

SELF AND SOCIETY: PARTICIPATION IN CULTURAL

LIFE - A CARIBBEAN PERSPECTIVE

REX M. NETTLEFORD

INTRODUCTION

In February 1982 President Reagan of the United States of America unveiled a plan to promote economic development and fight communism in the Caribbean Basin. This was long in coming and it did not disappoint many who had long entertained fears that the strategic importance of the Caribbean region to a neighbouring superpower would finally determine the initiatives by that superpower to have control over the region's mind as well as its matter, or at least to have it 'develop' in directions compatible with the geopolitical needs of that superpower. In all of this it is easy to conclude that nothing of cultural moment is included in this plan and those with a mind for cultural exchanges and intercultural relations would probably seize on the seeming omission in order to lobby Washington and/or United States embassies in the 24 countries of the region for reconsideration. But this pre-occupation stems from too narrow a view of 'culture' and ignores the centrality of the exercise of the creative intellect to the question of cultural identity. For Mr. Reagan's Basin Initiative does take a position of far-reaching cultural significance in the scheme of Caribbean development. The notion that the region should be a satellite of this or that superpower is itself a denial of the Caribbean having its own inner logic and consistency, its own sense of direction, its own vision of self, independent, in significant ways, of external factors, and possessing a history and set of experiences that are peculiar to itself, unique and discrete. The view of the Caribbean as the fourth border of the United States, as an extension of Europe or of its cultural extension (the United States), and as a neo-colonial outpost still to be captured, tamed and controlled by this or that ideological system, all fit into the picture of a region without its own inner dynamic and maybe without its own identity.

The fractions, fragile nature of the region aids and abets the perpetuation of such

monstrosities of perception and the continuing economic dependency of the region on the North Atlantic reinforces among persons living within the region the notion that nothing that they have created by themselves can possibly be of value. The relative international success of some 'harmless' artistic expression emerging from Caribbean sensibilities and creative energies have served to obscure the continuing intellectual dependency of the region on Europe and in the more modern and sometimes simplistic modes, on the United States of America. For those who see 'culture' as 'mind', this phenomenon overtaking the Caribbean region must be one of the most fateful challenges to cultural identity and political independence. It is natural for the United States under its present ideological dispensation to require of the economically dependent Caribbean, undivided loyalty to the intellectual traditions inherited and consolidated by the richest and this most powerful country in the liberal-corporate community of nations. The minds of those in the Caribbean who might have managed to escape the colonial ravages of mental slavery are therefore expected not to function except within pre-determined parameters set by a superpower which may have need for countries in its backyard for strategic purposes.

This is an undoubted cultural constraint, if not an insult, perpetuated not only by the outside power seeking mental fiefdoms beyond its borders but by many of the native leaders within those would-be fiefdoms whose internal authority may depend for its effectiveness on alliances with the external power. This presents the region with one of its many contradictions. As I have said elsewhere. "(the) common history of domination and the struggle for political freedom, economic viability, cultural identity

and, within that framework, the common process of creolisation offer a logical basis for ease of communication (especially via intercultural relations) between the different communities of what is sometimes referred to as a 'sub-region' (i.e. the insular Caribbean) or a 'region' (i.e. Continental Latin America and the insular Caribbean combined). Yet there are divisive forces rooted in that very history that keep the territories culturally apart. There are, as well, the realities of geography evident in the wide expanses of water and mountain ranges, forests and rivers which separate community from community. The dominant European colonising forces have also bequeathed imprints of language, religion and other cultural forms to their different spheres of influence, placing Caracas nearer to Madrid than to Port-of-Spain and Kingston nearer to London than to Havana . .

The fact is underscored by the poignant presence of distinctive culture spheres known severally as (i) Plantation America, brutalised and ravaged and for that reason endemically rebellious (ii) Meso-America, valiantly resistant to the onslaughts of European 'discovery' and correspondingly majestic in its ancestral certitude and (iii) Euro-America, still the active and often assertive purveyor of the ideas and technology of the Conqueror-forbears and therefore reflective of that ambivalence with which any thrust towards regional co-operation must contend".

