

“Pan Life”: Transformation in Trinidadian-American Steelband Culture

Scott T. Smallwood

Peabody Conservatory of the Johns Hopkins University

In this paper, I examine the concept of transformation Trinidadian-American steelband culture. My observations of the Baltimore T&T (Trinidad and Tobago) Steelband have brought forth three important domains that relate to a transformative force within the steelband culture. The first of these domains relates to the musical instruments themselves, i.e., the “pans” which are musical instruments transformed out of “trash cans.” The second domain deals with the transformative concept in relation to the social group's cultural history and musical heritage: The transformation of “pan-life” from a gang-related activity into a socially valued way of fostering Trinidad and Tobagan identity. Finally, there are issues relating to a pannist's personal ambitions as a creative artist and how they relate to a sense of gratification for “pan-life” and it's ability to transform lives.

My main informant from the T&T Baltimore Steelband was Richard Semper Jr., the son of Richard Semper Sr., the original founder of the group. Other secondary informants were Deon (the drummer), Tosca (the band's arranger), and Richard Sr.

“Big-ass cans” as musical instruments

The Baltimore T&T Steelband has been playing in the Baltimore area for nearly 30 years, and to the members of this ensemble, the importance of their instruments is paramount.

As I conducted my field work, I discovered that they never tired talking about their instruments—these “big-ass” cans, as Deon once referred to them. They are very proud of them, and they enjoy explaining how they work: the various types of instruments and their role within the steelband, the techniques that are used for playing them, the extreme talent that is required to make one.

During my interviews and casual conversations with the performers over a period of two months, I must have heard the following statement at least five times from three different people. “The steel drum is the only new instrument invented in the 20th century.” The fact that this last statement is not entirely true is hardly the point. The T&T “pannists” believe it absolutely. Beyond that, they feel that their instruments are fundamentally different in many respects from other, “normal” instruments. Part of the sense of pride that they have for the instruments comes from the incredible amount of craftsmanship required to produce one, but it also comes from the essential fact of its origin: its transformation from being a “trashcan” to being a musical instrument.

Inevitably when discussing the pan instruments in the steel band, the performers talk about the different roles that these instruments have within the ensemble and the relationships between them. The T&T Steelband use primarily six different kinds of steel pan sets. The “tenor,” the “double tenors” the “double seconds,” the “triple guitars,” the “tenorbasses,” and the “sixbasses.” These are fairly standard steel drum sets which I will not discuss in detail here. My main concern is the importance the T&T pannists place on explaining how the drums work and what their roles are. They are very proud of the innovation that has led to the different varieties of instruments, which have now become a part of an ensemble that is often compared to an orchestra. My primary informant Richard Jr. explained to me once that every voice in the steelband is considered to be a special voice in the ensemble, just like the “violins are different from the trombones in the orchestra.” He talked about the continuing development of new instruments by Ellie Manette (a famous steel drum maker and tuner) and others, and about how there are constant debates in the Trinidad community about the validity of such innovations and about the need for further standardization of the existing instruments. This is a crucial point, because it shows us that the Trinidad community is not only concerned about the history of their instruments, but they are concerned about their future. They recognize a need for further innovation and development, but also a need for refinement, standardization, and maturity. This

implies another aspect of the transformative force at work: a transformation of values from traditional craftsmanship to refined artistry.

The physical transformation of a 55-gallon oil drum into a steel pan is a complicated process, and takes years and years of intense work and experience to accomplish. The craft itself is among the most highly regarded activities that intrigues not only “outsiders,” but it intrigues the pannists themselves. Time and again I heard this topic discussed as if it were sacred, the legendary tuners and pan builders being discussed with great respect and admiration. Tuning and building pans was not a major aspect of my observations, but in my discussion of the process with the T&T pannists, I learned that it is a careful, exacting process reserved for only those gifted with the expertise that it requires. To the T&T pannists, this craft of pan building is as important as the music itself.

The “panyard”

Much of my field work with T&T took place at the “panyard,” and it is therefore an important place to discuss. In fact, the panyard in general is one of the most interesting aspects of pan-life in Trinidad, as it represents a kind of home for an entire community there. In the case of T&T, I believe that one of the main cultural themes centers around this place and its relationship to Trinidad.

A “panyard” is a complicated social scene that usually revolves around a group of pan players who play together in a steelband. It is a physical place where the pannists meet primarily to practice, but it is much more than that. The panyard is the steel band's home; it is a place for *being* a pan player, and hanging out with other pan players and friends of the band. It is a gathering place with an open-door kind of environment—a place where anyone is welcome. Richard Jr. used the term “liming” to describe it, a Trinidad word which means “hanging-out.” He brought up the term when I asked him directly about the various activities at the panyard. Some of the activities that Richard mentioned were “playing cards, barbecuing, and just hanging out.”

