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**DILENNAS OF A CULTURAL POLICY IN TRINIDAD & TOBAGO**

*by*

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*"The battle between Europe and Africa continues for an African centrality in the indigenising process, if not for uncontested supremacy: and neither Guyana and Trinidad with their growing East Indian aggregates, nor Cuba with its predominantly European population or Jamaica with its overwhelming African majority, can escape the fact of the African presence in the national cultural ethos. This is a fact of Caribbean Life!"*

(Caribbean Cultural Identity: The Case of Jamaica. An Essay in Cultural Dynamics, Institute of Jamaica, 1978, p.6)

The purpose of this paper is to show how cultural policy makers in Trinidad and Tobago face a formidable task in formulating a policy for the society as a whole. The major problems derive from the fact that Trinidad is a tri-racial society, whereas the other Caribbean societies are largely bi-racial. Since however, in Trinidad the political parties are mainly derived from racial bases, cultural policies usually become involved with political considerations. The paper accordingly argues that the best policy in the circumstances of Trinidad and Tobago is a genuine policy of multi-culturalism.

The problem of devising an appropriate cultural policy for Trinidad, it should be noted, was also a problem for the colonial Power. Although its official policy was the eventual absorption of subcultural groupings, it was forced in the case of Trinidad, to adapt to the needs of the more resistant Indian culture. Thereafter, it was hoped that the other cultural elements would be integrated around the dominant metropolitan values. Braithwaite's assimilationist model postulating a differential rate of

assimilation for the various segments of Trinidadian society around metropolitan values accurately captures the mood and intentions of official thinking. The implications of this state of affairs for the integration of the Indians was more fully articulated in his article, The Problem of Cultural Integration in Trinidad and Tobago (Social and Economic Studies).

Yet, there was always some uneasiness with the policy of assimilation in the context of independence. If independence now made possible policies of decolonization then it was possible also to have more authentic cultural policies. The anti-colonial stances and strident nationalisms of the sixties and seventies on the part of the new states also gave added impetus to questions of cultural policy.

In Trinidad, a Ministry of Education and Culture was set up by the first People's National Movement (PNM) Government. Its major concern however was with art and its propagation in schools rather. It did however actively promote the steelpan, carnival and later Better Village cultural expressions. The Best Village Programmes were however largely focussed on 'African' cultural expressions. It was largely in these circumstances that the successive election manifestoes of the PNM promised support for carnival, Best Village, calypso and the steelband. In the tourist brochures and in the rhetoric of politicians, Trinidad became "the land of the humming bird, steelband and the calypso."

Yet it was significant that it was not until 1983 that Emancipation Day was proclaimed a national holiday whereas Eid and

Divali had been made holidays years before. It seems that the assumption was made that the African had been assimilated around Creole values, and that with time the Indian would in turn be also integrated.

It was the explosion of 1970, by all accounts, the most substantial challenge which Caribbean societies had to face in decades, which brought the question of cultural policy once more to the fore. It was clear that the independent governments, whatever their pronouncements during the anti-colonial period might have been, were content with restricting culture to art and quietly going along with the old colonial policies of assimilation.

Such attitudes in the wider Caribbean no doubt had to do with the individual propensities of the political leaders of the region. The Manleys of Jamaica were devotees of sculpture, dance, theatre and music. Seaga, an anthropologist, was also known to be associated with the development of pocomania. Barrow, Adams and Burnham were never accused of such tendencies. Williams, during his early years in office was associated with Presence Africaine, was Chairman of the 1959 Rome Congress of Black Writers and had flirted with negritude. And yet, despite these personal idiosyncracies, they all seemed at least until the great explosion of 1970, to follow a well-trodden path.

It seems that the leaders of the region, and with them Williams, believed that to embark on a serious cultural policy would be to endanger the fragile unity of these states by the reassertion of communal and other cleavages which the policy of

assimilation had so far contained. Hence, in Trinidad, the grudging concessions to 'African' culture. It was Black Power which forced them to reconsider the time-honoured policy of assimilation. For these reasons, the Jamaican Government in 1972 appointed a committee to consider among other matters,

the development of means to bring the country's cultural heritage into perspective bearing in mind the imbalances of history and the contemporary response to this phenomenon especially among the assertive and self-aware youths."<sup>1</sup>

As is obvious, the major objective of such policies would be to scrutinise the 'imbalances of history'. As Nettleford puts it, the major question to be asked was "whose and what cultural values must be preserved and for whom and what (sic) must they be developed?"<sup>2</sup> Nettleford is right to assert that it would be foolhardy "to deny to Caribbean experience the capacity claimed by all other civilisations to throw up verities, maxims of prudence, moral guidelines - in short, a philosophy of existence that can be of universal significance."<sup>3</sup> But there is also a Trinidadian experience, a Guyanese experience, a Jamaican experience and a Barbadian experience that is prior to and must precede the wider

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Nettleford, Caribbean Cultural Identity. The Case of Jamaica, p. 87.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.191.

