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Ethnic Identity, National Identity, and Music in Indo-Trinidadian Culture

PETER MANUEL

Much of the literature regarding race and culture in the Americas, including the English-speaking West Indies, has focused on the struggles of Afro-American peoples to establish cultural identity in the face of white discrimination. While this theme is not irrelevant to Trinidad, Guyana, and Suriname, race relations in these countries have a distinct dynamic due to the presence of substantial Indian communities seeking to legitimize their own identity within traditionally black-dominated political and socio-cultural frameworks. As these East Indian populations grow in size, self-awareness, affluence, and political power, they find themselves engaged in complex processes of cultural reorientation. These processes involve, first, reformulating their own senses of culture and identity in relation to mainstream West Indian contexts; and, second, pressing for a multicultural framework that would accommodate both their East Indian ethnic identity and their West Indian national identity. Both processes have been the subject of intense negotiation and controversy, on national levels as well as within the East Indian communities themselves.

In Trinidad and Guyana, while a sense of distinct ethnic identity remains important to most East Indians, changing conditions have eroded some of the most important traditional emblems of Indianness, such as caste consciousness and, more importantly, the Hindi language (or its Bhojpuri Form), which is now known only to a few elders, pandits, and other learned persons. In such circumstances, music has acquired an unprecedented significance as a symbol of ethnic identity (La Guerre [1974, 1985: xiv]), as reflected in the extraordinary amount of musical activity in Trinidad, among East Indians as well as others. Music's importance is also manifested in the series of ongoing and spirited socio-musical polemics, waged in private and, more overtly, in public forums like newspapers, Parliament sessions, and calypsos. These controversies, aside from their inherent interest, often serve as remarkably concrete articulations of broader, more abstract socio-cultural processes.

Aside from studies of calypso, such socio-musical issues have received only passing reference in the otherwise considerable body of scholarly literature devoted to race relations in Trinidad, which, indeed, has been described as a "social science laboratory" for the academic attention it has received (Yelvington 1993: 15). Despite the value of this literature, dramatic developments within recent years have substantially altered the cultural and political situation in Trinidad, calling for an updating and revising of prior paradigms. This article explores aspects of the most prominent music-related ethnic controversies in Trinidad, with passing reference to Guyana. In particular, it aims to illustrate how these issues can be seen as key texts in the complex negotiations involved in the legitimation of new socio-cultural paradigms based on pluralism rather than assimilation. Given the fratricidal ethnic conflicts currently raging elsewhere in the world, and the lingering possibility of real violence in the Caribbean, the study of West Indian progress toward multiculturalism may be of more than academic interest.

East Indians in the West Indies

After the emancipation of West Indian slaves in 1834–40, British colonists sought to replenish the supply of cheap plantation labor by importing indentured workers, especially from India. Under this program, between 1845 and 1917 some 143,000 East Indians came to Trinidad, 240,000 to British Guiana, and lesser numbers to other parts of the West Indies. While some of these workers returned to India, most stayed; their descendants now constitute a majority of the population of Guyana and the largest ethnic groups in Suriname and Trinidad, where they surpass the "creole" (black and mixed-race) population; together, East Indians account for around twenty percent of the English-speaking West Indian population.

While most free blacks in colonial Trinidad and British Guiana spurned the arduous life of the sugar plantations, in many cases moving to the towns and cities, the first generations of East Indian laborers tended to remain concentrated in agricultural regions even after indentureship. Living in their insular, rural communities and shunning schools for fear of proselytization, most colonial-era Indo-Trinidadians
took little part in the mainstream of their country's social and political life. Gradually, however, increasing numbers urbanized and established footholds in commerce. Aided by traditional values of thrift, industri-ousness, and family cohesion, East Indians have now come to dominate business sectors in both countries, surpassing the formerly entrenched creole populations. Accompanying this process has been a revival of cultural awareness, pride, and assertiveness, stimulated by such developments as the import of Indian films from the 1930s, the Black Power Movement erupting around 1970, and the spread of modern concepts of pluralism and cultural revivalism (see Vertovec 1992: chap. 4).

As Indians grow in power and self-assurance, they have come to be increasingly resentful of perceived sorts of discrimination. In Trinidad from the mid-1950s until 1986, political life was dominated by the creole-oriented People's National Movement (PNM), with the predominantly East Indian opposition parties being marginalized through gerrymandering, electoral fraud, occasional persecution of political leaders, and their own internal difficulties (see, e.g., Mahabir 1995: 88–89, Hintzen 1989). The charismatic Eric Williams, who led the PNM until his death in 1981, was at best indifferent to the East Indians, whom he once characterized as a "recalcitrant and hostile minority." PNM economic policies since independence in 1962 largely favored the party's constituency—urban working-class and bourgeois creoles—at the expense of the East Indians, who have arguably constituted the country's most economically productive social sector (see Vertovec 1992: 132ff., Lowenthal 1972: 162, Hintzen 1989). Accordingly, as we shall discuss below, Indians have felt that state cultural policies have also tended to favor creole culture.

Since 1985, however, changes in Trinidad's political landscape and public culture have disrupted the comfortable hegemony previously enjoyed by the PNM and its constituency. In 1986, the increasingly discredited PNM government was ousted by a coalition which included an invigorated Indian-based party led by Basdeo Panday. While the fragmenting of this coalition enabled the PNM to regain power in 1991, the new prime minister, Patrick Manning, made concerted efforts to win over sectors of the now assertive, affluent, and organized East Indian population. Snap elections called in 1995 led to a triumph of Panday and his Indian-based United National Congress (UNC). In the same year, the East Indian presence was recognized by the declaration of May 30 as a national holiday, "Indian Arrival Day"; by the unprecedented prominence and recognition of Indians in the subsequent Carnival activities including calypso; and, as we shall discuss, by a de facto collapse of creole cultural as well as political hegemony.

**Ethnicity and Creolization**

Trinidad and Guyana have been characterized as "plural" societies in the model described by M. G. Smith (1965), in which ethnic groups coexist without mixing or sharing basic institutions or values (see also Despres 1967, La Guerre 1982). Many Trinidadians continue to live in ethnically homogeneous communities where there is little exposure to other groups. Religion and family life still tend to be segregated, and politics and black consciousness movements have further polarized the races since Independence. However, urbanization and the greater participation of East Indians in mainstream society have made the situation more complex than Smith's model might suggest. Increasingly, and especially in towns, Indians and blacks interact and socialize amicably, and there is a gradual increase in racial intermarriage, producing a growing population of "douglas," or black–Indian mulattos. But as Lowenthal observes (1972: 165), increased contact has also generated increased tension, and many blacks have come to feel threatened by the greater Indian presence and assertiveness in society. In a 1951 calypso, Killer voiced the subsequently familiar sentiment that the Indians are "taking over":

As for the men and dem I must relate  
Long time all dey work was in cane estate  
But now dey own every theater  
Yes, hotel, rumshop, and hired car. (Constance 1991: 8)

Ethnic tension is heightened by the different mainstream values of each community and the tendency to stereotype the other community in terms of these values. Daniel Miller (1994) describes Trinidadian society as being characterized by a fundamental dualism between, on the one hand, a "bacchanal" culture of partying, hanging out ("liming"), and informal and transient male–female relations; and on the other hand, values of frugality, hard work, and responsibility to the extended family. In popular discourse and to a considerable extent in reality, such polarized lifestyles are associated with blacks and Indians, respectively (see also B. Williams 1991).

