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The Caribbean as a Melting Pot

The Caribbean region long been described as a melting pot based on the multiplicity of races and ethnic groups which have one way or another come to call it home. Each race or ethnic group brought with it its own culture, religion and belief system. With the advent of time and the subsequent increased level of interaction a certain level of assimilation and amalgamation took place between and among the different groups. This mixing or amalgamation occurred to different extents throughout the Caribbean and some groups were able to resist a high level of amalgamation more than others, thus retaining a high level of their original group identity. However, for the most part the majority of the groups have undergone some level of amalgamation which has transformed their original make-up creating new blends with clearly noticeable remnants of the old. Throughout the Caribbean it is these new blends that have led to the use of the melting pot analogy.

The Caribbean region was the original home of the Amerindians from the Carib and Arawak groups. These groups were decimated by a combination of overwork and disease brought and imposed by European colonizers. Being a region of colonies, which had as its main purpose and role, the creation of wealth for European mother countries, new populations were injected into it to sustain and make possible the goal of economic accumulation. These new populations consisted of Africans who were enslaved on plantations as well as Europeans who placed themselves at the helm of the management and development of the plantation system. Very early in this arrangement evidence of the melting pot nature of the Caribbean was to come to the fore with the creation, as opposed to introduction of a third group which was affectionately or dis-affectionately called

mullattoes or coloureds. This new group was not brought from another region of the earth but was created through the copulation of Europeans with Africans. This group was not only mixed racially but also, socially and culturally, with its members possessing two clearly contrasting heritages.

The Caribbean was inhabited by Europeans (including Scots, Irish, French, British, German, Portuguese etc.) , Indians , Chinese, Javanese, Caribs, Lebanese, Syrians and Africans. Undoubtedly, this wide array of groups each bringing with it its own endemic culture laid the basis for a complex yet interesting blend of cultures, people and races.

Interesting to note however when analyzing the Caribbean as a melting pot is the fact that the European and African retentions are the most dominant throughout the region. Of these two the European is more explicit and is found in modes of dress, speech, moral codes and laws, while the African is more implicit and found in certain religious beliefs, folklore, music and dance. This dilemma as it may be termed can largely be attributed to the fact that the socialization process propogated by the plantation system suppressed African retentions while idealizing European retentions. In essence, a concerted effort was made to strip the Africans of their heritage and culture as much as possible. Groups that came after the demise of slavery such as the Indians and the Chinese who came as indentured labourers largely escaped cultural suppression. As such these groups have been able to retain their cultural practices in relatively pure forms. With regards o their contribution to the melting pot, 5this can be seen in different ways from diet to religious practices.

The Caribbean as a region has numerous religions which can be directly attributed to its multiplicity of cultures. Some of these religions are Hinduism, Christianity, Revivalism, Rastafarianism, and various strains which have taken aspects of different foundational religions and brought them together.

Religious practices or beliefs such as the nine night practice in which a wake or a set up is kept for the deceased before burial, came from African religious beliefs, while practices such as baptism and remission of sins came from European Christianity. Islamic groups brought with them the belief in polygamy while the Rastafarian group advocates the supremacy of the African motherland, and in particular His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie who is seen as the Black Messiah or the African Jesus. The existence of such a wide array of cultures and belief systems has undoubtedly added to the complexity and intricacy of the Caribbean region. More interesting however is how these cultures and belief systems have borrowed aspects from each other and have in essence blended creating new and unique cultural, social, and religious practices.

There is no doubt that the Caribbean is one of the most unique regions of the world. Having undergone conquest, colonialism, slavery, and more recently imperialism the region has nonetheless grappled with maintaining its identity, an identity which in and of itself is not easily identified. The mere diversity of the region has endowed it with an identity that is ever changing and always in a state of continuous evolution and development. To understand the Caribbean in any meaningful way it is of the utmost importance that one explores its diverse make-up. This make-up needs to be analyzed from ethnic, racial, cultural, religious, and social perspectives. After this analysis a deeper analysis is needed to see how far and to what extent the different aspects have in

fact assimilated or become mixed. On the completion of this, a third yet deeper analysis needs to be made of the new blends that have been created in an effort to ascertain how unique they are and moreso what retentions have survived from what cultures, and what retentions have not.