HUMN3099: Caribbean Studies Project

A Study of Saraka Songs and Rhythms in Trinidad

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Abstract

This is a study of saraka songs and rhythms in Trinidad, it will focus on the history of saraka in Trinidad, the conditions that gave rise to it and illustrations of the songs and rhythms themselves. There are many reasons as to why the writer would have chosen to make saraka songs and rhythms a study. Firstly, saraka has hardly ever been a topic of academic discussion, much to the chagrin of the writer, especially when it has been one of the traditions that formed a base for what is considered one of the main art forms of Trinidad and Tobago. This is an attempt to discuss at an academic level the tradition of saraka. Secondly, to an extent there has been a failure among our own people to document certain aspects of our story as Trinidadians and Tobagonians, especially where the oral traditions are concerned. This is, to a lesser extent an attempt to document the tradition of saraka, its history and the songs and rhythm. Finally, there has always been a disconnect between what is considered to be the younger generation and the older generation. This is not a holistic attempt to bridge that gap however, it is the hope of the writer that this study would serve as a platform for suggestions so as to use certain aspects of the tradition to be part of our school’s curriculum, whereby some level of connection would be formed between the young and the old in our society, if only through music. This study would show that more discussion and documentation of our oral traditions must take place in the shaping of our identity as a nation, especially within the Caribbean space.
Introduction

The study of *saraka* song and rhythm cannot be done in isolation, it must include as it is linked to, certain aspects of local and regional history as it brings into focus part of the history of the Caribbean and to a larger extent Trinidad and its oral traditions. For instance, the music of *saraka* did not originate in Trinidad but because of the mass migration from the smaller islands such as Grenada and St. Vincent, Trinidad became the new home for these traditions. Trinidad, an island of late settlement, became the repository of a wide range of music and dance as its population increased through its wave of migration, which lasted from the last quarter of the eighteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century. (Gordon Rohlehr 1990-6)

The music of *saraka* can be termed folk music and is also part of the oral tradition of Trinidad. Folk music has a very important role to play in society. In a study done by Atilla Ozdek folk music is shown to be a transmitter of cultures through song storytelling and other oral traditions. On the Caribbean plantation music was just one of the ways that was used for communicating and transmitting messages that were for the slaves alone. Music was also for entertainment so as to make somewhat easier the hardships of slavery. Here one can see the importance of music to a plantation society. Music was still very important and relevant post slavery in the Caribbean. It was still being used to transmit culture and values etc. It was still used as a form of rebellion towards the colonialists and more so after slavery it was still used among black people in the Caribbean to praise and worship their creator. *Saraka* came about as a form of resilience in that Africans upon arrival in the Caribbean were separated from their families and kinfolk. So that Igbo Yoruba Hausa and many other *nations* were purposely separated. As a result, there was a co-mingling of the different nations of Africa that were brought to the Caribbean into slavery. In an attempt to fight the language barrier, they developed their own method of communication, *creole* or patois and also their own method of worshiping their ancestors. Music
(singing and drumming) was a large part of this. So that in places such as Grenada and the Grenadines they developed what is known as Nation Dance or Big drum dance out of this came songs and rhythms such as belle juba and pique among others. Saraka music was all part of that development; some refer to the music as one and the same. Saraka music or Nation dance music among other factors should be considered emergence of calypso music in Trinidad. (Gordon Rohlehr 1990-9)

All of the above emphasizes the and support the notion that Saraka music cannot be studied in isolation it is a part of a whole and it brings with it a large part of the story of Caribbean people and it is a very important aspect of the musical history of Trinidad.
Chapter 1: The Project

