the modern-day outdoor styles.

Traversing that road could not possibly have been easy, especially when the journey would have been set against the very lofty principles which you developed and chose to guide your work over these many years:

- That there must be freedom for all forms of cultural expression which are consistent with the ideals and principles of a new society

- That our different cultural expressions must contribute to the building of a united nation

- That all our peoples must have mutual respect for each other’s different cultural expressions.

- That each group’s cultural expression must be treated as equally valid.

- That the Society must promote within each group, knowledge of its roots.
• That the cultural development of the entire society must be firmly wedded to a principle of self reliance

• That the society must ensure that each group understands the cultural heritage of every other group.

• That unity must be based on the truth of our historical situation, and

• That the indigenous growth of culture must be encouraged through the creative expression of our people in the national environment.

Those principles read like, and can easily and legitimately form the preamble to a constitution. I make that observation in the context of the current exercise engaging the nation and my personal and public insistence that before we can decide how we want to be governed we must first ask who are we and what do we want to become.

One of the important roles that artistes fulfill is to give articulate expression to our felt experience. That is why, polls notwithstanding, the first indication of how an election will swing is how the calypsonians sing! Too often, the rulers and the ruled do not speak the same language or, at least, do not hear what is being said. Who else to translate for us but the calypsonian?

You have rightly held fast to the position that the development of the arts and the development of the society go hand in hand, and that attitudes to artistes will be mirrored by attitudes to other sectors of the society.

You have expressed the belief that when we give our people a sense of pride in any art form that they have produced, we add something to the spiritual stock of the nation, and you are
quite firm that when this pride is developed, then and only then will we have the impetus to position our arts and our economy regionally and internationally.

How far away we are from developing that pride, and what are we doing to get there?

It is not always wise to find solace in the fact that we are not alone in any given situation. But the British, despite all of their history and traditions that have shaped and globalised their culture and even influenced the content of some of our own expressions, have been among more developed nations seeking answers to those very questions.

Prime Minister, Tony Blair– not exactly known for his support of the arts – has suggested, for instance, that the whole process of stimulation through plays, books, films, works of art, the delight in design, in architecture, in crafts: all of this enlarges a country's capacity to be reflective, interested and bold.

Dynamism in arts and culture, Blair said, creates dynamism in a nation, concluding that when more children get access to the joy of art, it is not the art alone that they learn; it is the art of living, thinking and creating. They may never be, probably won’t ever be, an artist or a dancer or a designer, but in whatever job, in whichever walk of life, they will carry an idea that is not just about the buying and selling, but about what makes the ordinary people special. A nation that cares about the arts will not just be a better nation. In the 21st Century it will be a more successful one.”

That is what I understand this evening’s function to be about. Calypso and Carnival make the ordinary people of Trinidad and Tobago extraordinarily special. In them we exhibit all of the energy, focus, creativity, innovation and commitment that can truly make us great. The challenge is to find a way to tap in to the mind set and emotions that are operating when we are at our best and apply them across the board.
If we accept these attributes as a major national characteristic, development of the national psyche must not be left to be shaped by the elected alone. Civil society must insist that it be regarded as a partner in development, including cultural development. That has to be included among the objectives of the NACC. The organisation’s struggle to keep this aspect of our culture alive deserves our support if only because it goes beyond the creation of cultural expressions that define us as a people.

I observed in a speech a few years ago, in discussing where I wish to make my home, that the country that you live mentally in, is determined by your perspective, the breadth of your vision, and by the audacity of your hope. On the one hand there is the country where we have already agreed that we have failed, that our systems and institutions are broken beyond repair; that this generation is lost, that we have no answers and are doomed to retreat behind ever thicker bars as criminals roam unchallenged.

Several years later, the situation on the ground has remained unchanged. Some may even say that it has gotten worse.

But I still choose to live in this country which I see as being rich in human and material resources, with a growing consensus that we must and can develop a different way of conversing and doing business; where, with full respect for our diversity, we move forward in a cooperative spirit. This to me is the path to excellence as a nation, and I see it greatly reflected in the foundational principles for the work that the NACC has undertaken in the development of our culture.

They remind me of the principles upon which the country’s constitution has been founded, and also in the rallying cry of so many of our national songs and writings. They speak to freedom for all forms of cultural expression which are consistent with the ideals and principles of a new society, as well as to attributes such as mutual respect, equality, unity and so on. These are
hallmarks of a just and equitable society which, in the case of our own Trinidad and Tobago, our constitution promotes, and which we aspire to achieve together.