Compounding the asymmetries between the two groups are the distinct cultural orientations toward their respective ancestral homelands. On the whole, Indo-Caribbeans have been able to maintain much closer
links to India than have West Indian blacks to Africa, in terms of both cultural retentions as well as ongoing engagement with the Old World. Most of the Indians arrived later than did the blacks, and they were spared the deculturating effects of the slave plantation. Their traditionally strong, multi-generational family structure and geographic isolation also facilitated cultural retention (Despres 1967: 45ff., Vertovec 1992: 14). While Hindi as a spoken language has essentially died out, imported Hindi films (usually with subtitles) and film music recordings have promoted knowledge of and identification with India since the 1930s. Trinidad has also hosted a small but influential trickle of visitors from India, including Hindu pandits and figures like Hari Shankar Adesh, who taught Indian music classes in the 1960s and 1970s. Identification with India has been further facilitated by the existence of a pan-regional North Indian cultural “Great Tradition” and by the fact that most immigrants came from the same Bhojputi-speaking region of India, thus sharing a language and a set of relatively uniform cultural practices.

By contrast, one can generalize that Trinidadian and Guyanese blacks are far more alienated from their African cultural roots, instead fashioning their own creole expressive arts like calypso and tassa drumming to extend as brokers for Euro-American, Afro-American, and Jamaican popular music and culture (see Lowenthall 1972: chap. 4, Deosaran 1987a: 7). Neo-traditional musics associated, for example, with orisha/Shango worship remain marginal phenomena, and most creoles, at least before the 1970s, have traditionally been largely indifferent to their African ancestry (see Herskovits and Herskovits 1947: 23). Some Indians regard this condition as the “tragic fate” of a rootless people who gave up their identity for secondhand Euro-American culture. As a letter in a Guyanese newspaper stated, “The Hindus in Guyana have a vibrant culture with its background much bigger than Guyana, they have not severed itself from its roots,” unlike the blacks, who were “bought by cheap sermons to shed their religion for a watered-down Christianity which the white planters use as a tool and weapon even today.”

Countering this perspective is the recurrent theme in creole discourse that the Afro-Trinidadians’ alienation from African culture, far from being an outright loss, inspired the dynamic creation of syncretic new cultural forms — especially calypso, Carnival, and steel band. As one Afro-Trinidadian told me, “I’m glad that the British banned our African skin drums, because that led us to invent steel band and calypso.” It is this sense of having created a new culture (along with the prior arrival of most blacks in the Caribbean) that justifies for creoles the feeling that they, unlike Indians, are, in common parlance, the “indigenous” West Indians.

From this perspective, calypso and steel band, unlike Indian bhajan singing and tassa drumming, are similarly “indigenous” forms. While creoles have thus reconciled themselves to their new homeland, Indians are seen as still looking back to the ancestral homeland and merely perpetuating or imitating Indian music and culture rather than creating. Trinidad is thus “the land of steel band and calypso,” and of the people who created them.

This Trinidadian “creole” culture — English-based, syncretic, and “Afro-Saxon”— is traditionally upheld as the national mainstream culture. Creole culture thus largely excludes, on the one hand, neo-African forms like Shango worship and, on the other, Indo-Caribbean music, which again is seen as the foreign import of a particular ethnic minority, whose increased presence in public culture represents an essentially divisive “special interest.” By contrast, the mainstream creole culture, although largely the province of Afro-Trinidadians and mulattos, has traditionally been celebrated as a national, cosmopolitan, and essentially universal idiom to which other groups have been expected to integrate (see, e.g., Lowenthall 1972: 175); such “melting-pot” ideals were explicitly articulated by Eric Willims and can be seen to have underlain state cultural policies and even the oft-heard slogan, “All o’ we is one.”

Letters from creoles to local newspapers occasionally voice such sentiments with particular clarity, such as the following, addressed to the Indo-Trinidadian columnist and cultural activist Ravi-ji (Ravindranath Mara), who had publicly lamented the low visibility of Indo-Trinidadian culture:

Indo-Trinis [are] a minority outside the Pan-African mainstream to which our true national culture and our Afro-Caribbean culture belongs. We cannot regard dub, rap, reggae, soul, township jive, highlife and zouk as foreign—they are all the products of our people. In sharp contrast, Indo-Trini “culture”, including chutney [an Indo-Trinidadian folk-pop style discussed below] and other forms not found in India, can be regarded as foreign—foreign to us. It's a black thing—Ravi-ji wouldn't understand. (Trinidad Guardian, 30 May 1993)

Indo-Trinidadian attitudes toward such ideologies have not been monolithic. Until relatively recently, many Indians remained largely indifferent to national political and cultural activities, and Indian sports fans have not helped the situation by cheering for the visiting Pakistani or Indian cricket teams rather than local ones. Increasingly, however, Indians have come to acutely resent being regarded as immigrants, and they insist on their right to be accepted as Trinis while at the same time...
maintaining their distinctive ethnicity (see, e.g., Lowenthal 1972: 175; Dev 1993).

The accompanying Indian cultural activism can be seen as implicitly animated by demands for two complementary reforms. The first is that the concept of “creole” culture be broadened to include certain Indo-Trini syncretic forms—especially, hybrid entities like chutney-soca. The second is that the hegemonic notion of a creole mainstream itself be replaced or supplemented by a paradigm of multiculturalism—that the “melting pot” be traded for a “salad bowl.” In the last decade, both these processes have in fact been occurring, amidst an ongoing din of intra- and inter-ethnic polemics and controversies that, however often acrimonious, can be seen as the relatively healthy negotiations accompanying the emergence of a genuine cultural pluralism in a civil society. While scholarly literature has tended to discuss these issues in the abstract, in popular discourse they are more typically articulated in terms of specific cultural and above all musical controversies, to which we may now turn.

**STATE CULTURAL POLICIES AND INDIAN MUSIC**

Trinidadian cultural policy, in however ad hoc a manner, has traditionally exhibited a marked favoritism toward creole culture and music at the expense of Indo-Trinidadian counterparts. The largely creole Carnival festival, with its core activities of calypso and steel band competitions, is heavily subsidized by the state, unlike Indo-Trinidadian events like the vernal Phagwa (Holi) festival. Until 1995, Indian music and dance were generally excluded from state performance ensembles at Carifesta, a pan-Caribbean performing arts festival; in an oft-cited remark, one politician (Ronnie Williams) explained this anomaly by stating that Indian culture was alien and not part of Trinidadian culture. Indo-Trinidadian culture is similarly marginalized at the state-funded “Best Village” (formerly “Better Village”) folkloric contests; one Indian academic told me, “We are made to feel unwelcome there, and the orientation is mostly Afro-Trinidadian, but then we are criticized as clannish for not participating” (see also S. Maraj 1994a, 1994b). An offer by the government of India in 1966 to set up an Indian Culture Center was spurned by the PNM government, with Afro-Trinidadian critics denouncing the proposal as “Indian imperialism” (e.g. Ifill 1987). On the whole, Indian critics have accused the Trinidadian Ministry of Culture of trying to “douglasize” Indians by promoting assimilation and “integration” rather than multiculturalism, and they dismiss (whether fairly or not) its occasional Indian-oriented projects and hirings as tokenism.