This project is a study of *Saraka*, songs and rhythm in Trinidad. It is the view of this writer that indigenous practices such as this, should be documented for multiple reasons. One very critical reason is that, the writer sees this as an opportunity to resurrect and preserve certain aspects of the culture, where the oral traditions of the land are concerned. In this instance *Saraka* in its self, as evidenced by some of the accounts given, is almost extinct in Trinidad. The documentation of certain aspects of it, in this case song and rhythm can lead to an appreciation for it and act as a catalyst for further documentation and study. In the course of this study, the writer has not been privy to any literature or works that focused on *Saraka* songs and different hands of drumming found in Trinidad. Gordon Rholehr supports this when he put forward the point that opposed to the data that exists on the number of African and Creole slaves in Trinidad in the nineteenth century, there were only general ideas of musical forms and lyrics of these people. (Gordon Rholehr 1990-6) In 1956 the Smithsonian along with Andrew C. Pearce recorded and released a few *Saraka* songs and rhythms from Carriacou. They also did the same in relation to Trinidad, however in the case of Trinidad there were no songs just rhythm patterns. Other than what was mentioned here, there are no known studies in terms of song and rhythm where *saraka* and nation dance music is concerned. In order to overcome this interviews and accounts were relied upon as well as, the writer’s knowledge in the subject area.

There has been some degree of study on *Saraka* in itself, its definition, and its purpose. There has also been some analysis on its source, all of which will be discussed further in this study. There were some books that were very critical to this aspect of the study such as Guinea’s other sons (Maureen Warner-Lewis) This book focused on the movement of Africans from the mainland of Africa to the Americas in the west via the Atlantic slave trade. It also was a study of the diaspora pre and post slavery and made mention of the different cultures that developed in the Caribbean as
a result of this new diaspora, *saraka* being one of them. Another book that was helpful was Yoruba Songs of Trinidad. (Maureen Warner-Lewis) This book was very informative in terms of the arrival of Africans from other territories into Trinidad and indirectly explained how Saraka became popular in Trinidad. It also served as a catalyst for the decision taken by the writer to document the songs and rhythm in the form of music notation. This was so because in this particular book, Warner-Lewis presents some of the Yoruba songs in musical notation. Most importantly, this is a study of song and rhythm and the writer being a music student thought that it would be fitting do musically notate the songs and rhythms. Dr. Gordon Rholehr in his book *Calypso in Society* gives a comprehensive history of calypso in Trinidad. This book was very instrumental in understanding *saraka* music in relation to calypso music. Other books that gave an insight into *saraka* in Trinidad were Monuments of the Black Atlantic: Slavery and Memory (Joanne M. Braxton), Central Africa in the Caribbean Transcending Time, Transforming Cultures (Maureen Warner-Lewis) Trinidad and Tobago (Lisa Winer)

A significant part of this study was drawn from accounts by the writer himself being involved in *saraka* from a young age, as it has been a family tradition. This tradition was continued by his father Aniṣéré Šango (Shango) Jeffrey Biddeau an Oriṣa(Orisha) Chief Priest in Trinidad, who passed away in 2010. Coincidentally he passed away as he was preparing for the annual *saraka*. The tradition is now carried on by the mother of this writer Ifayemisi Lydia John as well as the writer himself. As far as the writer knows and as other accounts would show the Biddeau (Bedeau) family is the only family in Trinidad who has kept this tradition alive. As much as the accounts were from the writer, interviews were conducted so that there was information to support and in some cases act as points to argue, in this study. One very important issue in this study which in itself was a reason for the study was a lack of documentation, where songs and rhythm are concerned. There are very few people in Trinidad who actually remembered *saraka* songs, one of
them is Anslem (Slim) Williams a folk drummer from Pleasantville San Fernando, who gave his account of saraka. The writer also had to depend on accounts from a couple elders in his family who remembered saraka in their childhood days. The interviews and accounts played a very important role in documenting the songs for this study. Though the writer had the general information needed for the study, information needed to be validated and supported, hence the importance of accounts and interviews. Another hurdle in this study was the language issue. Many saraka songs were song in patois or creole tongue. There were very few persons who speak patois in Trinidad and even when one person was sourced. There were some difficulties translating because through time and transmission of songs there would have been minor changes that would confuse the avid patois speaker. In an interview with Masika a folk drummer and patois speaker, he gave an account of a cultural group from Tobago visiting Martinique were patois/creole is spoken.