Given the importance of culture in all of this, to quote former British Minister for the Creative Industries and Tourism, the time has come to reclaim the word ‘excellence’ from its historic, elitist undertones, and to recognise that the very best art and culture is for everyone; that it has the power to change people’s lives, regardless of class, education or ethnicity.

It is also time to trust our artists and our organisations to do what they do best - to create the most excellent work they can - and to strive for what is new and exciting, rather than what is safe and comfortable. To do this we must free artists and cultural organisations from outdated structures and burdensome targets, which can act as millstones around the neck of creativity.

Calypsonians have always been most creative when adopting the role of mouthpiece of the people. Lynette M Lashley describes them in that role as gun-slinging balladeers whose weapons were quick wit, good voices and a wide knowledge of the events of the land. She says they were able to articulate for the population their analysis, a synthesis of opinions on an extremely wide range of matters, both local and foreign, particularly regarding social, economic and political issues.

That is when their lyrics could be most blatant.

That is when they could skillfully deflect the direct via the double entendre, and, as Lashley recounts, that is also when they best employed pun, satire, acerbic wit, pungent humor, and corrosive discourse; some even becoming quite personal and going so far as to incorporate commentary about family members.

As society’s raconteurs, their story-telling could be straightforward, their chronicling of events factual, or they could descend into ribald humour, colouring their real intent again by utilizing
the double entendre, and creating renditions that could be exceedingly funny, but never offensive.

Albert Gomes, renowned pre-independent politician and head of government described the calypso back in the 1950’s as the most effective political weapon in Trinidad. He noted that the singers of that era – all of them – were men reared in poverty and oppression, and they sing the life they know. Thus it is that even when cleverly camouflaged with wit and banter, the sharp tang or acridity of social criticism is evident in their songs. Moreover people go to the calypso tents to be entertained, and he asked: What politician who must harangue from the rostrum, can boast of a better opportunity for influencing people’s minds?

Maybe the economic fortunes of the Calypsonian are among the most significant change of the post Albert Gomes and post-independent era. But to this day politicians still respect the power of the Calypsonian to put them at the butt of community ire. After all, they have dared in latter times to label successive heads of government in their compositions as “deafy,” “duncy” and even as “a driver who cyah drive.”

On another note, the economic activity associated with calypso and carnival underscores the extent to which culture and creativity have grown as an important driving force in our own market place as well as globally.

One study conducted by the United Nations Education, Social and Scientific Organisation, UNESCO, has found that, in its route to the market place, culture has also been leading to radical transformations in the way people create, consume, and enjoy cultural products and in turn other products.

Globalisation and the convergence of multimedia and telecommunications technologies have transformed consumers from passive recipients of cultural messages into active co-creators of creative content.
Digital distribution in industries such as design and music has transformed global markets and allowed new industries and consumers to emerge in developing regions such as Africa and Asia, and no doubt Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean.

The study found for instance that licensed digital distribution of recorded music would have risen from 653 million US dollars in 2005 to a whopping almost 50 per cent compound annual increase to almost five billion dollars US at the turn of the last decade.

But the money is not all. UNESCO found further that culture and creativity have also had tremendous impact on social cohesion and development in many a global setting. I know that you have not missed the point, but permit me to restate it: Calypso and Carnival as a part of our culture are already acknowledged to have a significant impact on our economy but the deeper point is that if our Constitution and our Laws are to be a stable platform for the just social and economic development of our people, then our artistes have a very important contribution to the debate about values and goals. Politics, economics and cultural expression are not mutually exclusive areas of activity. They are more intertwined than we realize. The arts are the perfect starting place for building a unified society.

This is amply demonstrated in our own Trinidad and Tobago by the ease with which East Indian rhythms are able to blend comfortably with the beat of the Calypso, to be transformed into raw soda and/or chutney soca, and also how much more cosmopolitan we become when our population engages in the Carnival fetes and in the bands that hit the streets on Carnival Monday and Tuesday, giving truth to David Rudder’s harmony-in-diversity observation that “how we vote is not how we does party.”

What better way to end in saluting the power of Calypso than to quote him. According to Rudder, at the heart of the party is the Calypso:

*that living vibration*
Rooted deep within the Caribbean belly
Lyrics to make a politician cringe
Or turn a woman’s body into jelly
It is sweet soca music, calypso
You could never refuse it, calypso
It makes you shake like a tango now, calypso
Why is it you shaking you don’t know. calypso

I congratulate the NACC for its exploits once again. I also thank all of you for your kind attention, and, in the name of Calypso, let us enjoy the rest of the evening.