Much of the debate regarding the role of Indian music in public culture has focused on the perceived under-representation of Indian music and culture on the broadcast media (Mahahir 1984). In both Trinidad and Guyana until recently, radio and television were exclusively state-run, in accordance with British norms. While a few weekly radio programs of Indian music—primarily Hindi film music—had been established in the 1940s, these accounted for only a tiny percent of airtime. Ravi-ji observed in 1993 that the two Trinidad public FM stations each broadcast only one hour of Indian music per week (and also, he noted, favor American pop over calypso); more Indian music was heard on the AM station (610), but its reception is poor throughout much of the island (R. Maraj 1993b). Shopping malls playing radio broadcasts would routinely change stations when Indian shows came on, leading journalist Ravi-ji to feel that he and his culture were being personally “switched off” (R. Maraj 1992). It was not until the mid-1990s that the situation changed, when new policies allowed the founding of private Indian-owned and Indian-oriented radio stations, and the state-owned stations increased their Indian programming in order to attract sponsors from the increasingly influential East Indian business community.

The achievement of such increased Indian media presence in Trinidad and Guyana provoked considerable backlash from creoles who regarded the trend as divisive. Letters from creoles to newspapers in both countries reiterated, in various ways, the belief in the universality of the normal radio fare—primarily Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean popular music—and the perceived foreignness of the favored Indian genre, Hindi film music, with its unintelligible language and exclusively Indian audience. Indians, nevertheless, have insisted on the legitimacy of its presence, and that of Indian culture in general, in a national polity to be based on pluralism rather than an exclusionist creolism. To creole protests that the media largely excluded African music as well as Indian music, Indians have countered that “creole” musics are predominantly Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American, and further, that Indians would accept a presence of African music in a spirit of multiculturalism (see Deosaran 1987a: 6).

While Indo-Caribbeans have been demanding greater representation from state Ministries of Culture, they have also been increasingly able to bypass such institutions by sponsoring their own cultural activities. Such, indeed, had always been the norm, although the Indo-Trinidadians’ dramatically increased affluence has greatly expanded the
scope of their private-sector cultural patronage. Thus, for example, in 1994, the Trinidadian impresario Moea Mohammed could state: “Getting represented on state radio was an uphill struggle all the way. But now we have all the air time we want, and we don’t need any help from the government” (pers. comm.). Aside from the new radio stations, such activities would include the massive Mastana Bahar amateur performance competitions, the similarly annual Indian Cultural Pageant (both dating from the 1970s), and the privately sponsored Chutney-Soca Monarch Competition inaugurated in 1996 as a new fixture in the Carnival season. Also largely funded by private Indian donors are the festivities surrounding the newly inaugurated Indian Arrival Day (unlike the state-subsidized, Afro-Trinidadian-oriented Emancipation Day). Pluralism in public culture, whether becoming an official state policy or not, has thus become a de facto reality via private-sector Indian sponsorship. Accordingly, for many Indians, creole acceptance of the Indian presence in national culture may be becoming both irrelevant as well as inevitable.

Pan versus Harmonium

Despite the increasing ability of Indian cultural promoters to bypass the state, the perceivedly discriminatory policies of the Ministry of Culture continued to provoke controversies in the 1990s, including one polemic, which exposed in a particularly dramatic way some of the paradoxes and complexities of the problematic relationship of Indo-Trinidadian identity to national culture. The focus in this case was the steel drum—a seemingly innocent instrument, but one which is of prodigious symbolic importance in the country. The steel drum, or “pan,” was invented in depressed black neighborhoods like Laventille in the late 1930s and early 1940s for use in Carnival street processions. The steel bands were associated from the start with lumpen black youth gangs, whose violent rivalries provoked heavy-handed police repression and stigmatized the instrument among Indians and the middle classes. Since the 1970s, however, the steel drum has largely shed its negative associations, becoming a focus of Carnival festivities and one of the most cherished symbols of creole national identity, played by many dozens of amateur ensembles throughout the country and elsewhere in the West Indies. The steel drum, indeed, is an icon for creole culture in general, as a truly Caribbean entity created, as one correspondent put it, “out of a long history of common struggle of the people against Massa’s brutal attempts to suppress their cultural expressions” (Clyde Weatherhead, letter to the Trinidad Guardian, 23 September 1992).

In 1992, the Trinidad government formally recognized the pan’s uniqueness in local culture by declaring it to be the “national instrument.” Proposals were made to fund the introduction of pan in schools and to construct a US $1.5 million theater for pan performances. While most Trinidadians, including Indians, presumably regarded such proposals as harmless, a small but vocal sector of the Indian populace vigorously opposed them. Most prominent among the latter was Satnarayan “Sat” Maraj, secretary general of the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha (SDMS), a conservative —and increasingly isolated—Hindu organization (see Verhoeve 1992: 123–25, 183–84; La Guerre [1974] 1985: 181).

In two extensive paid advertisements in the Trinidad Express (S. Maraj 1994a, 1994b), Maraj vigorously denounced the proposal, arguing that if the Ministry of Culture were to support steel drums in schools, then equal funding should be given to the harmonium, which is the most popular instrument used to play Indian music. In the first manifesto, Maraj reiterated the patriotism of Indo-Trinidadians and its compatibility with their distinct sense of ethnicity. He further noted that although the pan is associated with the black experience, it is used primarily to play Western music, including calypso. Moreover, as advised by a local musician, he argued that the pan is inherently unsuited to Indian music, since its “discordant” timbre renders it unable to render the twenty-two shrutis, or microtonal intervals, allegedly essential to all forms of Indian music. The steel drum, he claimed, is an inherently “imperfect” instrument, unlike, say, the sitar or harmonium; indeed, in the pan, “Trinidad has given the world [merely] an idea . . . which is being perfected but not here,” rather in Japan, Sweden, and other countries. By contrast, the ideal instrument to render Indo-Caribbean music is the harmonium; “only the musically illiterate” would argue that the harmonium “is a Western instrument introduced into India,” it having undergone various “adaptative changes” rendering it suitable for Indian music. The government’s proposal of “pushing pan down everyone’s throat” thus constitutes yet another instance of “afro-Trinidadian [sic] cultural arrogance,” like the creole-oriented Best Village competitions.