Despite the challenges of the study, some of which were overcome, this study would simply attempt to give some back ground and history into saraka, give an explanation about the proceedings and highlight some of the songs and rhythms that one can hear during saraka. This would be done through personal accounts via interviews, some level of supporting literature and music notation.
Chapter 2: What is Saraka

Researchers who discovered the word have slightly differing views on its origin, however they all agree that *saraka* is a ritual and a festival of thanksgiving to the ancestors by Africans and *creoles* in the Caribbean. There seems to be a link between the word *saraka* and *sadaqa*. *Sadaqa* is a word used by the Islamic Hausa people of northern Nigeria which means charity or acts of charity where food especially is given to the poor and (Maureen Warner-Lewis 1991-115). Some writers suggest that the Yoruba may have adopted the word from the Muslim Hausa in northern Nigeria and changed it from *sadaqa*, to *saraka*. It however can be a somewhat confusing where the link lies. While a major tenant of *saraka* is the sharing of food in the name charity, ancestral veneration was another major aspect of this. In addition, the Orisha Yoruba people have been practicing ancestral veneration throughout history, with the staging of *egungun* festivals. As far as this writer is aware Muslims do not engage in such activities. Despite this there are accounts as early of 1860 of African Muslims in Trinidad practicing certain aspects of *saraka* (Maureen Warner-Lewis 1991-115-116). As a result of this it is safe to say that there was an intermarrying of traditions which resulted in an ‘Africanizing’ of *sadaqa* to bring forth *saraka*. It is also a possibility that word *saraka* could have well been adopted during slavery in the Caribbean where there were a number of West African Muslims co-mingling with traditional practitioners from West Africa. It must be mentioned here as well, that on the island of Tobago it is called *salaka*.

Despite these speculations on its origin among the Yoruba people, the songs that are associated with *saraka*, or what are called nation songs, were not sung in any particular West African languages and by extension did not sing of only Yoruba people. The songs were sung in patois and were sung in honor of the different *nations* that came to the Caribbean as will be shown later in this study. This raises the question as to if there was a further intermarrying of
another custom with *saraka*. Historian Gerard A. Besson in a blog entitled The Big Drum Dance makes mentions of ancestral venerations within a festival called the big drum dance.

‘The big drum dance of Carriacou contains three main aspects. The first, most important and most sacred, which opens the ritual, is devoted to the ancestors. The second expresses dance and songs that were established before emancipation, and the third innovative and more syncretic stems from the long twilight of the post-emancipation period.’

Joanne Braxton in her book Monuments of the Black Atlantic: Slavery and Memory postulates Sadaqa can be traced to other areas of the diaspora. In Tobago Carriacou and Grenada people of African descent offer *sadaqa* during Big Drum Dance or Nation Dance. These two quotes show that *saraka* in itself is part of a bigger festival called Nation Dance or Big Drum Dance, and the songs associated with these festivals are also associated with *saraka*. In a sense it is one and the same and it came about as a result of a co-mingling of African peoples during slavery in the Caribbean. As far as this writer could remember his father would refer to Nation Dance and *saraka* interchangeably. So then, *saraka* is thanksgiving to the ancestors through food song and dance.

**Arrival in Trinidad**

No matter what it was called, the thrust of *saraka* was thanksgiving to ancestors. As discussed earlier it would have come about in the Caribbean during slavery among the Africans of the smaller Caribbean islands, Grenada St. Vincent and the Grenadines and later on in the 19th it came to Trinidad and Tobago. Up to the mid-eighteenth century the island of Trinidad had been experiencing little activity where slavery in concerned. Trinidad was controlled by the Spanish and there were very few plantations and Africans. Generally, the population was small, this meant that Trinidad had room for development both in the slave trade and the sugar industry.
Still Spanish rule at this time, it was decided that there should be some sort of growth. The Cedula of Population act in 1783 opened the flood gates for slave owners, their slaves and free blacks alike from other territories in the Caribbean to take up residence in Trinidad they were allowed land etc. once they were Roman Catholic and remained loyal to the Spanish crown. There were many immigrants from the smaller islands who came into Trinidad, many of them came from Grenada, Carriacou, Union Island St. Vincent Martinique etc. The favorable climate in Trinidad however was not the only impetus for this new wave of settlers on the island. There was much wrangling between the British and the French especially over islands such as Grenada and planters were only too happy to migrate to Trinidad. (Gordon Rholehr 1990-7) there were also a fair amount of migrants from Haiti which is evidenced by the presence of the Rada community in Belmont in Trinidad (Gordon Rholehr 1990-7,8) Herein lies the transporting of saraka to the island of Trinidad. Many settlers to the island in places such as Laventille, Tunapuna and Morne Diablo and Point Fortin to name a few. The Biddeau (Bedeau) family traced their roots back to Belmont, a village on the island of Carriacou. Some members of this family settled in Laventille and others in Point Fortin and Gasparillo, this according to an account given by Henry Alexander who is the son of Mildred Biddeau-Alexander. The Biddeau (Bedeau) family is one of the families that came to Trinidad with the knowledge of saraka and today is the only family that continue to practice it in Trinidad.