Caribbean experience.

In this respect, an article by M.G. Smith on West Indian culture in 1961 is instructive<sup>4</sup> Smith argues that cultural homogeneity may be used to promote political unity, that since culture is a universal attribute there must be a West Indian culture. But as he notes, difference of history and metropolitan affiliation ensure that the Creole institutional complex that is different from the metropolitan model. He also points out that African culture does not exist in pure form but are overlaid by 'Creole influences and situations'. Smith declares, "the West Indian bred white is not culturally European."<sup>5</sup> He also notes that Jamaica, St. Kitts, Barbados and Antigua are predominantly Protestant; St. Lucia, Grenada, Dominica and Trinidad remain Catholic, and whilst one version of patois may be intelligible in St. Lucia, Trinidad, Dominica and Martinique, it may be beyond the Jamaican or Antiguan. In short, the regional problems are almost as intractable as domestic ones. For these reasons, the regional frame is a poor vehicle for a cultural policy in Trinidad and Tobago. The fundamental clash between regional and domestic perspectives were nicely illustrated by the controversy some years ago surrounding a calypso contest, the winning calypso being

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<sup>4</sup> For a critical assessment of regional cultural policy, see Nettleford, op. cit., p.155.

<sup>5</sup> See M.G. Smith, 'West Indian Culture' in Caribbean Quarterly, Vol.7, No.3, Dec. 1961, pp. 111-119.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

'Caribbean Man'.<sup>7</sup> The singer was Black Stalin and the lines which triggered the controversy ran thus,

Dem is one race, De Caribbean Man,  
From the same place, De Caribbean Man  
That make the same trip, De Caribbean Man  
On the same ship, De Caribbean Man<sup>8</sup>

Rev. Hamid wrote a letter to the Express on February 28, 1979, and complained 'Stalin either does not respect facts or has no place for a significant number of Caribbean people.'<sup>9</sup> Hindus, through the Maha Sabha also condemned the calypso, whilst the Express tended to equate Trinidadian with Caribbean. At one level it was understandable that those who supported Stalin could feel a sense of identification with the Caribbean man since the population of the Caribbean was largely African-descended. But that was a matter of racial identity which could hardly have provided a basis for a cultural policy in the context of the Commonwealth Caribbean, given its differing circumstances, history and cultural influences.

For in Trinidad the issue could not be as clearcut as it would be in Jamaica. In Jamaica political parties and the governments that emerged from them did so on the basis of ideologies and distinctive programmes. In Trinidad, by contrast, political parties developed from racial and cultural bases. The major pressure groups and other auxiliary organisations tended to follow

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the whole controversy, see R. Deosaran, "The Caribbean Man" in Samaroo and Dabydeen (eds.) India in the Caribbean. A Hansib (Warwick Publication, pp. 81-117).

<sup>8</sup> Deosaran, op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> Hamid's letter was not published.

cultural and racial lies. Thus, in Trinidad the Indian party and its successors were largely supported by Indian cultural organisations; and similarly, the major African party was supported by African organisations.

It was not surprising then that cultural policy, such as it was, followed along the lines of political alignment. Some of the most devoted supporters of the early PNM came from the Laventille area, famous for its steelbands. It was largely for these reasons that the PNM at an early stage in its career as government, had considered the 'Africanisation' of Trinidadian society by appropriate cultural and other measures.<sup>10</sup> It was in this context that the decision was taken to set up the Carnival Development Committee in 1957. It was soon recognised however that the Indian presence was substantial and the plan was abandoned.

It was the explosion of Black Power in 1970 and its emphasis on culture as the agent of change that gave the question of cultural policy new urgency. The Carnival Development Committee was transformed into the National Carnival Commission. Until 1972 there was a widespread perception that the resources of the state allocated to culture went largely to Carnival and its ancillary activities. It was the celebration of the anniversary of Independence in 1972 which for the first time witnessed a reasonable allocation to the National Council for Indian Culture, to mount its own celebrations. In keeping with the new mood Cabinet-appointed an Archaeological Committee in 1979 to advise the

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the question see Elton Richardson.