Express columnist Kim Johnson reported the response of a Ministry of Culture official, who observed, among other things, that the harmonium, with its piano-like keyboard, is no more able than the pan to play microtonal shrutis. Johnson went on to (correctly) note that the legendary twenty-two shrutis have never been systematically used in the folk and popular music patronized by Indo-Trinidadians; even in ancient Indian treatises, their alleged use is confined to Indian classical music, giving that music, as he somewhat injudiciously put it, its “characteristic whining...
sound" (Johnson 1994). Maraj responded with another indignant advertisement, accusing Johnson of "contempt and ignorance" for calling Indian music "whining," and deriding Johnson's inability to hear the twenty-two shruti which, Maraj insisted, pervade even Indian film songs and chutney. "Every Indian singer," Maraj claimed, "has an intuitive knowledge of shruti."

It is easy to see how this polemic could spin off into esoteric debates regarding the use of microtones in diverse African, Indian, and Caribbean musics, as happened in my own conversations with Indo-Trinidadians on the subject. One could opine that Maraj could have based his case for equal funding for the harmonium on three solid arguments: (1) the harmonium is a cheap, portable, and versatile instrument—suitable, indeed, for learning keyboard and harmonic skills applicable to all sorts of music, including calypso; (2) the harmonium is better suited to Indian music than the pan because of its ability to play sustained pitches and thus to better approximate vocal styles; and (3) the harmonium, quite simply, is the most popular instrument of the Indo-Trinidadian community. Maraj was perhaps ill-advised to rest his argument on the problematic issue of shruti, whose systematic usage in modern Indian classical music, not to mention genres like chutney, has been thoroughly disproven.8

Aside from Maraj's factually questionable statements, the aggressive tenor of his manifestos no doubt offended many creole readers. While dismissing the pan as merely "an Idea," Maraj gratuitously belittled the originality of creole music as a whole, deriding blacks for "[giving] up their culture to satisfy the whims and fancies of the European and American." Kim Johnson's inability to hear the twenty-two shruti in Indo-Trinidadian music, Maraj opined, was a case of "pears before swine." (I would be inclined to compare the shruti to the legendary emperor's clothing.) Indeed, the provocative and insulting tone of Maraj's articles clearly alienated many even in the East Indian community. While no systematic opinion polls have been taken, my own Indian acquaintances included some who trusted Maraj's discourse regarding shruti and appreciated his righteous militancy, and others who dismissed him as a divisive fool increasingly out of touch with his constituency and unnecessarily provoking ethnic animosity.

In this chapter it is perhaps inappropriate to belabor the musicological esoterica involved in Maraj's arguments, and one might well sympathize with the succinct headline of an essay in the Guardian: "Pan versus harmonium is foolish" (letter to the editor, 6 July 1994). Nevertheless, the debate raged on, with leading politicians being asked to voice their opinions (e.g., letter to the editor, Trinidad Express, 13 July 1994), until 1995, when the state agreed to purchase harmoniums for some schools, and a conciliatory PNM Prime Minister Patrick Manning embraced Sat, saying, "I'll pump the bellows, and you play the keyboard." Clearly, the issue had touched a national nerve, no doubt because of the broader questions it involved regarding the relations between ethnicity/race and cultural entities like music. Is the steel drum primarily an Afro-Trinidadian instrument, or a national and universal one? How do Indians and their music relate to the pan's "creole" status? What factors determine the ethnic character of a musical entity like steel band—the instrument's historical origin, the nature of the music played on it, or the ethnicity its performers and audiences?

In this case, the origin of the instrument in the urban Afro-Trinidadian community is a non-negotiable historical fact, but the ethnic associations of the pan's repertoire and personnel are inherently flexible, open to contestation, and arguably more important.9 As we have seen, Sat Maraj argued that pan is essentially an Afro-Trinidadian instrument; even after the pan outgrew its lumpen black hooligan associations, Indians have often been made to feel unwelcome in pan bands by what one informant called the "proprietary air" displayed by many creoles toward the instrument.10 As the calypsonian Chalkdust (Holli Livepool) sang in a 1982 calypso (or "kaiso"),

Some still laugh at the Indian man
When he sing kaiso or beat pan. (in Constance 1991: 35)

It is under these circumstances that Maraj and others regarded the official declaration of pan to be the national instrument as adding insult to injury. For their part, supporters of the Ministry of Culture position argued that the steel drum, notwithstanding its Afro-Trinidadian origins, is the patrimony of all Trinidadians.11 They pointed out that one of the country's leading pan arrangers is an East Indian (Jit Samaroo of the Amoco Renegades) and that, further, the instrument is quite compatible with Indo-Trinidadian music. Indeed, among the flurry of contemporary crossover fads (pan-parang, rap-calypso, soca-reggae, etc.), there have been several local fusions of pan and Indian music, including some hybrid recordings by Moeen Mohammad, a "pan chutney" competition started by Moean Mohammad, a "pan chutney" competition started in 1995, and innovative "pan-tar" collaborations of the sitarist Mangal Patasar with leading black panists. Patasar's group performs in a wide variety of locales, including calypso tents—otherwise strongholds of creole culture; in the new official spirit of ethnic inclusivity, he and a panist were featured on the cover of the country's 1996 telephone
directory. As the Indian soca singer Drupatee Ramgoonai sang in her “Hotter than a Chulha [stove]” (1999),

From the hills of Lord way up in Laventille
Pan man skills must spill into Caroni
For we goin' an' cause a fusion with the culture
To widen we scope and vision for the future.

(Caroni is a predominantly Indian region of central Trinidad). Steel drum, indeed, is not strictly associated with any kind of music; although most pan ensembles play current soca tunes, many play everything from European classics to the national anthem. A fortuitous dramatization of this point was provided at the peak of the controversy when the national television network broadcast an Indian film, Bekhud, featuring a dance sequence accompanied by a steel drum band. The Trinidad Guardian pithily noted, “There was a noticeable absence of harmoniums (or is it ‘harmonia’?) from the procession and none of the actors looked any the worse for the omission” (7 July 1994). As the Bekhud scene illustrated, the pan is increasingly able to be re-signified or appropriated by other ethnic groups—indeed, just as the pan itself has gone from being an instrument of European colonial proselytization to being an icon of Indian culture. Such re-significations, indeed, are typical of a postmodern world where cultural artifacts are uprooted from their original meanings, and musical entities from the global style pool are freely borrowed, mixed, and scrambled. However, such musical re-significations do not occur without friction. Some blacks are said to resent Jit Samaroo’s presence in the pan world, and Mangal Patasar himself has come under criticism from purist Indians who feel he has “degraded” the sitar by mixing it with pan. Nevertheless, the pan controversy, while a tempest in a teapot from one perspective, has also illustrated the inexorable redefining of Trinidadian national culture. The fusions of pan with Indian music have epitomized the broadening of the instrument’s “creole” character, while the state’s agreement to purchase harmoniums for schools reflects a simultaneous and self-conscious shift toward multiculturalism.