I

Cast in this mould, 'culture', however, presents predicatable problems of definition. And the question as to what is meant by cultural life and whose cultural life raises yet further (and sometimes more fundamental) questions challenging a rapidly changing and dynamic world to devise new policy initiatives, or discover added emphasis in cultural expression, as well as to re-appraise the values, concepts and interpretations which many have given to the word 'culture'.

The question has been put as follows: "Are we to understand 'culture' as 'the arts', as 'a system or means and values' or as a 'whole way of life' and how are these to be related to 'society' and the 'economy'". This immediately suggests an all-inclusive definition that would

satisfy the needs of new countries like those in the Caribbean in search of an indigenous cultural certitude and legitimacy. Cultural life would then be perceived as embracing all that are the arts or the product of the creative imagination, all that could be designated a philosophy or even a religion rooted in the history and life experience of a particular people (usually the result of the exercise of the creative intellect), and all that delineates, articulates and expresses a total way of life embodying the ethos of a particular civilisation.

Such perception offers further difficulties for the post-colonial communities of the world. For under a previous state of imperial grace such a cultural life was deemed to be the gift of the rulers (whether they be Spain, Great Britain, France, or the Netherlands and latterly the United States of America), or of some ruling class (planters, royal administrators, or elite corps of military officers) or of some master race (white and Anglo-Saxon, white and Gallic, white and Hispanic or just white, creole or metropolitan born). Native populations were to be socialised, acculturated, educated or assimilated into human 'culture'. The appropriation of Christianity with its entire system of values, symbols and meanings in the service of the civilising mission not only assisted in the legitimation of political and economic oppression but entrenched in the system of relationship which developed between peoples all over the globe, a form of cultural domination which located certain sets of people at the base of a pyramid of Western culture and other sets of people firmly, if precariously, perched at the apex.

Participation in cultural life for the sets at the base which is where historical realities have placed the Caribbean, must mean (a) a serious challenge of that inherited state of affairs which is the resistance side of the mission and (b) a reconstruction of society coupled with the rehumanisation of self which is the positive, constructive side of the challenge. Both approaches, though separate, are not by any means mutually exclusive and any attempt to make them so tends to rob the revolting world of the dynamic and richness of the dialectical nature of cultural life with which the participants in that life must

come to terms. The breaking of images must be accompanied by the shaping of new ones. The process of birth, growth, maturation, disintegration and regeneration needs to be understood if such participation is to be effective. The recognition of plural modes of cultural expression in any civilization must be achieved in fact rather than in rhetoric if we are to avoid the humbug caused us by a tenacious hold on such categories as "High art" and "Low art", "Great Tradition" and "Little Tradition", or "pop and folk arts" as against "classical expression". For the bane of many a development strategy inheres somewhat in such categories of classification which serve to ignore the rich collective wisdom from the "Little Tradition" out in the mountain-ridges and the ghetto-gullies in favour of the "Great Tradition" offerings from the metropolitan centres excellence which carry such names as the London School of Economics, Oxford and Cambridge, the Sorbonne and Harvard, to name a few. Participation in cultural life (if culture is to embrace our total way of life) extends to the involvement of much wider cross-sections of populaces and citizenries in the determination of plans, policies, programmes and action.

The operative word here is "determination". For central to the idea of participation in cultural life must be the primary responsibility of the participants determining that cultural life. In this sense the inherited cultural life of an imperial past cannot escape re-examination, analysis and that skepticism which all power structures invite by definition. And the master's culture is to the once subjugated a form of power-structure. Happily, the organic nature of culture, the very measure of Man, defies all resistance to internal change and transformation; and the creolisation of artistic expressions, or the inherited system of values or attempted transplant of entire ways of life from one society wherever different cultures have met. And this applies even when they have met in the ambience of brutality, human exploitation and military domination as they did in large areas of the Americas of which the Caribbean is an integral part. Westminster models, the Christian religion, African land-tenure systems, Oriental cuisines, the languages of the Old Worlds, and, most certainly, the traditional and popular arts have undergone more than a sea-change in the Americas. The ancestral heritage of the indigenous Amerindian has not always remained the passive, down-trodden recipient of the alien

intrusions. As an organic force, that heritage has fought back valiantly culturing its own antibodies to immunise itself against premature demise. Weaker transplants, as the African cultural complex undoubtedly was in the history of transplants to the Americas, also built up effective resistance to the stronger and more powerful transplants as the culture of Europe made sure it remained through slavery and colonialism.

