The Perception of Calypso Music as an Identity Issue in the Community of Cahuita

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ABSTRACT

Members of the Cahuita community belonging to three different pre-established age groups were interviewed to determine the pertinence of calypso in a specific community and how it may function there. Statistical tests were run on two of the age groups because there was more data on these groups than the oldest age group (Ages 50+). The mean likeability of Calypso music was greater in the 25-50 year old age group ($x=3.0$) than in the 10-25 year old group ($x=2.15$) ($P=0.041$). Also, the likeability values were strongly and positively related to the number of years lived in Cahuita ($P=0.008$, $R^2=21.9\%$). These results show that it is more probable for an older person (between ages 25-50) to like Calypso music than a younger person (between ages 10-25). Also, the longer that an interviewed person lived in Cahuita, the more likely it was that s/he liked Calypso music. Additionally, the knowledge of the English and/or Creole English language depended on the likeability factor of Calypso music. Lastly, the level of importance reported depended on the age group whereas a person’s recognition of Calypso did not.
RESUMEN

Se entrevistó a miembros de la comunidad de Cahuita que son socios de tres grupos de diferentes edad para establecer la pertinencia de la música Calipso en una comunidad específica y como puede funcionar en ella. Las estadísticas se realizaron en dos de los grupos porque hay más datos en los grupos de menor edad que en los de mayor edad. El promedio de las personas a las que les gusta la música Calipso en el grupo de las edades de 25 a 50 es mayor ($x=3.0$) que en el grupo de 10 a 25 años ($x=2.15$) ($P=0.041$). También, el gusto versus la cantidad de años de una persona que ha vivido en Cahuita se relaciona positivamente uno con el otro ($P=0.008$, $R^2=21.9\%$). Es más probable que a una persona mayor le guste la música Calipso más que a una persona joven. Además, si alguien ha vivido en Cahuita durante largo tiempo, es más probable que a esta persona le gusta el Calipso que a una que ha vivido en Cahuita durante menos tiempo. El conocimiento del idioma inglés y/o inglés criollo dependen del gusto de la música Calipso. Últimamente, el nivel de importancia depende del grupo de edad mientras que el reconocimiento no depende del grupo de edad.

INTRODUCTION

Calypso music has helped preserve the Afro-Caribbean culture in Cahuita and in the province of Limón by communicating a specific idea or a piece of information (Monestel 2005). It is often seen as a “message” and many times portrays real people and/or events in the community. It also contains many cultural aspects that can help identify or relate to a group of people. Calypso music is not often considered a typical “Latin” style
of music; however it does fall into this category (Monestel 2005). It helps describe a particular group of people in Latin America—specifically Costa Rica.

In the last 30 years or so, the popularity or consumption of Calypso music has decreased. Because Calypso is considered “old music,” the younger generation does not acknowledge it as their parents or grandparents did. Calypso has two objectives: a.) to teach the younger generation about the history of their hometown and b.) what might have changed. The decline in consumption is an apparent issue in the community and there are actions being made to improve this condition.

History of Calypso Music

Calypso music originated in Trinidad and was brought to the Limón Province in the 1870s by the railroad construction workers (Monestel 2005). In Trinidad, Calypso music was created so that the African slaves could communicate with each other (Brown 2010). Oftentimes they were not allowed to speak to each other; therefore they communicated in song. Calypso music also became a way for the African slaves to make fun of their masters (Brown 2010). However, Calypso music during this time was in French Creole—patois—but by the turn of the 19th century, it was being sung in English (Funk 2010). This is because, although Trinidad was ruled by England, it received many French immigrants as well (Brown 2010). However, over time, Calypso music became a popular style of music and was often a main attraction in Trinidad’s carnival—a festival brought over by the French (Funk 2010). The calypso songs would often talk about non-serious/comical topics, however as time went on, many Trinidadian calypsonians started to write/sing about social and/or political issues that the Afro-Trinidadian was facing during the late 19th to mid 20th centuries (Funk 2010).
In Costa Rica, the railroad workers came from “...Jamaica, Belice, Curazao, Barbados, Honduras, Trinidad y otros puntos del Caribe” (Monestel 27:2005). Many of these workers also came to Limón to work for the United Fruit Company (Senior 2007). During this time, Calypso music became a way of expressing the Caribbean culture in the Limón province; and over time, became a way of expressing the Afro-Costa Rican culture in this area as well. Calypso music in Costa Rica is often in Creole English, which was brought over by the Afro-Caribbean people as well. The Caribbean influence in Limón has made cultural aspects like Calypso music a strong identifying factor in Costa Rica (Monestel 2005). It is because of this reason that it is important for others to know/learn about it.