**Calypso and Indo-Trinidadian Identity**

Calypso is justifiably the most renowned Trinidadian art form, perhaps occupying a greater prominence in national public culture than does any other indigenous musical genre elsewhere in the world. At the same time, in Trinidad’s multi-ethnic society, calypso’s status as a “national” genre is inherently problematic in much the same sense as that of steel drum, in that its origin, content, and performers have always been overwhelmingly creole. Traditionally oriented toward the urban black lower-class male culture from which it emerged, calypso has only in recent years come to accommodate a few women and East Indians. As with steel drum, the complexities of calypso’s relationship to the East Indian community are the subject of ongoing negotiation and controversy, which serve as indicators of changing concepts of ethnic and national identity.

One important aspect of this subject involves the representations of Indians in creole calypsos themselves. Here I will deal only in passing with this topic, partly because of my intent to focus on Indo-Trinidadian musical culture per se, and also because this subject has already been insightfully discussed in a number of publications (especially Constance 1991, Rohlehr 1990:493–508, Warner 1993, Trotman 1989). The decades reflect changing creole perceptions and attitudes. On the whole, colonial-era calypsos tended to depict Indians condescendingly as exotic or laughable—much, indeed, as calypsonians portrayed Shango worshippers, Spiritual Baptists, and others on the margins of their rather narrow experience. In the 1950s, the increased participation of Indians in the social, economic, and political mainstream led to greater racial tension, greater mutual familiarity, and, correspondingly, to more varied representations in song. While a few calypsos appealed for racial harmony, others mocked Indians or portrayed them as a threat, often in the most unenlightened terms. As today, polemics raged in the media and in Parliament as indignant Indian leaders protested perceivedly racist songs. By the 1970s, the crudely derogatory tone of earlier calypsos was passing out of vogue. Instead, the norm was represented by songs like Mighty Sparrow’s “Marajin” (1982), depicting Indian women as desirable, or by Calypso’s whimsically exploiting bilingual puns, such as Crazy’s “Nani Wine”—“nani” meaning “grandmother” in Hindi, and short for “punnanny” or vagina in local slang. Calypsos continued to provoke ethnic controversy, as in the debate over Black Stalin’s 1979 “Caribbean Unity,” whose refrain asserted:

Dem is one race—de Caribbean man
From the same place—de Caribbean man
That make the same trip—de Caribbean man
On the same ship—de Caribbean man.

For obvious reasons, this song drew angry protests from Indians who were no longer willing to be written out of their country’s history (see Deosaran 1987b). In the mid 1990s, songs by CroCro and others lewdly
insulting a female politician, Hulsie Bhaggan, and Prime Minister Panday provoked protests, especially from Indians who felt that their tax dollars should not be used to subsidize calypso as a forum for their own vilification.

More directly relevant to the renegotiations of Indian culture in Trinidad has been the participation of Indians themselves in the calypso world. Indo-Trinidadian music itself played an indirect role in the evolution of modern calypso when in the late 1970s the black calypsonian Lord Shorty based his infectious soca (or, as he spelled it, “sokah”) rhythm partly on Indian tassa drumming (Constance 1991: 64). Tassa drums were also used in some early steel bands and continue to appear in a few soca/calypso bands.

Direct participation by Indians as performers, however, has been relatively infrequent and occasionally controversial. As with steel band, some interested Indians have been made to feel unwelcome in the predominantly creole milieu. On the whole, however, as one creole told me, “Most Trinis are happy to jump up to any song they like, regardless of who sings it.” Accordingly, since the 1980s a few Indians have entered the calypso/soca field and been well received by creole audiences (see Constance 1991: 68–82).

Indeed, the controversy regarding Indian participation in calypso has come largely from within the Indian community itself and thus involves questions of self-image and the desirability of creolization rather than creole hegemony per se. The most heated polemic erupted over the lively entrance of a young Indian woman, Drupatee Ramgoonai, into the soca scene in 1987. Drupatee, although neither a lyricist nor a composer, gained some popularity among creole and Indian audiences with her bouncy fusions of soca, tassa drumming, and chutney, with lyrics celebrating the cultural mix (as in the “Chutney Soca” quoted above). While such songs were in themselves innocuous enough, other aspects of Drupatee’s image provoked the ire of quite a few Indians. Particularly controversial was her song “Lick down me nani,” which invoked the grandmother/vagina pun in a way that was either violent (“knock down my granny”) or lewd (“lick my ‘nanny’”). For some Indians, the barrage of “nani” calypsos exploiting the same pun, and exacerbated the sensitivities of Indians during a period of several well-publicized rapes of Indian women by black men (pers. comm.).

Once again, newspapers and radio talk shows came alive with sound and fury, as controversy erupted around Drupatee and the broader issues of Indian participation in calypso, and creolization in general. Letters by Indians to newspapers denounced Drupatee as “immoral and disgusting” and “a thorn among East Indian women”; one critic wrote:

For an Indian girl to throw her high upbringing and culture to mix with vulgar music, sex, and alcohol in Carnival tents tells me that something is radically wrong with her psyche. Drupatee Ramgoonai has chosen to worship the Gods of sex, wine and easy money. (in Constance 1991: 51)

To those who argued that Drupatee was revitalizing Indo-Trinidadian music, one columnist asked, “Why is such extreme vulgarity necessary to maintain and perpetuate our Trinidadian culture?” (D. Maharaj 1993).

By the mid-1990s, the furor had dissipated somewhat as Drupatee became accepted as a minor fixture on the soca scene, and she continued to highlight Indian heritage in her music. In her “Hotter than a Chulha,” she reflected on the controversy she had provoked:

They give me blows, O Lord, last year for doing soca
But it shows how much they know about the culture
The music of the steel drum of Laventille
Cannot help but mix with rhythms from Caroni.
For it’s a symbol of how much we come of age
It’s a brand new stage.

Drupatee’s injection of Indianisms into the otherwise creole soca world has elicited a wide range of emotional responses among Indians, including both pride and shame (as well as indifference and, perhaps most commonly, casual bemusement). Most pointedly, it has led concerned Indians to question whether participation in mainstream, “national” culture is desirable if it entails creolization and a sacrifice of traditional values. Sat Maraj, again represents a purist point of view, conflating calypso culture with broken families and “bacchanal,” and denouncing racial mixing in general:

Why must all girls want to be flag women [Carnival revelers] and our primary schools be Carnival? . . . We do not want to give your children the culture of “wine and jam” [creole dancing and partying] and single teenage parents . . . [nor do we want] to mix up everybody, as if we do not have enough child criminals and teenage mothers. (Sunday Guardian, 2 October 1994)

Musical syncretism is thus seen as linked—not entirely without justification—to a broader socio-cultural creolization, with its attendant
weakening of traditional Indian values of hard work and family cohesion. Such concerns intensify the desires voiced by Indian spokespersons to be able to creolize on their own terms without eroding the values that have enabled them to progress, and to be able to maintain their own distinct cultural practices within a pluralistic conception of national identity.

Music and Creolization

In Trinidad, the phenomenon of creolization is as complex as it is controversial. Some Indian cultural activists have celebrated the syncretic musics of Drupatee, Mangal Patasar, and others as indications that Indians, rather than merely perpetuating or mimicking the culture of India, are creating distinctively local forms of culture. However, it could also be pointed out that local creation need not involve creolization, as in the case of the neo-traditional “tan-singing” or “local classical music” sung by semi-professional specialists at weddings and other functions. Although originally derived from North Indian folk and semi-classical music, tan-singing has developed into a unique song style, evolving along more or less Indian aesthetic lines without any significant creole stylistic influence.