Minister of Education and Culture on all archaeological matters and 'to co-ordinate the preparation for the archaeological research project in Tobago.'

There was also a concerted attempt to make near compulsory the celebration of carnival in all state schools. There were however reports of resistance by Indians in some of these schools. By far the most integrated attempt at a cultural policy was represented by the Better Village Programme run from the Office of the Prime Minister. It was clearly derived from the Jamaican model and geared to community action; but transplanted into the Trinidadian social structure it soon became a source of political patronage and control. In this respect, it merely carried on the earlier traditions of the community centres.<sup>11</sup> It was not surprising then, that African culture received far more emphasis and support from the state than Indian culture did. Indian culture was viewed as the culture of the opposition. It was also regarded as outside the mainstream of the Afro-Caribbean culture.

The formation of the National Alliance for Reconstruction (NAR) in 1985 did promise a new conception of politics in Trinidad and Tobago. For the first time a conscious attempt was made to recognise the plural nature of Trinidadian society and to build on those premises. It was for its day the grandest experiment in Afro-Indian solidarity. Consistent with these perspectives the manifesto of the NAR promised to recognise the various cultural

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<sup>11</sup> For an evaluation of the Community Centres and their activities, see S. Craig, "Community Development in Trinidad and Tobago".

strains that made up Trinidadian society and committed itself to the establishment of a National Cultural Commission. It was in fulfillment of this promise that a steering committee was set up with the following terms of reference:

... to formulate a Brief regarding the National Cultural Policy with particular reference to the structure, organisation, functions scope, staffing and budget (overhead and operational costs involved in the establishment of the National Commission on Culture;

... to consult with as wide a cross-section of appropriate national interests as possible;

... to propose a time-table for the establishment of the National Commission on Culture;

... to propose a Draft Bill, in collaboration with the Ministry of Legal Affairs, for the establishment of the National Commission on Culture.<sup>12</sup>

The report recommended the provision of resources so that all citizens could realise their cultural and creative potential; the presentation, conservation and documentation of the cultures present in the society "the promotion and dissemination among the nation's peoples of knowledge of all the cultures present in the society; the enhancement of indigenous cultural phenomena and practices. It also proposed vesting responsibility in the Commission for advising the State on cultural relations with foreign governments and agencies. The Commission was to be organised on the following principles:

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<sup>12</sup> Only four (4) of the fourteen members of this Committee were Indian.

- (1) Status and membership of the Trinidad and Tobago Commission on Culture
- (2) Structure and operation
- (3) Scope and Cultural Action
- (4) Relationship with existing governmental agencies.

Significantly, the report also proposed a Cultural Commissioner for Tobago affairs. A *de facto* Ministry comprising five departments was also recommended. It was also recommended that the Commission should assume responsibility for all programmes and projects then carried out by existing governmental agencies responsible for culture. Under this arrangement, the National Carnival Commission would have been assigned to one of the five departments. It was proposed also to offer these proposals as a White Paper in Parliament.

As a proposal for a cultural policy applicable to the whole state of Trinidad and Tobago, it had a lot to recommend it, although the proposal to have a Cultural Commissioner for Tobago Affairs did suggest a concern with electoral base. There can be no doubt too, that the authors of the report were inspired by the noblest of philosophies. They recognised that culture was "the sum total of ways of life, thought and action, behaviour, beliefs, customs and the values underlying them. They also conceded that 'cultural action by the state capitalizes on this potential (our diverse cultural heritage) to strengthen the fabric of society, thereby facilitating of the people's creative energies and engendering a sense of well-being through satisfaction with one's

culture.

Invoking the constitution, the report claimed that its proposed policy "affirms the responsibility of the State to encourage the cultural expression of the Nation's peoples as part of the concept: 'Unity in Diversity'. Commissioners were to be appointed by the President in his discretion after consultation with the ministers of Education and Culture. As a document designed for a plural society such as Trinidad and Tobago, the report was indeed a progressive one. As it turned out however, the document never achieved the status of a White Paper and instead the NAR proceeded with the promulgation of a National Carnival Commission.