**Understanding a Calypso Song**

To understand a calypso song, one should also be able to understand its lyrics. Although there is a specific musical sound to calypso music, that is definitely not the heart of a calypso song. The lyrics help describe the speech of an Afro-Caribbean person. It can also explain various issues at the time and how they might have affected a group of people (Cardona 1990). “La fantasía, el humor, el sarcasmo y la ironía son componentes de los textos del calipso” (Monestel 23:2005). A calypso song is a story that can have more effect if a person can comprehend its topic.

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1 Translation: “...Jamaica, Belize, Curazao, Barbados, Honduras, Trinidad and other parts of the Caribbean.”

2 Translation: “Fantasy, humor, sarcasm and irony are components of Calypso text.”
Cahuita is home to one of the oldest and most influential calypsonians, Walter Ferguson. At 91 years old, he still holds an important place in the community because his songs help maintain the Afro-Caribbean culture. Other calypsonians include: a.) the late Roberto “Buda” Kirlew, part of the famous Buda Band; b.) the late Reynaldo, who co-founded the group Ashanti; c.) Donald “Donny” Williams and Alfonso “Gianty” Goldberg of the group Kawe Vibrations. The above people mentioned make Cahuita an important place to study Calypso music. Many songs, mostly by Walter Ferguson, are about people and lifestyles in Cahuita. A native Cahuitian or cahuiteño might be able to identify a person(s) or social topic mentioned in a local calypso song because of the many local references.

A calypsonian is someone who maintains the Afro-Costa Rican culture by being able to talk about or express various topics. These topics include “[f]enómenos naturales, incidentes en la comunidad, problemas económicos, acontecimientos culturales y personajes populares…para los calypsonians limonenses” (Monestel 71:2005). To be able to express these different ideas effectively is a very specific and special task for a calypsonian. As Donny Williams explained to me, “anybody can try [to play calypso], but not everyone can play it.” By this he meant that composing a Calypso song is more than just trying to come up with things to say, a calypsonian should be able to feel what s/he is saying personally. S/He is communicating to his/her community about something specific and therefore s/he should think of a creative way to tell his/her story.
Objectives

My objectives for this study include the following:

a.) Determine perception and existence of Calypso in terms of age groups
b.) Investigate history and cultural features of Cahuita by means of Calypso lyrics
c.) Detect role of Calypso music in community
d.) Identify who plays, performs, writes etc. Calypso music today
e.) Examine the possible social function of Calypso music

My hypothesis is that Calypso music does play an important part in the community; however its personal relevance differs among ages. In this paper I present what those perceptions are and what the importance/pertinence of Calypso is today.

Study Site

This study was conducted on the Caribbean coast in the town of Cahuita (9°44’20”N 82°50’44”W). It is located in Talamanca County in the province of Limón. Cahuita is a small town with approximately 3,000 inhabitants and is 42 km south of Puerto Limón, the major Caribbean port of Costa Rica (McNeil 2001). Many people that settled on the Caribbean coast were people of Afro-descent and they still make up a large majority of the population of Cahuita (Monestel 2005).

Cahuita has many sources of natural beauty that includes two beaches—Playa Negra and Playa Blanca—and the Cahuita National Park which is also part of Playa Blanca. Although it is a very small town, Cahuita is very lively and full of culture. It is also a unique tourist destination because many of the businesses are owned/operated by native cahuiteños. Also, because it is a small town, many people know each other.
This is especially helpful if someone is trying to find another person but is unsure where to look. I found this aspect very helpful when trying to find key people to interview for my project.

**METHODOLGY**

Interviews were conducted in the Cahuita community. They were semi-structured or set questions. However if a person was able to, they could provide more in-depth information in an open format. Interview questions were divided into two groups, *calypsonians*—people who play and/or write Calypso—and *non-calypsonians*—people that do not play Calypso. *Calypsonians* were labeled as key informants because they were able to provide information that the *non-calypsonians* could not. This information included history of Calypso and how it functions/ed in Cahuita. Interviews with *calypsonians* were conducted in English; however, most interviews with *non-calypsonians* were conducted in Spanish.