In this power-game the very denial to the weaker elements in the society of any say in the determination of the legitimate cultural life which was forced on those people (usually the vast numerical majority), caused other options of participation to be forged and the construction of what came to be known as a "sub-culture" became the ruling force of social and even political life though Europe governed in formal, symbolic and magisterial splendour. It is the experience of that historical participation which now hankers after legitimation in places like the Caribbean. For the old problem still confronts those who have inherited power from the metropolitan raj. So though they may be the people's Elected they are too frequently the unwitting surrogates of a departing ruling power: and the symbols of the imperial past weigh heavily on the region as though it were the old system. As with meanings and values (rooted in the heritage of Christendom even where such other great religions as Islam and Hinduism exist as in Trinidad and Guyana), so with the artistic expressions (some rooted in that same Christian liturgy, others in the received literature and language of European masters)! What it does to the total way of life is nothing short of confusion. And the cultural choices to be made by the new native leaders present them with difficulties rooted in the contradictions of a society accustomed to operating on more than one level as a condition of survival.

The temptation to find solutions in periodical offerings of bread and circuses is always at hand. The Caribbean like some other parts of the world is becoming famous for its festivals of arts (regional and national) and the facility with which governments can find otherwise scarce funds to finance such three-day wonders when they are at a loss to find similar funds for sustained training and

development work in the arts, has been the target of public attack by at least one world-renowned Caribbean Writer. But this is done frequently in the name of popular participation. That such indulgences in frenzy, while providing showcases for creative efforts, do not guarantee the continuing participation of a society in the determination and development of its cultural life, is not altogether missed in the Caribbean; and political directorates have in a number of cases sought to bring to the service of that aspect of cultural life the more palatable features of political support and public funding. It would even be argued by some on ideological grounds that as with the commanding heights of the economy, certain cultural activities, goods and products need the patronage of State support to ensure widespread access to them by all who inhabit the land and not simply by those who can afford to pay for them. This would certainly be the case with Cuba and Grenada as a matter of course but Santo Domingo, Jamaica and later Guyana, Barbados and Trinidad have all expressed public commitment to cultural policies which draw on public funds to ensure that widespread participation by their respective citizenries is achieved.

Cuba is far advanced in its provision of a cultural institutional infrastructure (national and provincial training institutions, galleries, museums, theatres), and Santo Domingo has an impressive arts centre modeled on metropolitan lines while Jamaica has settled for a more modest complex dedicated to the training of artists and teachers of art, drama, music and dance under the aegis of the century-old Institute of Jamaica. Other branches of the Institute are the National Library (at the centre of a quite extensive library and documentation network), a Division of Natural History, a National Gallery, a Museums and Archaeology Division, and a Research Institute for African-Caribbean Studies. Guyana since 1972 is building a similar network of cultural institutions and both Trinidad and Barbados have national programmes in cultural development with emphasis on ensuring the fullest possible participation in cultural life. The community-based Better Village Festival enterprise has the personal patronage and attention of the late Prime Minister Dr. Eric Williams. The annual Trinidad Pre-Lenten Carnival which is probably the Commonwealth Caribbean's most genuinely

spontaneous example of a popular cultural mass explosion is not altogether appropriated by officialdom but Government has long seen the relation of this (for some) yearlong preoccupation with commerce and the economy. The Bahamas has achieved much in cultural tourism where Jamaica and some of the other territories hope to succeed by the conscious promotion of indigenous arts and a lifestyle that spells uniqueness and seemingly foes beyond the cliché of sand and beach.

