

Calypso and the Bush

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This paper compares some of the lyrics from two apparently radically different song codes – calypso from Trinidad and Tobago in the postcolonial Caribbean, and the bush ballad from white settler Australia. I am using two different although interlocking time frames here. The bush ballad belongs primarily to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while calypso sung in French patois dates as far back as the eighteenth century but only moved into English and began to achieve prominence at the beginning of the twentieth. Both song codes developed in environments with very different histories and very different colonising situations. There are, however, some interesting similarities. In both regions the indigenous people were almost totally erased and their lands occupied by new groups displaced from their own homelands. Australia was a dumping ground for white convicts and then a 'land of opportunity' for immigrants, while Trinidad and Tobago, in addition to a mixed race population of English, French, Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese, Indian and Chinese colonists, received a huge influx of black African slaves – mainly under Spanish rule during the second half of the eighteenth century – until the island passed into British hands in 1797. The people of both Trinidad and Tobago and Australia, then, have, in different ways and circumstances, been owned and controlled by England in its role as imperial power, and this shared subjection to colonisation provides a background to this comparison of calypso and the bush ballad. The main assumption here is that both song forms have, in their respective countries, played a significant part in creating and representing imagined ideas of a national culture. In the Caribbean, calypso continues to play a living part, keeping abreast of changing times as a vehicle of social, political and moral insight and commentary. In Australia, even though the bush ballad song form long ago proved inadequate as a comprehensive and authentic mode of cultural expression, images from these early songs undoubtedly continue to influence ways in which many white Australians see and represent themselves to each other and the rest of the world.

One of the most prominent oral codes to influence the literature of the English speaking Caribbean, calypso originated in an oral, improvisatory form, a character-

istic that it shares with the bush ballads of Australia. The term 'calypso' seems to be a kind of hybrid or composite. Keith Warne, in his study *Kaiso! The Trinidad Calypso*, gives many possible sources to do with topical and joyous songs concluding with the West African (Hausa) term 'kaišo', itself a corruption of 'kaišo', an expression of approval and encouragement similar to 'bravo' (8). As for the word 'ballad' we will go with John Manifold's term that ballads are narrative folksongs – stories – although here, in its Australian context, the term is extended to include the 1890s literary Australian bush ballads of Paterson, Lawson and co.¹

Errol Hill, in his study 'The Trinidad Carnival' writes that the first calypsonians date back to the eighteenth century, where African slave singers entertained with satiric and often insulting improvised songs derived from the West African oral tradition of praise and derision. Nineteenth-century calypsoes were sung in French patois but at the beginning of the twentieth century the calypso made the transition into English and creole English. Calypso is customarily devoted to humorous, satiric social comment. V.S. Naipaul emphasises that without wit and verbal conceits a song cannot be called a calypso (70). The vital point here is that the calypso form works through the medium of laughter. Its effectiveness and very existence depend entirely on the humour that is embedded deep in patterns of speech which Bakhtin would categorise as belonging to folk, street or marketplace language. Out of this language calypso songs provide comic, alternative interpretations for a wide variety of situations ranging from the most trivial domestic incidents to serious political issues. Irony and satire are its main weapons. The calypso tradition flouts the dominant English language and its conventions via a series of constantly inventive and irreverent improvisations with words, phrases, grammar and rhythm. Calypso belongs to the carnival spirit. Its songs can be seen as comic compositions that stand in opposition to a rigid established order.