Three different age groups (10-25 year olds; 25-50 year olds; and 50 and older) were established to test for age differences in personal relevance/pertinence of Calypso. Other interview criteria included: if the person lived in Cahuita; if s/he knew what Calypso music was; if s/he liked Calypso; how often s/he listens to Calypso; what language they spoke or identified with the most; and how important s/he thinks Calypso is in Cahuita.
Data Analysis

Qualitative data was obtained through my interviews and can also provide examples to my objectives aforementioned. Quantitative data was based on age groups, ages, likeability of Calypso, amount of time living in Cahuita, frequency of listening to Calypso and if an interviewee thought Calypso was important in Cahuita. The likeability aspect was measured on a scale of 1 to 5—1 being “dislike” and 5 being “loved.” This scale was established after the interview was given. Likeability was then compared to the two age groups, 10-25 and 25-50 year olds using the parametric one-way ANOVA test, after testing for homogeneity of variance (Sokal and Rohlf 1995).

Likeability was also related to age group 10-50 year olds—the two age groups combined—using a simple regression test. Two regression tests were run on likeability related to the number of years living in Cahuita and likeability related to language spoken. The responses pertaining to the frequency of listening to Calypso were divided into five categories: Not at all; Once in a while; Sometimes; Often; and A lot. These categories were established after the interview was taken. The independence of these categories with age groups was estimated with a contingency table. Also, the responses pertaining to the importance of Calypso were divided into four categories: Very important; Really important; Important; and Does not know. These categories were also established after the interview was given. The independence of these categories with age groups was estimated with a contingency table.
RESULTS

Qualitative Data

In total, 38 interviews were conducted. Among age groups, I conducted: 20, 11 and 7 interviews for the 10-25, 25-50 and the over 50 year old groups respectively. Availability of people in age groups influenced the amount of interviews. I was able to contact younger people more easily than those of older age groups.

Most of my subjects had stated that Calypso is important in Cahuita because it talks about the culture. Others also mentioned that Calypso helps with the tourism in Cahuita and that many tourists enjoy it. Many people throughout all of my age groups also said that they like to listen to Calypso, not necessarily dance to it. They do not see Calypso as dance music like they do other types of music.

Also, when speaking to Walter Ferguson, he informed me that Calypso has changed since he began playing. The Calypso from Trinidad and Tobago had only one tune or melody, and as Calypso evolved in Costa Rica, calypsonians started experimenting with other tunes. Also, Calypso music usually only consisted of someone playing the guitar. The instruments used now such as: the quiongo, tumba, maracas and clave were added over time which is what all of the calypsonians interviewed use. An interesting fact that Ferguson expressed to me was the perception of Calypso when he was a young man. Many did not like it because people thought calypsonians got into the business of people in the community. Since the songs were about people in the community, this perception is very interesting. However, there were calypsonians, such as Ferguson, who generalized the people in their songs.

Calypso songs talk about people in the community. For example the song “Cabin in the Wata” by Walter Ferguson is about Ferguson’s good friend, Bato, who built his house in
the sea. Bato had tried to build a house where the Cahuita National Park is, but was prohibited to. Since Bato “was a diver,” it was easy for him to build his house in the water. This is a lighthearted song and is meant to casually express an occurrence in Cahuita. Other songs talk about the local food, such as plantains, rice and beans and callaloo, which is a soup.

An interesting element, as stated earlier, was how the topics of Calypso songs can be sarcastic or ironic and can poke fun at local issues. An example of this is “GOOD” by Ferguson which talks about the education system. In the song, Ferguson says that his teacher was a very good teacher; however she only knew how to spell the word “good,” which was the only lesson that she taught. Yet, the student believed that he was receiving a good education and tried writing a letter to his girlfriend and also enrolling in the University. However, both parties stated that he should study harder and learn to write words other than the word “GOOD.” This is also a lighthearted song, yet people could relate to how the education system was during the time of the song. According to 3 of the older people (50+) that I interviewed, the education system in the Limón province was not always the best, which could have been a problem for those that wanted to continue their education.