Saraka: Order of events

A saraka is done for many reasons ranging from a new baby being born to someone having some great achievement in the village, to getting married. It is also possible that someone may have had a dream and in the dream was told to give a saraka. Whatever the reason when it was time for saraka, it was done. According to some accounts in this study, the duration of a saraka would last from three days to sometimes a week. Other than songs and drumming, there
would also be prayer dance food and storytelling. In an interview with Henry Alexander the son of a Biddeau (Mildred Biddeau Alexander) gave an account as to the order of events according to what he experienced as a child on Laventille hill. Henry remembers growing up in a house hold where there were always drums his grandparents Morgan (Masmo) Biddeau and Elizabeth Biddeau his Uncles Jeffrey and Andrew Biddeau as well as his mother al played drums. He recalled the 3 main drums belonging to his grandfather one was called the bouleh the other called the fullah and the third called the cutter, they were all called Laventille bell. Henry recollected

“I remembered from small saraka, what they called big drum dance. My family from union island and carriacou came together for a whole week of drumming and singing cooking and dancing. They call it the ancestors dance. Somebody might have had a dream that ‘the people’*1 wanted food. There was a song that used to sing to ‘open the ring’*2 with. Usually there was a male and female both with white towels one of the two would be the person who had the dream. The song went (Henry begins to play drums and sing) “Dem ah call me oh ah you nah hear, Dem ah call me oh ah you nah hear, Dem ah call me oh ah you nah hear, Dem ah call me oh ah you nah hear” they would sing the song and the ring would be officially open”.

To explain a few key terms, when he spoke of the people* he meant the ancestors., Opening the ring* here simply meant the opening of the portal through which the spirits ancestors were invited. As this writer recollects the opening of the ring does consist of a special song and dance with two clean white towels, however before this is done while the song is being sung, the area is usually sprinkled with water and olive oil and rum as a form of spiritual cleansing. Then the two family members with the towels would dance and at the climax they would place the towels either in a cross or an X in the centre of the space. This symbolized the crossroads or the meeting of the canal and the spiritual realm.
In 1988 an extensive interview conducted by Rawle Gibbons with Andrew Biddeau one of the sons of Morgan Biddeau and someone considered to be the master folk drummer in Trinidad during his time Andrew’s account of Saraka supports the above claims by the writer

Well, my mother had a ting in Carriacou, and Grenada and all these places, they call it Saraka. There I learn to play drums. My mother used to give that every year. Something like a feast. But it’s all different from the Shango feast. They’ll kill the goat and fowls you know and they’ll do the cooking and thing and everybody will eat and they have the opening of the ring. They open the ring with two towels…and they cross the towels and they sprinkle rum rice water and all kinda thing….

The sacrificing of animals was not uncommon to saraka as this writer would have engaged in it himself. Anslem ‘Slim’ Williams a folk drummer who would have witnessed saraka ceremonies as a boy was asked to describe what he witnessed at the opening of the ring.

Slim: They people sang ‘inna ay inna oh*3’ and went round in a circle and when they reach half they go back, clockwise and anti-clockwise…. So it come like you tie yourself and you untie yourself.

Jeffrey Biddeau: What can you tell me about the white towels?

Right, the white towels represent the purity for the cleansing so once the towel is crossed… The dance done that means the place is clean and ready.

Inna ay inna Oh* was part of a song that was sung at the opening of the saraka.

As far as this writer knows and realizes there was no standardization in saraka ceremonies according to where you went or who’s yard you are in for saraka you may see different proceedings or hear different songs which will be shown later on in this study. A few things
however, seemed to be very commonplace were the opening of the ring, singing and drumming and the preparing of food.
Chapter 3: Saraka songs and rhythms.