Creolization itself has been used as a means of sustaining Indo-Trinidadian music culture, albeit in somewhat syncretic and accordingly controversial forms. The conservative SDMS and institutional Trinidadian Hinduism in general have survived partly by incorporating features of Christian practice, such as the custom of holding Sunday morning services (see, e.g., Lowenthal 1972: 152–53, Vertovec 1992: 120–21). Similarly, tan-singing competitions at once imitated calypso competitions, while serving as celebrations of traditional Indian music and lore. As Myers (1983) has observed, creole Carnival has served as a model for some aspects of the springtime Phagwa (Holi) festival—especially the chowtal (a Bhojpuri folksong genre) competitions organized by the Hindu Prachar Kendra (HPK).

In Indo-Trinidadian music itself, creolization is perhaps most overt in the form of language. While Indians in Trinidad and Guyana enjoy hearing Hindi-language songs and cherish the language as an icon of Indianness, very few are conversant in Hindi. Thus, as cultural activists like Ravi-ji have noted, Indo-Trinidadians have been unable to perpetuate the rich poetic heritage of India and, in the absence of an English-language Indo-Caribbean lyric tradition, they have contributed little to the realm of West Indian verse, which has instead been created mostly by creoles, from Derek Walcott to Mighty Sparrow. Ravi-ji observed, “We have failed to contemporise our music and lyrics . . . we have to make our music speak for us” (R. Maraj 1993a).

In hopes of ameliorating this perceived crisis of lyric self-representation, in 1993 Ravi-ji, director of the HPK, decided to establish a category of chowtal competition for so-called “pichakaaree” songs in English or mixed Hindi and English.14 Anticipating objections by purists, he noted how Tulsidas’ sixteenth-century rendering of the Ramayana in colloquial Avadhi (rather than in esoteric Sanskrit) helped popularize the epic and became one of the classics of Indian literature (R. Maraj 1993a). (Similarly, the SDMS itself had earlier instructed pandits to improve their English in order to better impart Hinduism; La Guerre 1985: 179.) When competing chowtal groups and amateur solo singers avidly rose to the occasion, purists did indeed protest the move as one more example of cultural erosion and creolization. Sat Maraj denounced the experiment as “seducing chowtals into calypso singing” (Trinidad Express, 11 March 1993), while another critic wrote, “if this practice . . . is not stopped, the age of soca, dub, and calypso tunes will obliterate all traces of Holiness in Holi” (letter to the editor, Trinidad Guardian, 8 April 1993). A pandit denounced the songs as “unnecessary concessions that are made to non-Hindus” and claimed that Tulsidas’ translation was accepted only after it was sanctioned by God.15

God not having spoken on the subject of chowtal, it has been up to mortals to resolve the issue. Moderate reservations were raised by Mangal Patasar, who, while recognizing and even composing pichakaarees as a parallel development to Hindi chowtals, feared that the former might obliterate the latter and questioned whether such efforts would ever match calypsos in quality (pers. comm.). Ravi-ji and his supporters, however, see pichakaaree songs as illustrating how creolization—here in the form of using English—can promote Indian identity by revitalizing and contemporizing a music genre which remains Indian in style and orientation. Further, the pichakaaree songs, however amateurish, are seen as constituting yet another form of syncretic cultural creation, strengthening the Indo-Trinidadian stake to genuine citizenship in the Caribbean.

The contradictions in the use of creolized practices to promote Indian music are even more evident in the Mastana Bahar phenomenon. Mastana Bahar is an Indo-Trinidadian amateur song and dance competition network founded in 1970 by Sham and Moean Mohammed, two energetic entrepreneurs also prominent as radio deejays, record producers, and concert impresarios. The primary Mastana Bahar activities
are the weekly variety-show auditions held in various parts of the island throughout most of the year, leading to final competitions held in stadiums. Television broadcasts of the auditions are avidly watched by Indians, and some 80,000 people are estimated to have competed in the show since its inception (R. Maraj 1992). As such, Mastana Bahar has evolved into an institution in Trinidadian culture.

As Moean Mohammed readily acknowledges (pers. comm.), many aspects of the program have been modeled on the calypso competitions, with significant differences including the reliance on private commercial sponsorship and, of course, the show's orientation toward Indian art forms. Thus Mastana Bahar again illustrates how creolized socio-musical institutions can be used to promote Indian culture, serving as a bulwark against the "raging flood of Afro-Saxon and Afro-American cultural forces" (Shamoon Mohammed 1976: 29). The Mohammeds are quite justified in boasting that they have played a significant role in the Indo-Trinidadian cultural revival occurring since the early 1970s, not only spreading awareness of Indian music and dance but, more importantly, inspiring a prodigious amount of amateur performance. At the same time, they repeatedly proclaim their fierce Trinidadian nationalism and insist that Indian arts not be seen as foreign (e.g. Sham Mohammed 1979: 13).

Aside from the general goal of promoting Indian culture, the Mohammeds stress how Mastana Bahar is intended to inspire the creation of a uniquely Indo-Trinidadian musical culture, rather than mere imitation of India. The main vehicle for such attempts has been the encouragement of "local songs," which combine Hindi and English (see Sham Mohammed 1979: 17). The Mohammeds note with pride how a few traditional Indo-Caribbean local songs have even become popular in India, as rendered by Babla and Kanchan, a singer-producer duo from Bombay (e.g. Sham Mohammed 1983).

However, at least ninety percent of the Mastana Bahar fare consists of amateur (and decidedly amateurish) renditions of Indian film songs and dances. Indeed, critics allege that Mastana Bahar, rather than promoting local creation, has in fact served to stifle it with an inundation of film music. Ironically, much of modern Indian film music is itself heavily Westernized, incorporating disco rhythms and synthesizers, and often consisting of Hindi-language cover versions of Western pop hits. Thus Hindi film music, via Mastana Bahar, serves both as a celebration of Indian identity and a conduit for Western pop culture.

As Mastana Bahar uses calypso-influenced competition formats and Westernized Indian pop music to promote Indian culture in Trinidad, the dichotomies between "Indian" and "creole" musics in many respects dissolve, as does the utility of the concept of "creolization" itself. At the same time, one of the basic features of modern global culture is the uneasy coexistence of such inexorable trends toward syncretism and hybridity with tendencies toward ethnic essentialism. Such contradictory processes are particularly evident in the chutney boom, which we may consider as a final text in the (de)construction of Trinidadian national identity.