A few of the same observations, particularly those about irreverence and humour, can be made about the bush ballads. The content of both song forms is extremely diverse. Calypso at its most basic level has a continuing tradition of ribaldry, sexual innuendo and sexism featuring the egotistical language of the compulsive boaster such as we find, for example, in Sparrow's song 'Lucy Garden'. Ostensibly documenting the innocent activities of a hired gardener, it encourages the listener's imagination to run erotically or smuttily amok:

Quite in Jamaica
 Sparrow gone as a gardener
 Oh Lord, ah working hard
 Ah want to come back to Trinidad
 Then miss Lucy turn and tell me
 She like to see the garden well watery
 Ah wet it good, and how you don't know
 In a couple of months she plants start to grow

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She tell me to water the garden
 Sparrow water the garden
 You should see how ah pose
 When ah reel out the hose
 To water the garden (Sparrow 52)

Many of these calypsoes are so attuned to the psychology of gossip and so aware of people's hunger to hear about erotic incidents that they are able to gain the listener's complicity in the narrated experience, often by playing on reprehensible human traits. The Australian bush ballad has a parallel ribald tradition with more of an emphasis perhaps on straight-out bawdiness; one example is 'Navy on the Line' from John Meredith's collection 'Folk Songs of Australia':

Some like the girls
 Who are slender in the waist,
 Others like the girls
 Who are pretty in the face.
 But give me the girl
 Who'll take it in her fist
 And shove it right home
 Into the cuckoo's nest. (217)

And, as a second example from the same source, comes 'My Beautiful Muff':

A handsome young damsel, one cold winter's night,
 Away from her home she did happen to glide.
 She was wrapped up very warmly with her hair rather rough,
 And in front she did wear a most beautiful muff.
 chorus:
 My own and I'll wear it,
 (So) Don't you come near it;
 You'll spoil it, you'll tear it,
 My beautiful muff. (217)

The lack of a named character in these Australian songs might be indicative perhaps of the male Anglo-Saxon sensibility that would rather not recognise any distinct personhood in its female targets. The song 'My Beautiful Muff' seems to bear this out. In its final verses the anonymous lady in question is subjected to what can only be interpreted as a gang rape. The whole faceless episode is kept, in the telling, at a safe psychological distance by the equally faceless language of double meaning and a storyteller's third person narration which typically sets up a kind of collective immunity for the listeners, even though they might very well be participating in singing the rousing chorus. On the other hand, calypsoes like Sparrow's 'Lucy Garden' above do not shy away from very specific characterisation and since the

boasting element is so crucial to the calypsonian's self image they often employ a first person narration as in Sparrow's song 'Village Ram':

Not a woman ever complain yet wid me
 Ah ain't boasin' but ah got durability
 And if a woman ever tell you that I
 Ever left her dissatisfy
 She lie, she lie, ah say she lie. (Thieme 64-5)

These calypsoes are very much about sexual warfare and they also belong to an oral tradition of fast-talking and wars of words, a tradition that encourages and admires masters of witty verbal insult. For the calypsonian, then, being personally implicated by casting himself as a protagonist in his songs is not a problem. In fact it is a necessity for his performer's ego and his manhood. There are two vicarious victories to be won, the first over a female subject and the second over all competitive males within earshot. These calypsoes are thus essentially dramatic, a quality that accounts partly for their forceful impact. The demeaning of women in the Australian songs seems comparatively savage in the dumb, mindless way of boys' dunny humour. Calypsoes of the same genre can be more seriously disturbing, with moralistic double standards and a goddess/whore dichotomy proudly articulated and deliberately exacerbated, rather than masked, by the cruel, judgmental humour of deeply personal insult and ridicule:

This disgraceful female
 Smells like saltfish tail
 The food on she teeth like mortar
 She won't bathe she 'fraid water
 Every night she begging for rum
 From club to club like a real bum
 When she finish drinking all about
 She doing anything with her mouth ('Jean Marabunta,' Sparrow 24)

But calypso also has a tradition of protest and social commentary; songs that, in theoretical postcolonial language, destabilise the discourses of metropolitan power – subversive, political, anti-authoritarian songs; songs against injustice and poverty, rebel songs, nationalistic and genuinely humanistic songs. Errol Hill points out that one of the first calypsoes to appear in English was aimed at the British governor Sir Hubert Jerningham who attempted in 1898 to dissolve the Port of Spain City Council:

