REFLECTIONS ON THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF ST. KITTS AND NEVIS

by Larry Armony

What is 'Culture'?

We humans inhabit a world made up of oceans and seas, land, an atmosphere, plants, other animals, forests, mountains, deserts and other physical or natural components. Some of these have been and are being used and abused in the quest to provide the needs of survival: food, shelter, energy. We interact with each other through codes of conduct which we have formulated; and try to make sense of it all through rituals and belief systems we have constructed or which have been revealed to us.

These customs and beliefs, along with the physical objects we have built and the interventions made to the natural order such as cultivated fields and domesticated animals, constitute human culture, passed on from generation to generation. But like all things except perhaps nature itself, culture can become lost or destroyed. Certainly, it is not static, but changes over time, influenced by geophysical phenomena, human inventions and new ideas and the constructive and destructive actions of others.

However, members of a group of people who occupy a particular territorial area and share a common history and feel themselves to be different to others in their way of life or world view, may consider that they possess a distinctive culture. Thus we may speak of a 'Caribbean culture' within which there may be various sub-cultures including that of St. Kitts and Nevis. *The culture of a group is an important frame of reference for the individuals of that group: it defines their identity. When many elements of the culture of a group change or become lost during the same period within one or two generations, the group can also lose its sense of identity. It may become assimilated into another culture, or otherwise weakened and susceptible to control by others.*

Geology and Geography

St. Kitts and Nevis, two of the Eastern Caribbean arc of islands, arose from the volcanic eruptions and geological upheavals associated with the convergence of the Caribbean and Atlantic plates of the earth's moving crust. Volcanoes and earthquakes are therefore their legacy and their destiny. The islands also lie in the pathways of the seasonal hurricanes spawned off the coast of Africa on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. Towering mountains, thickly forested above 2,000 feet – three in St. Kitts, one in Nevis – dominate their landscapes. In St. Kitts the lower land is composed for the most part of easily worked sandy loams; while in Nevis, the soils are, for the most part, clayey and stony. St. Kitts, the larger of the two islands, enjoys a relatively ample supply of fresh water, easily accessed from mountain springs; while in Nevis water has to be won by the public drilling of wells and the private catchment of the rain. Interestingly, the deep subterranean lakes of water in Nevis appear to hold exploitable reserves of thermal energy which can potentially yield tremendous economic benefits.

At the low-lying and arid south eastern peninsula of St. Kitts, which reaches out as if to touch the sister island, shallow basins of water enclosed by sand cays have become salt ponds. Coral reefs surround the head of the peninsula and occur elsewhere off the coast of both islands. The material of the reefs combined with the material of the land, over time, form the greyish to golden brown sands of the south eastern beaches of St. Kitts and the west and north western beaches of Nevis. The black volcanic sand beaches found elsewhere are less inviting, even to many locals!

Geography, to a very large extent, is a determinant of history and therefore impacts upon culture. The fresh water, fertile soils, and the salt ponds of the land now named St. Kitts but known as Liamuiga ("Fertile Island") by the native Kalinago, seemed ideal to the first English and French settlers of the Caribbean. These 'conquistadors'-cum-planters cultivated everywhere except the steep mountains and ravines. In Nevis, known by the Kalinago as Oualie, "Land of Waters (lagoons)", the yields of the plantations fell away rapidly leaving a land poorer and therefore available to a formerly enslaved people to own and make a living from. The writers of the Country Environmental Profile, published in 1992, observe:

> *"St. Kitts and Nevis have together succeeded in fashioning for themselves a national identity and a public image of uniqueness derived in part from the country's distinctive, dramatic and spacious landscape profile ..... Perhaps this variable display of nature's vegetational splendour is why Kittitians and Nevisians take obvious pride in what their separate but almost linked pair of islands look like. They seem to have an innate sense of understanding that the assembled landscape features, both natural and man-made, really do constitute a remarkable resource, part of the national patrimony, and a thing of value that is priceless."*

Cultural Landscapes

The landscapes and townscapes of St. Kitts and Nevis are replete with colonial structures of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, in various stages of preservation and deterioration. These include churches, forts, plantation factories and residencies, cisterns, retaining walls, public buildings. There are also several 20th century sites and monuments of historical or cultural significance as well as pre-colonial archaeological sites. In an OAS study undertaken in 1997 on behalf of the St. Kitts-Nevis Ministry of Tourism, Environment and Culture by George F. Tyson and Maria Eugenia Bacci, 254 sites were listed for St. Kitts alone. Of these, 28 were given a number one ranking, indicating they were "of utmost national and hemispheric significance … national treasures deserving of the highest levels of recognition and protection". Another 84 with the number two ranking were "of great national importance". A less comprehensive survey of Nevis, undertaken in 1987 by Daphne Hobson on behalf of the Nevis Historical and Conservation Society, listed about 100 historical landmarks.

Among the archaeological sites are Amerindian settlements and African burials, mostly lying beneath abandoned canefields, public and private housing and land designated for tourism development. Neither of the two studies referred to above touched upon underwater marine sites, which would include scores of 17th to 19th century naval and merchant vessels sunk around and between both islands by hurricanes and military actions.

These structures, large and small, above and beneath the land and sea, all fashioned by the human hands of those who came – Amerindian, European, African – constitute our physical or built cultural heritage.