Chutney

In the late 1980s, a dramatic new development occurred in Indo-Trinidadian music culture which threw the ranks of Indian critics and commentators into yet another round of polemics. The subject in this case was the phenomenon of "chutney"—a term which in Indo-Caribbean culture had long denoted not only a spicy condiment, but a loose category of lively, up-tempo Hindi-language folk songs and accompanying dance. Chutney was typically performed at Hindu weddings, wherein groups of women would indulge in animated and often whimsically lewd dances in secluded settings with no men present. By the 1970s, most Trinidadian Hindu weddings had come to include lively chutney dancing, in settings that were no longer sexually segregated, with music being provided by an ensemble of singer with harmonium, dholak (barrel drum), and dantal, a metal idiophone. In the mid-1980s, chutney enthusiasts spontaneously cast off most remaining social inhibitions, as public chutney dances started to be held in large entertainment halls. Since then, every weekend in two or three locales, several hundred Indians—male and female, young and old—gather to listen to chutney groups, to socialize, and, as the beer takes effect and the music quickens, to push aside the folding chairs and dance.16

Chutney is a mixture of old and new. On the one hand, most of the songs, although often original, are sung in Hindi and in standard Bhojpuri-derived Indo-Caribbean folk style. The dance style, although often flamboyant, is also largely traditional, combining graceful Indian-style hand gestures with sensuous pelvic "wining," whether performed solo or with a partner of either gender. On the other hand, the practice of men and women performing such dances together and in public is recent (except, paradoxically, insofar as it has been inspired by dance scenes in Indian films). Further, the chutney groups often add Western dance-band instruments and soca rhythms, producing a hybrid called "chutney-soca," as performed by Drupatee Ramgoonai and others.
The chutney vogue, in accordance with its merry flouting of conventions, provoked a barrage of vitriol from outraged Indian critics and community leaders (self-appointed and otherwise). The SDMS fulminated against it, letters to newspapers denounced it, and a women's organization called on the police to arrest lewd dancers. The controversy came to involve a complex range of issues, which can only be mentioned here. At one level, the debate concerned religion, with critics denouncing the dancing to devotional songs as blasphemy, and defenders pointing to the tradition of sensuality in Hinduism. Issues of gender were also involved, as moralists focus their wrath on women dancers, while proponents celebrate chutney as a vehicle for female liberation. Thirdly, class has played an important role in the debate, as chutney fêtes are predominantly working-class affairs, and the critics are mostly bourgeois.

Of greater direct relevance in this article are the ways in which the chutney controversy involves questions of local creativity and creolization. Much of the outrage over chutney has focused on the manner in which it allegedly reflects the negative aspects of creolization. Critics charge that chutney is a vehicle for the adoption of the worst features of Carnival and creole culture—drinking, vulgar dancing, and, allegedly, illicit sex and the subsequent breakdown of the family (e.g. in Dauny 1990, 1992; see also Rampersad 1990). As one columnist wrote, using what might be interpreted as a euphemistic reference to black society: “Why do we have to follow the decaying sector of our society and destroy such an integral part of our Trinidadian heritage?” (D. Maharaj 1993).

For their part, chutney’s defenders have stressed the ways in which it is an original and distinctly Trinidadian phenomenon, whose creole aspects (soca beat, public performance, etc.) strengthen the Indian claim of being West Indians rather than immigrants (e.g. M. Mohammed in Elcock 1987). Chutney supporters further argue that for all its hybridity, chutney-soca nevertheless serves to keep Indian culture alive and dynamic. As the columnist Kamal Persad (1990) wrote,

> Chutney occasions represent Indian cultural continuity and persistence. Such is the strength of this Indian cultural expression that it is holding its own against competition from other musical forms emanating from other cultural streams like African calypso, reggae and dub, and even rock 'n' roll and pop music from the US.

Another columnist hypothesized, in reference to the “bombardment” of Western pop music:

> Could it be that the Chutney phenomenon, the winning, is a subconscious emulation by the Indian people, their response to that bombardment? That out of a fear of cultural annihilation, they have begun to respond? That attack—winning—is the best form of defence? That rather than be swallowed up whole by the omnivorous reach of the cultural imperialism of the West, the Chutney singers and dancers are now fighting fire with fire...that via the Chutney...Indians who might have strayed away in the past might once again return prodigiously to the fold? (L. Siddhartha Orie, letter to the Trinidad Express, 30 December 1990)

Chutney is thus seen as constituting a bulwark against commercial Western and creole culture partially by incorporating some of its features. While this situation is paradoxical, it is also a common and oft-noted feature of syncretic musics throughout the developing world. Music genres that remain frozen and “pure” are often marginalized, while those that evolve and syncretize remain vital and are able to preserve at least some aspects of traditional culture.

Perhaps more immediately visible and relevant to Trinidadians has been the dramatic entrance of chutney-soca into “mainstream” national culture since 1995. That year saw the election of the country’s first Indian prime minister, the establishment of Indian Arrival Day as a national holiday, and, on a more grassroots level, a lively fat of Indian-oriented calypso and soca songs, as performed and enjoyed by creoles and Indians alike. In February/March, the Calypso Monarch prize went to (Afro-Trinidadian) Black Stalin’s song entitled “Sundar Poo,” dedicated to the veteran Indian chutney and “local song” crooner. In the subsequent Carnival season commencing in the latter part of the year, creole calypso singers released a veritable torrent of self-titled “chutney-socs” which, whether stylistically Indian or not, nevertheless foregrounded Indian themes in one way or another in an unprecedentedly appreciative spirit. One of these songs, Brother Marvin’s “Jihaji Bhai” (Shipmate), won the 1995 runner-up award. Meanwhile, a genuine chutney (“Lutela”) by the Indian singer Sonny Mann became one of the season’s smash hits and carried Mann to the Soca Monarch festival—where, however, he was pelted with missiles by creoles shouting “We eh [ain’t] want de coolie.” Such incidents notwithstanding, the Indian presence in Carnival was formalized the following year with the institutionalization of a Chutney-Soca Monarch Competition. Significantly, around half the competitors in this event were creole. At the same time, chutney seemed to be syncretizing out of existence, as Indianisms virtually disappeared from the new chutney-soca, with its English lyrics and soca style. Nevertheless,
Prime Minister Panday publicly hailed chutney-soca as "a symbol of the type of complete harmonization that must characterize our society in years to come." Indeed, chutney-soca has enabled Indians to finally enter the mainstream of Trinidadian culture, and on their own terms rather than on the traditional creole turf of pan and calypso. With chutney-soca entrenched on radio, in Carnival, in creole dance clubs, and even on BWIA's in-flight soundtracks, Trinidad is already being referred to—however belatedly—as "the land of calypso, steel band, and chutney."

**Conclusion**

In 1991 a *Trinidad Express* editorial described the ongoing debate about African, Indian, and Trinidadian identity as "tired old rumshop talk" ("Indians Flavour Cultural Callaloo," 11 August, 8). The vehemence of the ongoing socio-musical polemics, however, reveals that when provoked by concrete issues, the nature of Indian and Trinidadian identity continues to be a matter of prodigious import and animated negotiation. Indeed, what is at stake is no less than the forging of a workable cultural consensus in a country otherwise in danger of fragmenting along racial lines.