Jerningham the Governor,
 Is a fastness in-to you
 Is a rudeness in-to you
 To break up the laws of Borough council (59)

There seem to be similar strains and a similar diversity in Australian bush ballads. In his *Who wrote the Ballads?* John Manifold draws attention to what he calls the 'treason songs', of which Banjo Paterson's 'Waltzing Matilda' is one. These protest against the institutionalised representatives of colonial power in Australia. The bushranger ballads and the convict songs often belong to this category and Manifold quotes this verse from one of the many Jack Donahue ballads:

Then hurl me to crime and brand me with shame,
 But think not to balk me, my spirit to tame,
 For I'll fight to the last in old Ireland's name;
 Though I be a bushranger,
 You still are the stranger,
 And I'm Donahue. (30)

Manifold goes on to write that

Russel Ward points out how neatly this establishes the continuity from Irish to Australian political nationalism. It is the imperial English power, not the transported Irishman, that is 'the stranger' in the colonies. The bushranger fights on in the Australian bush 'in old Ireland's name'. (30)

On the themes of imperialism, oppression and resistance, one of the ways in which calypsonians tackle the Caribbean's catastrophic history and how it impinges on the present is to adopt a persona and situate it in an imagined reconstruction of past events. This imaginative recuperation of silenced voices from the colonial past has become a familiar and a powerful feature of writings from many postcolonial countries. Sparrow uses it in his calypso 'Slave':

Many times I wanted to run
 But the English Slave Master standing there with his gun
 Oh I know he would shoot to kill
 So I stayed and I prayed but I planning still
 I studied night and day how to get away
 Ah got to make a brilliant escape
 But everytime I think about the whip them dogs
 Me body starts to shake (87)

The yearning and plotting for seemingly impossible freedom from extreme conditions brought about by transportation and the inhuman cruelty of masters also recur constantly through a great number of Australian songs:

But by and by I'll break my chains: into the bush I'll go,
 And join the brave bushrangers there – Jack Donahoo and Co. ;

And some dark night when everything is silent in the town
 I'll kill the tyrants, one and all, and shoot the floggers down:
 I'll give the Law a little shock: remember what I say:
 They'll yet regret they sent Jim Jones in chains to Botany Bay
 ('Jim Jones at Botany Bay,' *Manifold* 28)

Manifold also points out that the language and the opening lines of various Ben Hall bushranger ballads all stress Australian nationality: 'Come all Australia's sons to me', 'Come all you young Australians', 'Come all you wild colonials', 'Come all you lads of loyalty'. These are songs resisting the forces of the crown, rejecting the concepts of England and Empire in favour of a loyalty to one's own kind and country. Such feelings developed in a patriotic direction in some ballads. In *Folk Songs of Australia*, Meredith comes across a version of 'Native Mate' under the title of 'Australia For Me,' the chorus of which might easily be seen as an antecedent to Peter Allen's anthem 'I Still Call Australia Home':

So give me your hand in my own native land,
 Or a tent in Australia where the tall gum trees stand.
 No matter how far, in the bush it may be,
 (Shouted) Every man for his country –
 (Sung) Australia for me (137)

If the bush ballad can accommodate an anthem style of lyric then perhaps it should come as no surprise that calypso can too. The coming of Independence in Trinidad generated this song called 'Model Nation' from Sparrow; an anthem without doubt, but when creole English from the pen of a calypsonian mimics the underlying European model there is bound to be a strange, ambivalent interplay between genuine celebratory sentiments and the wicked ways of satire, irony, sarcasm and perhaps a play on the idea of continuing bondage:

Trinidad and Tobago will always live on
 Colonialism gone Our nation is born
 We go follow our leaders they always do their best
 We want to Achieve so we're going to Aspire
 And we bound to a success. (40)

