

KEYNOTE ADDRESS: CULTURE RETREAT

Ministry of Education, Youth & Culture

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I have just returned from a very instructive and useful conference on Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in Mauritius. One thing that struck me was the place enjoyed by **culture** in the discourse on sustainable development. All credit must go to small islands, as we all are, in the Caribbean where the collective sense and sensibility of a region tenanted by souls who have survived the traumas or, should I say, the tsunamis of enforced severance from ancestral hearths, and suffering in a kind of Babylonian captivity otherwise known as chattel slavery. That survival, many have come to realize, rests on a particular kind of engagement with the silence which the severance and suffering bequeathed generations but which was never allowed to deprive either the immediate sufferers or their descendants of the duty they have as human beings to claim and protect their humanity -- their sense of place and purpose so vital to sane existence.

It is not strange, then, that such a sense of survival should persist in a place like Jamaica, once described as the hottest baby to hold because of the tradition of resistance to obscenities evident from the time of the Maroons through Tacky, Sam Sharpe, Bogle, George William Gordon and the Morant Bay Rebellion, to Marcus Garvey and the advocates of self-government and independence. And throughout all

this, it has been the products of the creative imagination that stand out, as in artistic manifestations (music, dance, drama, visual arts) as well as in the folk philosophies so evident in our storytelling and cornucopia of proverbs and in the undertow of creativity that fueled the strategies of survival. Such strategies ranged from the plotting of schemes to sabotage the best laid plans for maintaining the status quo of the Plantation, through the devising of plans to build villages and making of designs for social living in post-Emancipation, to the building of a nation and shaping a society in Independence. Let me hasten to admit that not all turned out positive in the process. But more than we are even now willing to admit, there has been much that has been positive and life-giving. Otherwise, how could we now live to tell the tale?

I was therefore pleased to be participating in that SIDS Conference on the side of *culture and development* since for me the inclusion of the topic addressing a people's resilience and vulnerability somewhat settled a concern among cultural activists who for long felt that the idea that culture was no less central to development than economics yet was nowhere evident in the development equation as perceived by developmentalists. In fact though the Caricom session on culture was listed as a "**side event**" competing with another simultaneous session on trade, it attracted a more than respectably large audience which engaged in spirited discussion. I should add that one of the mainstream panels was about *Culture and Development* involving

Caribbean panelists which included Jamaica's Director of Culture. And that too drew a large audience.

Clearly there have been definitional perceptions that have placed factors like culture and education in the "**non-productive**" area of national development in many countries including some of our own in the Caribbean in their annual Economic Reports. But this has changed in many places especially since the idea of *cultural industries* (especially the highly profitable trans-border music industry) has entered the discourse. Such cultural products after all serve the tourist industry (itself considered to be a highly 'developmental imperative') through the production of saleable objets des art (paintings, sculpture, straw goods, culinary arts ingredients, crafts, cd's and dvd's etc).

The trouble with this rests largely on the secondary role that such products of the creative imagination are made to play in the development process. So we are expected to paint, to sculpt, to dance, to create and play music for the tourists rather than for ourselves. It admittedly fits into a culture of hospitality where the poorest of the poor among us will save the best utensils displayed in glass cases for the guest but never to be used by us in the home.

All this tends to deny to cultural products and culture itself its own inner logic and inner consistency and deprives artistic culture of its

functions as primarily serving its creators. The great music creator Jimmy Cliff on launching his latest album at the UWI recently pointed out how his involvement in the creative process turned on his quest for self, for the certitude that afforded him the opportunity to serve his people and humanity in general. So one would imagine that the best form of cultural tourism (not touristic culture) would be one that has us as hosts creating for ourselves and having our guests (the visitors) come in and share the products with us and even to add to them by what they may bring both in their critical appreciation and involvement. In any case nothing is created from the void except in the first Book of Genesis; and many a Jamaican artist like Jimmy Cliff will attest to the fact that the definitive genre that reggae has become has depended on creative evolution involving a cross fertilization of features found in different sources, local and foreign – from the traditional lore of Jamaican folk music and religious rituals through rhythm-and-blues and jazz of the United States to the chants of European liturgy in that fascinating trajectory of a journey from ska through rock steady to reggae with its many offshoots including dub poetry and dancehall.

Such is the sustainable development of our cultural forms corresponding to the “renewable resources” in the lexicon of developmentalists. For nothing is a greater renewable resource than the human mind. Intellect and imagination are the major features of that mind and the exercise of both is an ongoing dynamic mechanism

that has a cybernetic effect in being able to produce the more that is fed into that mind.

For people like us, such a mechanism possesses real historical/ancestral pedigree. Under slavery and colonialism of centuries preceding our 42 years of Independence, it was the exercise of those features of the mind which gave to forebears the capacity to survive and function as **human beings** even as they functioned as **chattels** - the property of others and virtual beasts of burden. They, it was, who discovered that the mind was beyond the reach of oppressors. And it is the cultivation of the kingdom of the mind that underpins the sustainability of our capacity to self-develop, self-empower, self-affirm and all the other means of becoming whole. That is why a long hallowed national cultural policy dating back to the time of Norman Manley who created the first Ministry of Culture back in the late Fifties, was designed to **facilitate** and never to **imprison** in enclosed spaces the urge, capacity and energy of our people to create.

Many of our artists have individually understood that an artist (any creator) is only as good as his/her last work. I recall that being the mantra of the late Edna Manley, the sculptor. For as human beings we share with other organisms of nature the capacity to regenerate. Recreational activities among our ring playing villagers are means to re-create after a hard day's work the energy and stamina to plough

the fields next day. There may also be something in the view that the communion with nature is the artist's best bet. And those who do not see trees grow may well be deprived of that sense of process so vital to all creators whether they are creating a painting, a dance, some bars of music, a piece of ceramic or a nation to be moulded out of the clay of subjugation and denigration.