Song and rhythm played an important role in the staging of saraka. There were three drums as stated before bulleh (a big drum with a very low tone that usually played the basic rhythm. There was the fullah (slightly smaller than the bulleh on which the basic rhythms were played but with some added beats to make fill the empty spaces in the basic rhythm) The cutter drum (smallest in size but has the highest tone, this drum was used to play the polyrhythms which were usually syncopated rhythmic patterns) There would also be a chantwell, the person who leads the congregation in songs which were mostly call and answer in format.

Difference in song and rhythms

As stated previously in Saraka, there seemed to be no one way in which things were done. According to what part of the country you experience saraka you may hear a different order of songs or even type of songs. In an interview with Avery Ammon an Ifa/Orisha devotee cultural activist and philanthropist. He puts forward the argument.

You cant compare the saraka from south Trinidad to the saraka in north Trinidad, unless its for function of the saraka yes, it’s the same purpose you’re keeping it for ...but you have to remember if the Biddeaus have a set of songs that they keep…then the saraka on shouter hill and other parts of Laventille that the Biddeaus spawned would have that complexion. So no body from south could come and tell me is not so to do saraka…

What Avery is basically saying is that there are reasons as to why there may be differences in songs pronunciations of words and rhythms. Avery also spoke about the fact that because migrants came from different territories in the Caribbean there is a possibility that all who brought saraka with them would have a different brand and would affect songs and rhythm.
Illustration of songs and Rhythms

In This study the songs and rhythms that would be illustrated would be those that the writer would have been exposed to via his involvement in Saraka. For contrast purposes however, if there were any differences that came about as a result of the study, it would be highlighted. In this study *saraka* and nation dance would be looked at as one and the same so to would be the songs and they would be classified as being different type of songs within *saraka* ceremonies. The classification of songs ties in with the format of the *saraka* itself, i.e. *saraka* commences with some form of spiritual and meaningful devotion and dedication to the ancestors and the different nations that came from Africa. Hence the name nation dance or nation songs. When this is finished the mood becomes more festive and this is where the ‘fun’ songs come into play they would include *picong* and *mais poui* which are songs that make fun of other folks or flirtations songs on the pike (pique) and bele rhythms.

In *saraka* usually, there is a procession into the space where the *saraka* is to be held before the actual event starts. In some instances, this is accompanied by a slow chant. When Anslem Williams was asked about this he said “The first introduction to *saraka* is this song, I saraka yay (I saraka saraka) I saraka oh” (he repeats the refrain while doing a drum roll) “Now that song and drum roll goes for as long as the procession is taking place.” This writer has never encountered that song in the *saraka* he would have experienced. The first song as far as this writer knows was the song to accompany the opening of the ring. *See illustration on next page.*
Another song that the writer would have experienced would be the one that was mentioned previously “Dem a call me oh”
Following this, the songs in dedication to the ancestors of the nations would commence usually the order of nations would differ again according to location. From the writer’s recollection his father who conducted saraka would raise a song for the Mandingo nation usually called a Manding or Mandig.

**Mandingo Nation Song**
This is one of if not the only song that could have been translated. According to folk drummer Masika, Mandingo ca/ka veni weh translates to mean Mandingo come and see, and Sa yais/yay means, what is this. This is the only song for Mandingo nation that this writer has ever heard at saraka celebrations at his home conducted by his father. A different version however was heard by Anslem Williams in the southern part of the island, the lyrics for this version is as follows Ay ri lay ri layo Ay ri lay ri layo Mandiga diga diga diga yo
Following, the Mandingo nation song would be the Igbo/Ibo nation song there seemed to be a prevalence of these songs as there were about four Ibo songs that were known of by the writer they are.

1. Chantwell: Ibo lais lais/ lay lay
   
   Singers: Ai bak ah feh Ibo
   
2. Ibo lay lay lay lay Siamba (chantwell and singers sing the same thing)
   
3. Chatwell: Ay Ibo
   
   Singers: Ah yan deh.

**Slow Ibo Nation song**
Chromanti/Kromanti Nation song

Chantwell:
Ma-u-le ma-u-le oh

Congregation:
Kro-man-ti Ko-jo Ma-u-

Drums:

Chant.
Ma-u-le ma-u-le oh

Cong. Kro-

Drm.