The T&T Panyard is modeled after a Trinidadian panyard, and I believe that Richard Sr.'s intention was to make it as much like the panyards in Trinidad as possible. It is meant to be a place where the band can practice, have parties, store and maintain their instruments, and interact with the local community. Richard Jr. told me an interesting story about how once during the summer the band was rehearsing, and there were lots of people around having a good time, dancing, drinking, and eating, and Richard Sr. looked at Richard Jr. and said, with a certain emotional “look” in his eye, “this is just like the panyards back home!” In many ways I think that this “nostalgia” for Trinidad is part of the purpose of the panyard - its role is to remind them of the way things are “back home,” as well as providing a kind of “club-house” for the T&T Steelband. Deon described it to me this way:

Yeah...we try to keep the mentality from back home, so like if you come here, alright, you may talk alot a shit talk. That's the panyard thing... you may ..?.. someone over but, you will not fight like all some American guys who take it to heart. So if I cuss you out, then you cuss me out...you tell me *anything* about my mother. Then in a little bit we be back buddies. That's how it is. We just quibble - whatever - all that bullshit <a passing thing> but, once you get together.. all nonsense stuff - just straight music, you know? Just have fun, you know?

Both Deon and Richard stressed to me that even though the panyard is located in a relatively bad area of Baltimore, they look out for the community and the community looks out for them. They keep their doors open, and the local people are free to come and listen or just sit around inside or outside the building. Every time I visited the panyard, I found that there were large groups of people loitering in the parking lot.

At first I had a hard time understanding how all of the people at the panyard were related to the band. I didn't understand why they were there, and how they contributed to the social scene. On the one hand, you had the people loitering outside, most of which I never spoke to, and on the other hand you had people who sometimes were *inside* the building: people like Wayne, a man who seemed to be quite drunk much of the time; or an old man sitting against the wall, interacting with no one; or the women who sometimes came in and out, talking to various member of the band for brief periods of time. And there was the phone—it seemed as if the

phone rang constantly, and often times band members would simply stop playing to take a call, right during the rehearsal of a tune. Eventually, I came to realize that the “non-members” are as much a part of the steelband as the members are, because the band members think of themselves as part of the community, and their music is a way for them to interact with the community. Richard Jr. mentioned to me once that, in some ways, the band is sort-of indebted to the community, because there are very few places where a band can get together and make as much noise as they do when rehearsing. But the people in the community enjoy the music, and like to be part of it. Deon explains:

Yeah...we...all the people you see here...they respectable people, b'cuz we got a respect here. You know I try to keep no drugs no <stop> that shit here. If I'm not here he tell [some name I can't understand] here. You know he make sure everything is cool here. An if he have a problem, they call, we call the cops. They come take care of that. You know we try to keep it clean for our...safety or whatever, you know? So we don't like...that type of...vagabond thing too much around...music, you know? We let people come in have their fun as long as they don't disrespect the place, you cool, you know?

Part of what Deon is trying to say here is that, while the relationship with the community is important, it is also important to respect the band and not to drag the street problems into the panyard. Much of this has to do, again, with the perceived cultural history—the connection of the panyard with gang violence in Trinidad. Deon remembers these problems and he is concerned that the panyard not be associated with them in their transplanted home in Baltimore.

Interestingly, Deon himself mentioned that he was concerned about street problems and such, and that, in his interest in teaching people about the pans and “giving back” to the community, he has often tried to help the kids on the street by getting them interested in learning to play:

I like to show people how to play. I used to try pull off couple guys off Park Heights (a street in Baltimore where there is drug activity), you know, sellin' their drugs...but they stupid and dumb, man, I say 'man if you back home, you think - you think parents would let you do that type of shit?' They would be ass, man! [Scott laughs]. So in America you get away with that bullshit? You know?

So, again, this is an example of the idea that the steel drum can transform lives, and the panyard has been transformed from being a gang hangout to being a place where kids can go to “keep out of trouble”—a social haven. In this sense, the panyard is not only a model of the panyards in

Trinidad (in terms of the social “clubhouse” scene), but it is also an representative example of how pan-life can help to transform the community into a better place, and the pan is a physical icon representing that transformation (trashcan -> musical instrument).