“[Ferguson’s] songs tell of his many adventures: the calypsonian gets stopped by police, then accused by street gangs of being an undercover officer. Women treat him badly, his wife leaves him for a curandero. He helps another woman carry groceries, only to find out it’s really a man. He gets robbed at Carnaval. And he faces off in a typical calypso duel with a Chinese calyposonian who sings in Mandarin” (Ross 253:2003).

All of the aforementioned themes continue to show how Calypso can be a lighthearted, funny and satirical form of music and still talk about local themes. “The songs are rich in word games, and they mix the various languages of the region
with local lore, political satire and sexual innuendo” (Ross 250:2003).

**Quantitative Data**

Mean likeability ratings of Calypso music was greater in the 25-50 year old age group (x=3.0) than in the 10-25 year old group (x=2.15) (F=4.6; df=1,29; P=0.041) (Fig. 1). The older that a person was, the more likely s/he liked Calypso music. Additionally, likeability values were strongly, positively related to the number of years lived in Cahuita (F=8.1; df=1, 29; P=0.008, R²=21.9%) (Fig. 2). Level of importance of Calypso music depended on age group (X²=13.5; df=3; P=0.004). Additionally, likeability ratings of Calypso depended on ability to speak English and/or Creole English (df=3; F=4.62; P=0.0105); (X²=5.66; df=1; F=5.31; P=0.0306) (Fig. 3a and Fig. 4). Also, the frequency of people listening to Calypso was greater in the 25-50 year old age group than in the 10-25 year old age group (X²=7.36; df=1,29; F=4.76; P=0.037) (Fig. 3b). Finally, no dependence existed between age groups in their recognition of Calypso music (x²=0.8; df=2; P=0.66).

**DISCUSSION**

**Majority Classify Calypso as Important**

Regardless if an interviewee liked Calypso music or not, the majority of them said Calypso music is important in Cahuita. This shows that, although one’s personal relevance/pertinence to Calypso might differ, it is very much present in the community.
Likeability of Calypso Depends on Length of Time Living There and Age

The longer a person has lived there, the more likely s/he likes Calypso. Many people in the older age groups (25-50 and 50+) stated that many young kids do not listen to Calypso because they prefer other forms. A lot of my interviewees mentioned that the youths listen to reggae and reggaeton. This is true because reggae and reggaeton have a faster, more upbeat and “modern” tempo than Calypso.

Afro-Descendants in Cahuita

The Cahuitaian and Afro-Costa Rican culture is significantly different from that of the central Costa Rican valley. This has a lot to do with the people who settled in communities like Cahuita. Many Afro-descendants reside in the Limón province because of Costa Rica’s history with the emigration and later, segregation of the Afro-Caribbean workers. For some 80 years, between 1870 and 1950, Afro-descendants who emigrated to Costa Rica were not considered Costa Rican citizens, not even those born in Costa Rica (Senior 2007). It was because of the ideology that a Latin American country had to “whiten” itself to appear more European that many Afro-descendants were pushed to one part of Costa Rica (Wiehoff, et. Al 1997). Between the 18th and 19th centuries, Europe was considered “ideal” and many countries had modeled themselves after it (Wiehoff, et. Al 1997). This is unfortunate because Afro-descendants have been in Costa Rica for many years and it is unjust for them not to be considered part of this country; especially for those that were born here.

Although the Afro-Costa Rican culture and general Costa Rican culture are not totally integrated, Calypso music has become a way to start that process. Although it is meant
as an English-speaking form of music, there are calypso songs written in Spanish as well. Spanish songs allow people who do not speak Creole English to engage in Calypso music which can broaden the audience of people who listen to it. However, it is very important that Creole English is not forgotten by the younger generation. Although it can be very easy for Afro-descendants to only speak Spanish in a country like Costa Rica, many people I talked to said that it is important not to forget the mother tongue.

**Afro-Descendants in Cahuita Do Not Speak Patois**

It is very commonly believed that Afro-descendants in the Limón province speak French Creole or *patois*, however this is not true. One of my interviewees explained to me that there were some Haitians living in Cahuita that spoke *patois*, however they were the only ones that spoke it. It is unclear how this assumption came to be for the Afro-descendants in this area. My assumption would be that a visitor in Limón heard some people speaking in *patois* and assumed that everyone in the region speaks this language.