Central, then, to any public policy must be the opportunities for the cultivation of the kingdom of the mind – in other words, the opportunity for education for all.

The location of Culture in a Ministry of Education is certainly not meant to have it in the role of an add-on. Rather its integration into the learning process in preparing a child for productive adulthood is the **sine qua non** of the output and throughout from our schools and colleges. In my generation much that ones like myself received in honing a cultural sense and sensibility was received with the help of teachers inside and outside of classrooms. Curriculum development meant for those teachers the inclusion of bodies of knowledge that would take their students nearer to values and attitudes which gave a special centrality to the worth of the human being. And much of this, one could gather through literature, sports (which I regard as a performing art), music, acting and play making as well as dialogue with the great creators of the past whether they were scientists or scholars in the Humanities.

But most of all it was the involvement of us students in the creative process that hit home. And as I have often said a child who learns to create a poem (from the simple couplet, or middle length iambic pentametric quatrains to the longest of narrative), to make up a dance, to make up a song, or perform in any of these artforms is bound to evolve with a sense of self and a consciousness of his or her social obligations as part of a community and wider society. The performing arts (like sports) teach teamwork and a certain tolerance based on participatory action.

I see the pursuit of such cultural knowledge and exposure as an integral part of whatever solutions will be embarked upon following the recommendations of the Education Task Force which emphasizes the Three R's, Science and Technology, ready world-of-work skills but not much of the artistic and spiritual underpinnings of learning how to live as well as how to make a living. My Japanese counterparts in the academy, I have discovered on recent visits to that remarkable country, are even now grappling with the challenge of how to harmonise technological thought of which they are eminently famous and spiritual feeling which is by no means absent from their perception of life and living.

Our challenge here is not so much that as to how to devise and activate public policy that will fertilise the soil in which our people's creative talent can grow with emphasis on the soil rather than on the

fertilizer. Our cultural training schools, exhibition halls including museums, galleries, concert halls and theatres are items on the agenda. All of this suggest a policy of deepening and heightening of our cultural institutions that can provide the country with the multiplier effect in the production not only of artists but also of cultural agents whose expertise can benefit schools and youth groups as well as of arts administrators who are sensitive to the needs of artists and the peculiarities of the creative process, added to this must be the nurturing of a no less sensitive audience that will in turn be moved to bring support (patronage and ^{MONEY}~~MORE~~ donations) to artistic culture. Other aspects of culture like **Religion** (Churches have long been able to attract attention to themselves in Last Wills and Testaments), **Social and Cultural Anthropology** now regarded as proper subjects for research and explication in the academy throwing up better understanding of the psychology of race (also legitimately enshrined in the academy) have been well served. The all-inclusive **Cultural Studies** discipline is also getting due attention.

What continues to be treated as poor cousins in the family of knowledge are the artistic manifestations with the possible exception of Music of the popular brand which while being a commercial success still suffers from the snobbery and arrogant ignorance of a number of Jamaicans who feel that without exposure to Bach, Brahms or Beethoven the likes of a Marley, a Cliff, a Tosh or a Luciano or a Beres Hammond cannot be regarded as "serious

musicians". The emancipation from such mental slavery is part of the challenge though I would recommend that such emancipation is best achieved by the continuing creation of expressions rooted in our reality rather than the engagement in pointless shouting at each other across the divide between misguided snobbery on one side and an over-confident roots-based mediocrity on the other. We must concentrate on the excellence that the human mind anywhere has been able to produce to become the stock and capital of all on Planet Earth. For in the realm of excellence there is no hierarchy.

Our vulnerability in the field of culture turns therefore on the lack of education, on the lack of opportunity for self-development. Here the promise of adequate funding for our cultural institutions becomes a major public responsibility - an issue which this retreat will no doubt address. Our cultural vulnerability has rested on the exploitation of our labour skills in conditions that rendered the vast majority of our people sub-human. It is ^{now} threatened by our growing susceptibility to communicable or life-style diseases rendering many incapable of creating as is the case with hypertension, diabetes, malnutrition and the dreaded pandemic HIV/AIDS. We as human beings are culturally endangered no less than other creatures of nature as our mangroves, coral reefs, coastline habitats, our birds and animals, our rivers and our mountains. We become culturally vulnerable through lack of social services as in health delivery, housing and education. We are culturally endangered through the abuse of material

resources as in the use of firewood from felled trees leading to soil erosion. And we are culturally endangered by way of the aftershocks in a long history of dehumanization of an important part of our populations, hence our contemporary concerns with racism, identity crisis and a form of religious persecution evidenced in the wider world especially in the present struggle between Christian and Islamic fundamentalism and the continuing denial of legitimacy to such African inspired religious expressions as Candomble in North-East Brazil, Santeria in Cuba, Voodoo in Haiti, Shango in Trinidad and ~~Zionism~~^{Revivalism}, pukkumina and Rastafari in Jamaica. We are culturally endangered when we relegate fifty percent of our population - our women - to the kitchen and the washtubs and leave them vulnerable victims at childbearing age of the HIV virus through misguided notions of masculine prowess and the power of the seed of Israel.

That culture is as central to human growth and development as is economics is therefore clearly impatient of debate. Jamaica which instinctively understood this from the beginning of its history and has produced leaders of vision in the shaping of our society dares not betray such a significant part of our heritage.