Trinidadian national identity was stunted from the start by the lack of any history of pan-ethnic independence struggle (see Trotman 1989: 184). While the labor movement of the 1930s (like Cheddi Jagan's Marxist mobilizations in Guyana) sought to foster a sense of proletarian solidarity, its goal of ethnic collaboration was premature, due to mutual ignorance between the two communities and the existence of too many problematic issues which remained to be worked out. The establishment of a creole "mainstream" under PNM leadership provided only a partial and temporary solution, as it largely excluded Indian as well as neo-African culture under a shallow integrationism, which was itself to occur largely on Afro-Saxon terms.

The Black Power Movement of 1970 forced a new and necessary confrontation of these issues. While celebrating Afrocentricity, it also re-ignited East Indian racial consciousness, leading to a cultural revival which came "perilously close to mimicry" (La Guerre 1985: 177), as dashikis and Afros on one side were matched by chutney and Mastura Bahar on the other. For the Indian historian John La Guerre, the frenetic cultural revivalism of the 1970s and 1980s constituted yet another stage which the East Indians were to undergo and eventually surpass. In fact, however, the revival appears to be intensifying rather than subsiding, and it is clear that whatever national consensus emerges will have to be based on new paradigms of multiculturalism and an expanded, or perhaps exploded, sense of "creole" culture. Accordingly, as Earl Lovelace's novel *The Dragon Can't Dance* dramatizes, the challenge facing Trinidad may involve starting from one's own cultural base in a way that opens up to others, relinquishing traditional clannishness but not cultural difference, to place culture in the service of a broader struggle for human dignity (see, e.g., Taylor 1993: 272). Accordingly, cultural activists have emphasized how Indian culture can at once sustain Indo-Trinidadians while enriching national culture as a whole (e.g. Parmasad 1973: 290). In the evolution of such a pluralistic rather than "plural" society, all ethnic communities would ideally transcend neo-colonial inferiority complexes and bigotries by achieving both self-respect and mutual respect.

At the same time, the self-conscious celebration of Indian identity and multiculturalism—with its dangers of ethnic fragmentation—has been offset by the trend toward various forms of syncretism. One aspect of this development is the increased East Indian participation in creole musical activities like steel band and calypso. As this process continues, such music may become genuinely "mainstream" in the sense of being national and multi-ethnic rather than overwhelmingly Afro-Trinidadian. The symmetrical process of creole interest and participation in Indian arts, which had earlier commenced with tassa drumming, has now intensified dramatically with chutney-soca. A related form of syncretism involves the creolization of Indian musical culture itself, whether inspired by calypso or by Westernized Hindi film music. One ramification of these developments is that "the Trinidadian creole mainstream," in the words of one columnist, "is in a state of collapse . . . [and] is being replaced by a radically different understanding of society based on ethnicity" (Sankelalli 1996). Centrifugal ethnic revivals and centripetal syncretic hybridity thus emerge as the twin bases of Trinidadian culture, as of the postmodern global scene in general. Ironically, both trends serve to undermine the nation-state as a foundation for identity. The spirited socio-musical polemics in Trinidad illustrate how the transitions involved in such processes can be successfully negotiated in the public sphere, at once sustaining national polity and making it increasingly irrelevant.

**Notes**

Research for this article was conducted in several field trips to Trinidad, Guyana, and Suriname in 1993–98 (two of which were funded by a PSC-CUNY grant), shorter excursions to Holland and Toronto, and in ongoing interaction with Indo-Caribbeans in New York City. While assuming full responsibility for the
The country of Trinidad and Tobago is referred to here simply as Trinidad; few Indians live on Tobago itself. In Guyana, Indians constitute 51% of the population; in Suriname, 37%; and in Trinidad, around 45%. The Indian population growth rate is roughly twice that of blacks, although their emigration rate may also be somewhat higher.


3. One commentator wrote articulately of the Afro-Trinidadian experience: “Much had to be reinvented and even improvised on the spot, be it music, religion, or family organization. Such a challenge must indeed have been a creative one to the extent that it has had to be faced up to without many of the disciplines ordinarily exercised by the ancestral legacy. What the latecomers for their part more easily discern are the risks and the dangers of an uncharted journey. They were, and the spectre of drift into a mongrel condition” (Best 1993).

4. In a much-quoted speech, Williams stated, “There must be no Mother India, no Mother Africa” (see E. Williams 1962: 281).

5. As the Indo-Trinidadian scholar John La Guerre stated, “It was only in the last couple of years that Indian community formally decided that it would participate in the calypso competition” (Trinidad Guardian, 1 June 1990).

6. Mahabir calculated that in 1980 only 1.25% of Trinidadian television (TTT) programs had Indian content (1984: 2). In both countries, newspapers have for several years given expanded coverage to Indian affairs (see Centre for Ethnic Studies 1995).

7. A contemporary cartoon in the Guyana Chronicle parodied the situation showing members of each of the country’s six ethnic communities, and Indians and Creoles, seated around a table demanding their own radio programs.

8. Despite the discussions (themselves ambiguous and self-contradictory) in the terrors in ancient Indian musicological treatises, empirical research has revealed that they are not used in any systematic fashion in modern North Indian classical music, not to mention folk or popular music, most forms of which instead use a flexible system of twelve semitones compatible with that of Western music (Ley 1982, Jairazbhoy and Stone 1963). Hence, for example, the relative compatibility of the harmonium with many forms of Indian music, despite the fact that the harmonium is indeed an instrument of European origin. (Mahtani does not specify what structural “adaptive changes” the instrument underwent in India.) Maraj may correctly sense that Indian singing — including film music and chutney — sounds quite distinct from Western singing, but these differences are due more to nuances of style rather than intonation per se.

9. For example, the Venezuelan-derived genre parang, despite its obvious “foreign” character (including Spanish texts), is regarded as “indigenous” partly because it is cultivated primarily by creoles (see R. Maraj 1992; according to some extent seen as a stronghold of Afro-Trinidadian musical culture. When an Indian girl sang parang at a 1993 concert, a creole acquaintance of mine laughingly quipped to his friend, “Now we really losin’ it!”

10. The columnist Morgan Job commented on this sentiment in an article in the Trinidad Guardian, 11 February 1991. An Indian musician similarly commented, “Indians do not get too much involved in pan-playing because they probably were made to feel it belongs to the Afro-Trinidadians” (in Danny 1991).

11. The Afro-Trinidadian scholar Gordon Rohlehr (in criticizing the novelist V. S. Naipaul’s disdain for pan) described pan music as “the single common ground where Trinidadians of all races meet on a basis of equality” (in Lowenthal 1972: 175).

12. Ken Parmasad related to me how his daughter’s entrance in the calypso competition was greeted with heckles and calls of “What dat coolie girl doin’ dere?”

13. The Syrian-Trinidadian singer “Mighty Trini” had earlier faced similar, if less vehement, opposition from his own, predominantly bourgeois community.

14. Pickaninny is the syringe-like squirt-gun traditionally used in Indian Phagwa merrymaking. See articles in the Sunday Guardian, 23 March and 4 April 1997.


16. For more expansive discussion of chutney, see Manuel 1998.

17. To the disappointment of many, the first prize went to a clannish song by CroCro denouncing blacks for letting Indians win the elections.

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