All this is done in the name of the people as well as of a new national consciousness and integrity. And in this sense the guarantees for participation in cultural life are assumed to be in place. But are they? An examination of such participation in terms of (a) the majority of Caribbean people determining their own artistic expressions as well as the society's politico-ethical and philosophical underpinnings and, by extension, the entire profile of their cultural life and (b) such efforts where they already manifest results that are being legitimated by the native power-structure, is here appropriate, using some major cultural indices as frame of reference,

II

The Caribbean has long sought to place its artistic creative potential to economic advantage. The pre-occupation by international cultural organisations during the sixties with something called "cultural tourism" sparked enthusiasm in different parts of the Caribbean. The Bahamas revived the Gombay Festival for its American visitors and in Jamaica a whole new school of woodcarving sprang up aimed at the tourist's dollar and presumably his taste. Haitian craft and primitive paintings had long led the way in tapping this market. This would no doubt be seen as a facilitator to international participation in cultural life. The salvaging of treasures from a seventeenth century earthquake underwater wreckage at Port Royal, a former capital of Jamaica, resulted in replicas of tableware and utensils of the period but the effort was thwarted by lack of funds for continuing exploration and conservation. The restoration of old Spanish Caribbean cities following on the resuscitation of old San Juan and of old Santo Domingo also implied large sums of imported capital as well as progressive legislation to facilitate the investment in such endeavours by the private sector. Jamaica thought of restoring old Spanish Town and is now actively putting its mind to the restoration of Old

Seville. All this is perfectly reasonable in terms of making the country more enticing to visitors from overseas bearing the much-needed foreign exchange. The incentive of a promise of possible employment to people who probably have been out of jobs for the better part of their young adult life is an obligation from which policymakers cannot escape. But the problem of ensuring the intrinsic cultural integrity of every such project under cultural tourism is no less an obligation; and many are the pitfalls of such efforts which seek to entertain the visitors rather than to develop one's artistic culture. The distortions of traditional cultural life are universally evident wherever tourists have stalked Caribbean lands and so there is no shortage of custodians of cultural integrity in the Caribbean region, which is, after all, one of the major tourist resort areas of the world. That people sing, dance, paint, sculpt and play-act for themselves and welcome the visitors as guests to enjoy their culture with them is quite a different thing from cultural offerings being specially concocted for the visitors and sometimes with little consideration for the cultural realities and sensibilities of the country itself. Cultural policies formulated by the Caribbean Governments need, then, to take this into consideration at all times and UNESCO as international benefactors can help by not encouraging a neglect of this obligation on the part of policy-determiners who are eager to please the itinerant hard currency-bearing tourist rather than the citizens to whom they are answerable. Already throughout the region the exercise of the creative imagination and the outflow of artistic products therefrom are widespread among the citizenry. Many efforts have benefited from active State support through local, national and regional festivals and many community organisations - youthclubs, lodges, church and civic groups, political parties and trade unions - have their own cultural (artistic) programmes.

What needs to be done is for far more of this kind of work to enter the education system, not to be ossified into the rigidities of written examinations of the O and A level types which are still popular in the Commonwealth Caribbean countries, but to act as catalyst for self-discovery, the acquisition of cognitive skills, and a grasp of a sense

of process. UNESCO can do much to encourage member governments to take more seriously the arts in education. This disjuncture between the arts and education - especially in the Anglophone Caribbean - is a block to greater participation of the young in cultural life. The oddity of the Jamaican Government setting up in law a tertiary-level training complex for the training of teachers in the arts without corresponding provision for accreditation of such graduates in the educational system is only a symptom of that grave deficiency in the society which is yet to see artistic culture as more than frill to the hem of the society's garment.

Quite apart from teaching such life-skills as confidence, capacity to cope in multi-dimensional situations, and an understanding of process, the arts (learnt at an early age) could open wider employment (hence participation) options for individuals in places like the Caribbean. The tourist industry needs musicians, singers, dancers and multi-talented entertainers. The electronic media (radio and television) need writers, announcers, actors, dancers, musicians, singers, scene designers. Commerce (whatever the ideological stance of a Caribbean government) needs graphic artists. The export sector could do with handicraft makers, textile designers, jewellers, potters and ceramists. Nowhere could money be better spent by, say, the UNESCO Culture Fund or some similar mechanism, than in facilitating by way of long term low interest loans the financing of projects aimed at achieving some of the above. Neither the World Bank nor the IMF would countenance requests for the funding of such projects and even where lip-service is given to the cultural model of development and the importance of building the human capital in terms of its creative potential, bilateral aid prefers to go "economic" rather than cultural. The gap is yet to be plugged.