The kind of representations of an imagined Australian culture set up by many of the bush ballads have resurfaced many times in Australian song. Particularly raw versions, for example, emerged in rock of the 1970s and 1980s which, despite their primarily urban orientation, seem to hark back to the whole transient lifestyle featured and celebrated in the ballads: restlessness (as represented by driving), independence, individualism, vast distances, the aversion to settling down, struggle against authority, physical toughness in the face of hardship. Such themes, attitudes and images have continually re-emerged and have been re-presented particularly,

perhaps, as a kind of packaged deal in some well known bands. The influence of the Australian ballads and their projections of what constitutes an Australian people can perhaps be detected in the prison songs and social comment of Don Walker from 'Cold Chisel', early AC/DC's 'Jailbreak' and their exposition of the gruelling band life on the road in a big, wild country in 'It's a Long Way to the Top', and, for example, the ballads of Mick Thomas from 'Weddings, Parties, Anything.' The persona of a rock spokesman in this context, artificial construction though it might be, certainly resonates with the mythic images of the wild colonial boy, outlaw-hero, rebel and rootless man adrift in a harsh landscape that have been handed down via the ballads and remain residual in the Australian psyche.²

In different guises of course, the outlaw-hero figure as rebel and outcast also holds a central place in Caribbean stories. As we have seen earlier from the boasting songs, the calypsonian has no compunction about placing himself as hero in his own dramas. In his public role as social commentator he also often adopts the persona of a self-styled outlaw-hero at war with hypocrisy and injustice. Attempted police censorship of calypsoes in the 1930s and later in the 40s brought this response from calypsonian Atilla the Hun which shows a lucid awareness of how European texts were used by a dominant culture to silence indigenous voices:

To say these songs are sacrilegious, obscene
or profane
Is only a lie and a dirty shame.
If the calypso is indecent then I must insist,
So is Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis,
Boccaccio's tales, Voltaire's Candide,
The Martyrdom of Man by Winwood Reid,
Yet over these authors they make no fuss,
But want to take advantage of us. (Raymond Quevedo [Atilla], Hill 67)

By way of conclusion, I'll refer again to Trinidadian writer V.S. Naipaul: his assertion that '[t]he pure calypso, the best calypso is incomprehensible to the outsider' (70) is not entirely true, as I hope this comparison between the bush ballad and calypso has shown. The questions, 'Who are we? What place is this? Where do we come from? Where are we going?' lie at the foundation of both these song forms born out of colonial situations. I am sure that any Australian bush balladeer and those familiar with the songs would have no trouble comprehending Mighty Duke's calypso, the sentiments of which seem just as applicable to the Australian bush ballad tradition as they are to the calypso tradition of the Caribbean:

It's a feeling which comes from deep within,
A tale of joy or one of suffering,
It's an editorial in song to the life we undergo,
That and only that I know is true calypso (Hill 69)

As a kind of postscript here, however, it is certainly worth noticing one general contrast between calypso and the bush ballad. Gordon Rohlehr, Caribbean scholar with an expert knowledge of calypso, has remarked in a study of Sparrow's calypsoes on how the calypsonian often departs significantly from 'any metropolitan voice of complaint' (92). There may be a question worth considering here about just how much the idiosyncrasies of creole English actually facilitate that departure. It's probably true to say, then, that calypso often tends to be far more specific in its focusing on targets and blatant in its articulation of grievances than the bush ballad ever was. It was also pointed out to me by Steve Hemmings from Australian Studies at Flinders University that a similarly harsh, 'upfront' blatancy is often true of black Australian songs in their targeting of white oppression and injustices and that this type of unequivocal oral response reflects the profound levels of difference between white settler Australia's experiences of having been colonised and those of postcolonial cultures such as the Caribbean and black indigenous Australia.

Notes

- ¹ A brief musical note – Australian material draws on the Celtic tradition and many different European dance forms. Calypso too drew on some of these dance forms with African, South American, French, Spanish and American jazz influences thrown in.
- ² Yothu Yindi's version of AC/DC's 'Jailbreak' gives an indigenous twist to the convict/colonial/outlaw/hero theme.

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