The report struck all the right chords in the formation of a national cultural policy. It clearly recognised that cultural policy was a problem in management; that it had to be aware of the technology and possibilities of mass communication, that it had to reach as wide a cross-section of the people and to evoke their loyalty and commitment. It also attempted to appeal to all segments so that there could be no fear that one culture would dominate the other. It finally attempted to lift cultural policy from the domain of politics by assigning the choice of Commissioners to the President in his discretion.

What, then, went wrong? Ironically it was the congruence of politics and culture in the Trinidadian situation which by their operation led to the collapse of the NAR as a party and thus to the attempt to formulate a truly multi-racial cultural policy. For the

NAR was truly a coalition party which had temporarily, at least, had successfully assembled a vehicle for the competing interests of African, Indian and Tobagonian block within the state of Trinidad and Tobago. But an imbalance developed almost simultaneously with their victory of 33-3. It meant that the Indian vote in Parliament was no longer as critical as it was expected to be. It was a situation that was made worse by the quarrels and recriminations that developed over the division of the spoils of office.<sup>13</sup>

It is in this context that the controversy over the Indian Cultural Centre must be viewed. The offer of a Centre had been made by Indira Gandhi in 1968 but had not been taken up by the PNM. It seems that while the NAR agreed to accept the offer, problems relating to protocol and diplomatic niceties arose. It was felt, however, that the delay in approving the arrangements was unduly long. Indians also pointed out that France and Venezuela did have centres in Trinidad and that they had voiced no objections to the building of a Pan Theatre or a Carnival Museum. Those who opposed the Indian Cultural Centre argued that Indians had no need to 'produce a civilisation' in the Caribbean since the contract of indentureship required them to return to India. Thus the burden of creation in the Caribbean fell on the African. Lovelace argued thus:

When we point to Steelband and Calypso, to the Spiritual Baptists and to Carnival, we are pointing not simply to artifacts that people of African race have created but things that

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<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of these difficulties of the NAR, see Ryan, The Politics of Succession.

also express the stubborn creative potential of the Caribbean people.<sup>14</sup>

What this illustrates is the confusion that exists between conceptions such as art and culture; for while the African was forced to be more creative there can be no doubt that Carnival, Calypso and Steelband were connected institutions deriving from French and African influences and largely associated with the African community in Trinidad and Tobago.<sup>15</sup> It should also be pointed out that despite their insistence on the guarantees of a return passage in the indentureship context, the vast majority of Indians ultimately chose to remain in Trinidad. Indeed, there was a process of creativity no less compelling than was the case with the African; for adaptation, creation and recreation began as soon as the recruiter took his prize to the depot and from there to the port of Calcutta. In the Depot and during the Middle Passage, the Indian was also forced to adapt to new castes, mores and standards and values. All cultures - including European, Indian and African - were forced to adapt and recreate in the Caribbean. Given the fact of European dominance in the political and economic sphere, it was not surprising that European norms, culture and values for substantial sections of the community, became the object of striving; but equally important is the fact that a great deal of what has been described as "African" or "Indian" culture involved

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<sup>14</sup> Ryan, op. cit., p.162.

<sup>15</sup> For a more finished analysis of this area, see G.Rohlehr, Calypso and Society.

a process of adaptation, recreation and syncretism.

Part of the problem too was that 'Indian' culture was a devalued culture, especially during the period of colonial rule. The colonial elite, African, Indian or European-descended, tended to evaluate cultural forms by reference to the dominant metropolitan standards. On these grounds African and Indian cultural expressions were devalued and as Rohlehr has pointed out, became the targets of prohibitive legislation. While there is no intention to judge the calypso either as art or "social commentary", there can be no doubt that they reflected deeply-held views of the African and Indian cultures in the society. While for instance, Black and Indian women were reviled, there was little comparable attack on White women; and while the shango, obeah, massala and dhal and maharajins became the objects of satire and mockery, there was no comparable attack on the whites or on Christianity and its sacred figures. Not only was the metropolitan world the centre of gravity, it became as well the standard by which other cultures were judged.

The policy of assimilation to which reference has been made was an attempt to transplant metropolitan values and culture in place of African and Indian cultures. The transfer of power and the acquisition of independence did not change these perspectives. As we noted earlier, it was not until 1983 that Emancipation Day was declared a national holiday. The consequence of this position was that cultural policy such as it was, were responses to political pressures of one kind or another. This is why as the two

major enquiries into cultural policy in Trinidad and Tobago discovered, there was so much overlap in the institutions involved. It was also found that there was a conspicuous lack of co-ordination among the units involved in cultural activity.<sup>16</sup> Thus, both governmental and non-governmental agencies were involved in cultural affairs but the relationship between them was never quite spelt out; nor too were the principles by which state funds were allocated to non-governmental organisations really worked out. The Division of Culture however does receive requests for financial assistance from groups, organisations and individuals but these must be approved by the Minister.