This is not likely to be easy for the developing Caribbean or for the developing world in general. The cultural hegemony of the metropolitan centres of the world over them have entrapped them all into conceptual frameworks of development which still place emphasis on growth rates and economic development. And whether it is socialist or capitalist, Keynesian or supply-side, the dominance of the intellectual inheritance from Western civilisation locks the Caribbean into preconceived notions about development. Such is the paradox of the futile battles between the Left and the Right, more recent borrowings from the

classification of European political postures. Where such notions and the programmes which flow from them provide for little or no participation by the people for whom those plans and programmes are intended, failure has been and will continue to be the record. The best laid plans of committed public servants have been frustrated by a non-participating and unresponsive populace in such fields as housing, agriculture, health-care delivery and food and nutrition. Cultural forces are like yeast: without them the dough does not rise. The very political and economic policies in the strategy of Caribbean development will be better understood when pitted against those deep cultural forces.

The combative reactions by Caribbean Left-wingers to the exercise of external and internal power are a logical development in a region which has long been deprived of any serious participation in the determination of its own destiny though the people of the Caribbean have always insisted on changing this debilitating condition. An exchange of one form of external domination for another would not be acceptable to many Caribbean peoples therefore; even if one United States public servant at the United Nations chooses to see the Caribbean region as the "fourth border of the United States of America" rather than as a group of countries existing in their own right. The right of the peoples of the Caribbean region to participate in any decisions about their future territorial status and way(s) of life comes from the same source that goads them to want to sing their own calypsoes and their own reggae tunes, their own religious chants and their own national anthems. Paradoxically the claims are firmly rooted in a cultural inheritance of 500 years membership (albeit of marginal status) in the civilisation of the West which sets great store by liberty, self-determination and territorial autonomy.

III

Participation in cultural life, then, must not be taken to mean the mere access of a citizenry to a bit of dance, a bit of music, a wall or two of paintings, rooms and gardens of sculpture, a dramatic presentation or two and amateur theatricals of the self-indulgent kind, baskets full of ersatz tourist art, or bread-and-circus spectacles offered with pomp and circumstance on 'occasions' in

national stadia and faddishly along blocked-off city streets. Participation in cultural life means the multiform involvement of wide cross-sections of a populace in the totality of the life of their society. This does not mean passive absorption of what is offered from on high but rather an active response by as many people as possible as audience, critic, creative doers in the shaping and development of that life. The key points of reference that give form and purpose to that life cover the major means of communication (the language they speak), the god(s) they worship and the belief-system(s) that underpin social living, the families they build and the structures and processes of socialisation which embrace and are embraced by patterns of kinship, the artistic manifestations that spring from the collective and/or individual creative imagination in that society, the systems of thought and cosmogony(ies) that are the product of the creative intellect, the way(s) power is structured, administered and distributed within a given social aggregation and the material base of such a society with emphasis, as indicated above, on levels of production and consumption of goods produced. Human action and interaction when related to these points of reference constitute the determinant, cause and occasion of the society's ethos and total cultural profile. The extent to which people are able to relate with ease and purpose to such points of reference is the measure of the society's capacity to nurture and maintain the commitment, loyalty and dedication of those who live within its borders. A wider world order which facilitates such relationships in multiple forms is no less assured of that sense of hope which in the present circumstances it is yet to inspire among the hundreds of millions who are still not free from disease, hunger, fear, ignorance and cultural denigration.

Participation in cultural life for those and others means the dismantling of that indefensible cultural hierarchy which relegates to a subordinate position those without a grip on science and technology, or who have little access to or control of the contemporary world's powerful information systems and who certainly are without the advantages of past imperial power. Put another way, there can be no justification for forcing the majority of the world's population to 'enter the mainstream' of a cultural life which is claimed to be universal but which in fact spans the civilizations merely of a few who live in Europe

and have extended themselves across the Atlantic to North America. That 'Mainstream' must be determined by the rest of the world as well, and is not there simply to be entered. The Caribbean would do well to help rid the world of such habits of thought and of the resultant policies and programmes of action that continue to frustrate the many millions who on the available empirical evidence are in possession of enough of 'culture' to participate creatively and constructively in the shaping of a new and, hopefully, more equitable world order.