**Calypso Lyrics are Very Important**

The *language* that a calypso song is in is very important. For many Afro-descendants, their mother language is English. This is because of the fact that many Caribbean countries were ruled by Great Britain (Senior 2007). However, their English dialect is called *Creole English* which can best be described as “broken English.” However, there are native *cubueteños* that argue that statement. Instead, as two of my interviewees informed me, it is better to say that Creole English is a “chopping” up of Standard English words.
The Decrease in Popularity of Calypso is Problematic for the Cahuita Community

The consumption of Calypso music has decreased in the last 30 years or so. My key informants and other older interviewees have also noticed this decline and see that it is problematic. They do not want to see Calypso disappear from the culture just because it is not “mainstream.” Mainstream music, such as reggae, reggaeton, salsa, etc. tends to overshadow Calypso music because of its modern rhythm. Yet, Calypso music is definitely the foundation for many types of mainstream music today. One genre is the Costa Rican “chicky chicky” which was popular in the 1980s (Monestel 2005). “Chicky chicky” Calypso and Cumbia intertwined. Calypso is also the foundation for reggae, soca, and mento music (Monestel 2005). However, many may not know that Calypso has influenced these genres. This is interesting because this shows that Calypso continues to be an “underground” style of music and not a main force.

There have been programs for the preservation of Calypso in Cahuita

Over the last 10 years, there have been programs funded by various government departments that are specifically for the preservation of Calypso music. The first department was the Centro Cultural de España headed by Manuel Monestel. The second, which is currently funding a Calypso program, is the Ministerio de Cultura. In the current program, calypsonians like Donny Williams and Gianty Goldberg teach younger kids how to play and sing calypso. This program has been going on for approximately three years.
CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

- Regardless of age, Calypso is considered important in the Cahuita community, however according to the contingency table done, the level of importance varied between the two age groups (10-25) and (25-50).
- Not many people listen to it which could be a reason that its popularity has decreased.
- According to the ANOVA tests run, the older age group (25-50) liked and listened to Calypso more than the younger age group (10-25).
- According to the ANOVA tests run, people who spoke English and/or Creole English liked Calypso more than those who speak only Spanish.
- According to the simple regression test, the likeability of Calypso is greater for those who have lived in Cahuita for a long time.
- I can conclude that the importance or perception of importance by the responses from the younger age group was not totally based on personal opinion. I believe that their responses were probably based on what they might have heard or assumed from what the older people in the community have said. The responses might also be based on the fact that Calypso is beneficial for Cahuita tourism, therefore it would be important in the community as well.
- Language is an important factor for someone to really understand Calypso. It is beneficial if someone knows and/or is familiar with English/Creole English. This is definitely connected to likeability of Calypso music.
- Patois is not spoken in Cahuita. If a person is to listen to an Afro-descendent speak, s/he will not hear French words, but English words—Creole English.
• From its inception, Calypso has not changed too much in terms of its form. However, the ways in which a person or band might play it can be slightly different. Originally, Calypso was acoustic; however bands such as “Kawe Vibrations” play Calypso songs using electric instruments (i.e. electric guitar and bass). This could help in how people hear Calypso music—which, as stated earlier, many say has too slow a rhythm.

• The program mentioned above needs more than government funding to keep functioning. It needs the support of the entire community if Calypso is going to continue to be an identifying factor in Cahuita. However when speaking to Donny Williams, he mentioned that Calypso is slowly getting back to what it was, but there still is a lot more work to be done.

• I would recommend funding for more instruments for students to use in the program. As of now, there only seems to be one of every instrument for kids to use. There needs to be more if/when new recruits join this program.

• Since every generation always changes, there should be new/modern ways to attract potential recruits.

• I would recommend cultural workshops to be held in the elementary schools in the areas that talk about Calypso and its history. I would recommend these workshops be done for younger grades (kinder to grade four) because younger kids seem to be more willing to learn about these topics than older kids.

• Something that might be interesting for future exploration is whether or not Calypso music is really understood in the community. Although a person might know what Calypso is, there is some speculation in the community that people might not necessarily pay attention to the message. This can definitely be true for those that do not speak English in the community.
Works Cited


Figure 2.
Likeability of Calypso music compared to the number of years living in Cahuita. Cahuita, May 2010.

Figure 3a.
Figure 4.
Likeability rating versus languages spoken using a simple regression test. Cahuita, May 2010