The Individual Pannist

Richard Jr. once explained to me that everyone has different reasons for playing pans. Some people play to relieve stress in their lives, some people play to make money, some play because it makes them happy, some play to get away from their wives. I believe that my observations have revealed a combination of all of these things. The individuals in the steel band love to play because it's fun, it provides a release, it makes people feel good, and it makes the individual players feel a sense of cultural pride. I believe that the steel pan is thought of a medium for transforming the lives of these people into artistic, expressive ones. Just like the “trash-can” has been transformed into an instrument, pan-life activities, starting out as a way for gangs in Trinidad to work out their violent rivalries, have become a activities of artistry, beauty, and happiness.

There are several aspects involved in determining what constitutes success for an individual pannist. Becoming a pan artist, and working through the different levels of prized knowing and experience, a pannist can transform himself into a successful musician by becoming proficient on all of the pans, and perhaps aspiring to becoming a leader. During my observations, I expected the leadership roles within the ensemble to correspond to the most prominent instruments. For instance, I would have expected that the leader of the band play the lead, and that he would be the one to conduct the rehearsals, make decisions, etc. However, I found that I was greatly mistaken. There are basically three kinds of leaders in the T&T Steelband:

The “captain” - the main leader of the band

The “arranger” - the person who creates the original arrangements for the band

The “tuner/builder” - a person who tunes and builds pans

There are other people who are potential leaders as well, such as the PR person, who happens to be Richard Jr., and “original members,” or members of the band who have been

around since the beginning of its founding. However, the three roles described above make up the traditional kinds of pan leaders—leadership not necessarily based on which instrument you play or even how well you play it, but based on your role in the band and the history of your experience. In Tosca's case, his role as arranger make him a leader, and his ability to play all of the different pans is just a part of being an arranger. In Richard Sr.'s case, his role as founder of the group, as a highly respected performer and aspiring tuner/builder, and his experience both in this country and in Trinidad make him a leader. As an aside, Tosca, who is from Trinidad, is of Indian descent. The ethnic makeup of Trinidad is diverse, but I found it interesting that one of the main leaders of this band is of a different ethnic origin than the other members—who all consider themselves simply “Islanders.”

There seems to be a new variety of leader that is emerging which has more to do with individual artistic goals, such as becoming a performance artist, being able to establish a reputation, and building a career on performance. Richard Jr. expressed to me his desire to achieve artistic goals, perhaps outside of the T&T Steelband, to “make his own mark,” so to speak. At one point, he and I met at The Peabody Conservatory, where I am a student, so that I could introduce him to the internet—I had developed plans for making a website for the band, and I wanted to show him what else was out there. He was ecstatic when I showed him the steelband presence on the web—he wanted to explore every page and see what other bands were doing—what kind of music they played, what they looked like, how they promoted themselves, what their logos looked like, etc. Afterwards he said “Man, I can’t describe to you how much I am enjoying this.” I asked him to elaborate, and he explained that his eyes were being opened to a whole world around him that he had never really experienced before. He started talking about some of his dreams, and I began to realize that Richard has some real aspirations as an artist. I think, too, that some of his excitement has to do with an admiration for documentation. This was confirmed when I reviewed earlier conversations with Richard in which he revealed his admiration for Ellie Manette, the famous steel pan builder, because of his current work in documenting his building methods in writing.

Measuring success, then, includes making an impact on the pan community, as well as aspiring to attain one of the leadership roles I have mentioned: being a solo artist, being a band captain, being an arranger, and being a pan builder/tuner. For Richard, having an impact means making a solid, concrete contribution by sharing information with the pan community and having a “presence” in the world.

As in any ethnographical study, there are still questions and gaps in my understanding of this complex culture, but I believe that in the short time I have had to learn about this group of people and their music, I have come to understand a great deal about them, and have gained an enormous amount of respect and admiration for their accomplishments. To hear them talk about their instruments, their history, and their music is to see how much impact this transformation has had upon them and their perception of themselves as artists. In their minds, a transformative force has changed a vagabond into an artist. It has changed a street gang into a musical ensemble that is a positive influence in the community. And all of this revolves around a single, remarkable physical medium, the pan itself. An icon which has been transformed through years of craftsmanship from being an ordinary, everyday oil canister to being a beautiful music instrument. Richard Jr. elaborates:

...they always say “yeah yeah yeah, but what about that trash-can band?” you know. (laughs)
They call us trash-can...I mean, but sometimes, we used to really take offense on it, you know, because it's like, it's kind of - when they call it “trash-cans” it kind of belittles the instrument, you know what I mean? I mean, it's the only instrument invented in the 20th century, you know what I mean? In a sense, it deserves that respect.