The accession to power of a new government in 1991 has once more restored the issue of a cultural policy to the agenda. The major event was the decision by the government of Trinidad and Tobago to recognise the steelpan as the national instrument. The arguments advanced by the supporters of the policy was that the steelpan was invented in Trinidad and was therefore the only institution that could be called indigenous. Critics of the move, mainly Indians, held that the issue was not whether the instrument was indigenous or otherwise, but rather that it was a decision to legitimate by State action, the institution of one group as against another. It was held that the steelpan, calypso and carnival were all institutions associated largely with the non-Indian community; to recognise the steelpan then was to commit the State to favour

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<sup>16</sup> See Claude Fabrizio, Towards a Cultural Development Policy, (UNESCO, 1979, and Sheila Graham, Organising the Cultural Complex of Trinidad and Tobago (Dept. of Cultural Affairs, OAS, 1987).

the related institutions of the steelpan in preference to the institutions of the Indian community.

For much the same reasons, the allocation of state lands for cultural purposes has now become a major political issue. For some time, the issue of land has been a major political question. It has been advanced that the cause of relative Indian success in the economy has been due to the fact that they were 'given' lands by the Colonial Government. For these reasons, successive governments were reluctant to lease lands to Indian farmers at Caroni Limited; and even more, central to the cultural question also explains why the organisers of the Divali Nagar are now finding it difficult to lease more land from the Government.

Some of the considerations we have been discussing have also exercised the attentions of the Commissioners of the recent West Indian Commission. Their report on the cultural dimension of the regional integration puts a great deal of emphasis on the Caribbean experience.<sup>17</sup>

It is important, however, to recognise that the agenda of the Commission entailed the integration of a very disparate region. It was imperative therefore for them to paint a broad canvas and to emphasise the common features of the Caribbean experience. For these reasons, more emphasis was placed on Carnival than on Phagwa and in drama, dance, sculpture, music and painting, the perspectives were undoubtedly Afro-Caribbean. It was therefore not

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<sup>17</sup> See Report of the West Indian Commission, "Time For Action," pp. 265-305.

surprising that they hoped for "the triumph of oneness over otherness,"<sup>18</sup> Among their many recommendations was the proposal that there should be a new look at Carifesta and that the policy-makers should "formulate a regional cultural policy matched by national cultural policies." But this is just the problem. Should the policy be first formulated at national level, simultaneously with a regional policy? It has also been asserted that Indian culture are no more than isolated pockets in the Caribbean. But a lot depends on whether the boundaries are the Commonwealth Caribbean or the larger Caribbean. The Indians may represent pockets of culture in the Anglo-Caribbean but it is important to remember that in Guyana, they are a decisive majority and in Trinidad, according to the latest census figures, the largest majority grouping in the society. In such a situation, it is neither useful nor appropriate to regard Indian culture as mere pockets, as the recent Carifesta conference demonstrated.

### Conclusion

It should be clear by now that nation-building, especially in plural societies, requires a carefully thought out and integrated cultural policy. The new states, as they went into independence, proclaimed their intentions to be rid of colonialism and its

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<sup>18</sup> The West Indian Commission, p.290.

cultural baggage. The Caribbean was no exception but as the events were to prove, the newly-independent states soon fell back on the time-honoured colonial policies of assimilation. In Trinidad, it essentially meant a concern with art rather than culture. Part of the problem was that given the nature of the social structure it was impossible to promulgate a policy in 'African' terms, whatever the actual 'African' content of that policy might be. Policy-makers accordingly settled for ad hoc responses to claims of groupings and organisations; and given the nature of the political parties and the fact that one party was in office for nearly thirty years, meant that there were substantial imbalances in the way that resources were allocated by the State to 'African' and 'Indian' organisations. It was in this context that feelings of alienation did develop. Yet, without a cultural policy that can appeal to a wide cross-section of the Trinidadian community, commitment to the State by all sections of the community would be fragile. The proposal for an independent National Cultural Commission with powers and responsibility for the formulation and implementation of a cultural policy for Trinidad and Tobago is now more imperative than ever.