8
Chant.

Cong. man - ti Ko - jo Ma - u - le oh

Drm.
Rada Nation song

Chantwell

\[ \text{A-ra mi de A-ra mi de} \]

Congregation

\[ \text{A-ra da a-ra mi de} \]

Congas

\[ \text{3} \]

\[ \text{3} \]

\[ \text{3} \]

\[ \text{3} \]
After all the nation songs were completed, in accordance to what was mentioned earlier, there was the segment with fun songs where songs and rhythms for this segment are as follows

**Pike**

This is a very fast rhythm sometimes referred to as Cherrup that is accompanied by fast feet movements and picong songs such as,

Chantwell: Tell ah lie yuh tell ah lie

Singers: Yuh Tell ah lie Weh ha

Mo rive Mo rive, mo rive mo rive, Pika pike pikim weh (singers repeat)

**Kalenda**

This is the rhythm of the stick fighter and the songs are of stick fighting for example

Chantwell; Olivay na bois

Chantwell: Olivay vay na bois

The basic Kalenda Rhythm is illustrated below

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**Bele**

There are many types of bele, two types that one would hear in Trinidad is Gran Bele and Congo Bele. *The diagram below illustrates the Gran Bele Rhythm*
Saraka/Nation Songs and Calypso

Undoubtedly, *saraka* songs were the pre cursor to Calypso or what we call Kaiso (Gordon Rholehr 1990-7) This write was privileged to have sat in on a few lectures by Zeno Constance a historian on calypso and the oral traditions of Trinidad and Tobago and he has often made the link between songs that were song on the plantations pre and post slavery as being the precursor to Kaiso. Zeno termed them as two-line call and response songs. He also made mention of the fact that they were sung in patois. *saraka* songs were of the same structure and language. As Kaiso developed the two lines grew into four lines then to eight lines with a hook or a refrain.
Chapter 4: Conclusion

The thrust of this study was to present and discuss issues surrounding saraka songs and rhythms in Trinidad. In order to achieve this, saraka had to be defined. As was shown, there was evidence that suggested saraka was definitely West African in origin, especially when it came to the ancestral aspect. There was also need to delve in some historical background to show how and why saraka came into being into the Caribbean space and then to Trinidad. the information where this is concerned was quite forthcoming. There was also a need to give an account of how saraka was celebrated, at this point another key term came to the fore. Nation/dance which was shown to be simply a part of what saraka is as a result of this, there should be no confusion. A considerable amount of time was spent explaining saraka through accounts of people who were involved including the writer. While all of this was necessary. This writer happens to be a music student and so, this had to be manifested in the study hence the use of the musical score to illustrate some of the songs and the highlighting of the link between saraka music and calypso

Issues of the Study

There were many issues that were brought to the fore in this study, firstly there is lack of documented information where the songs and rhythms are concerned, hence the study had to rely on accounts by interviewees and the writer. These accounts themselves presented another major
issue which was the non-standardization of the celebration of *saraka*. While its being stated here as an issue, in fact it really gives the writer a platform to expound on *saraka*.

Furthermore, this non-standardization simply adds to the beauty and the mystery of the songs and rhythms. Another major issue was the inability to translate the songs that were presented. The language issue Though attempts were made to translate these songs as it is identified that most of them were sung in patois, a dying tongue in Trinidad. Nevertheless, someone was asked to help translate and was unable to. There are many reasons for this, one possible reason is that some of the songs may not be purely patois but mixed with elements of West African language.

In an interview with Masika another African folk drummer and patois speaker from San Fernando Trinidad, he spoke of an incident where some cultural performers from Tobago journeyed to Martinique to performed at a bele festival. They were asked what language they sang in and responded patois. This was a bit puzzling to the people Martinique because they speak patois and did not understand most of what was sung. Having said this Masika himself was unable to translate some of the nation songs. This proved to be a limitation in the study

While this study demonstrates certain nation/folk rhythm in *saraka* one must understand that in Trinidad a rhythm that is called bele in the southern part of the island may be called by another name in the northern part of the island. This can be said for songs as well

This study can only serve to encourage further research in this area to add towards the information bank concerning the history of the art form and oral traditions of Trinidad and Tobago.
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