The UNESCO's World Heritage Convention defines 'cultural landscapes' as representing the "combined works of nature and man" and are "illustrative of the evolution of human society and settlement over time". Such a site may be put forward for nomination on the prestigious World Heritage List either individually or in conjunction with other such sites within a country or across national boundaries. But of course, such a site must first be legally protected, properly managed, and a case made for it. In St. Kitts and Nevis, except for the Brimstone Hill Fortress National Park (inscribed in 1999 as a World Heritage Site of universal cultural value) and Hamilton House, no nationally owned cultural site or monument is protected by legislation. Indeed, throughout the Caribbean – with a culture indelibly stamped by the plantation and the legacy of slavery, superimposed upon a landscape first inhabited by native people all but destroyed – there appears to be little initiative to honour the vanquished Amerindian and the formerly enslaved African – to *reconnect to the hidden and endangered elements of our heritage* – by protecting the cultural landscapes they inhabited, performed their ceremonies, where they perished or were buried.

The various Church denominations however, do maintain and manage their properties well. Some public buildings and monuments as well as stone cisterns and a few elements of the 20th century sugar industrial plant continue to be looked after. Furthermore, a few private owners of heritage properties maintain their structures and some have adapted and developed them as commercial ventures for trade and tourism. These latter initiatives, often with little or no governmental support, have helped to define a distinctive characteristic of the tourism product of the two islands: the Plantation Inns of St. Kitts and Nevis and the colonial townscapes of Charlestown and (rapidly disappearing!) Basseterre.

Intangible Culture

Within the first decade of European settlement of St. Kitts and Nevis in the 1620s, Africans had been imported as slave labourers; and by 1700 they were the majority by far. They were kept in subjection by an oppressive system based upon the military and technological advantage of the colonizers, abetted by *the erosion of the cultural integrity of West African society* which had become engulfed in an escalating chain reaction of war, capture and the sale of people by African traders, mercenaries and chieftans to feed the insatiable demand of European merchants and governments. The control of the many by the few, despite intermittent insurrections and a more pervasive and subtle resistance, was possible for over two hundred years, because *the Africans had been ripped from their cultural bases* and thrown together into a heterogeneous tribal, ethnic and cultural mix across the plantations and territories of the Caribbean. All expressions of African cultural practice, where they were discovered, were vigorously suppressed.

In the rigidly stratified structure of the plantation, which typified Caribbean society, upward mobility was mainly through lighter skin pigmentation – the offspring of white European

and black African – but was also attained by those few who were able to assimilate European modes at the expense of the African, as well as by enterprise and luck. For the vast majority, however, particularly among the larger populations of the bigger territories, African customs, rituals, beliefs and practices did survive, albeit in altered forms, so that there evolved a peculiarly Caribbean culture which included syncretic forms combining European, African and even Amerindian elements (as well as Indian and other mixes in those populations into which were imported indentured workers from Asia).

This Caribbean 'intangible' culture (as distinct from the 'built' culture) is manifest in language and speech, religious beliefs and practices, cuisine, festivals and numerous customs and practices, often existing alongside and interchangeable with those forms imposed by Europe.

Christmas Sports

In his 'Reflections on Culturama' published in 1989, the late Calvin A. Howell described the objective of this annual Nevis festival, first held in 1974, as "to stimulate interest in the wealth of our indigenous folk culture, particularly among the youth and to create a climate in which the best of our traditions could re-assert themselves and flourish."

The most popular expression of this "indigenous folk culture" had emerged on the sugar estates of St. Kitts and Nevis among an enslaved people who were allowed a modicum of relief from oppressive toil during the Christmas holidays celebrated by the ruling caste. This annual explosion of creative festivity embodying half-remembered African traditions in music and dance wedded to European forms and incorporating Native Amerindian elements, evolved by the early 20th century into the 'Christmas Sports'.

The Christmas Sports comprised a diverse assortment of acts involving mime, dance, drama, pageantry and music performed in the plantation yards and on the streets and alleys of the villages and towns of both islands during the week from Boxing Day to New Year's Day. Most troupes were accompanied by the 'Big Drum', an ingenious adaptation of the European military band of bass drum, kettle drum and fife – a response to the banning of the traditional African drums. Some acts, more particularly the 'Masquerades' or 'Wild Indians', were taken to Bermuda and the Dominican Republic by migrating workers in the early 1990s (and are regarded in both places as *their* cultural heritage). From the Dominican Republic and US visiting circuses, other elements were imported, notably, the String Band and Sagwa respectively, followed after the War years (1939-45) by 'Cowboys and Indians' and dancing 'Japanese Girls', influenced by US cinema. While there were similarities with other 'masquerade traditions' of the other Caribbean territories, the Christmas Sports of St. Kitts and Nevis were distinctive and comparatively vibrant. This vitality may have to do with the fact that *it was infused with other, imported, influences yet was itself sufficiently strong so as to retain its essential character.*

In the late 1940s, the leadership of the nascent movement agitating for improved social and economic conditions and political representation of the working-class people; seemingly dismayed by the tradition of performance by the Christmas Sports troupes for the entertainment of the white and 'coloured' ruling clique of plantation owners/managers, colonial civil administrators, merchants, and their families; admonished the performers, their constituents,

against further involvement. Large-scale emigration to the UK during the late 1950s to mid-1960s deprived the Christmas Sports of many of its key practitioners and further weakened this cultural tradition. Additionally, as Washington Archibald argues persuasively in his, 'A View From Baby's Traffic' (published 2008), there were other factors which contributed to the demise of the Christmas Sports. These were: innovations and improvements in the Elementary School system of the Presidency of St. Kitts, Nevis and Anguilla in the late 1940s which motivated young people to aspire to middle-class jobs rather than work as labourers in the cane fields – the major source of the various Sports troupes; the introduction of Steelbands in the early 1950s; and the importation of Carnival as a Christmastime festival, in the late 1950s.

Steelband and Carnival

The Steelband phenomenon erupted on the streets of Port-of-Spain, capital of Trinidad and Tobago in 1945 during their first pre-Lenten Carnival following the dry spell of the World War years (1939-45). It evolved from the bamboo, scrap metal, garbage pan cover and biscuit tin bands which the urban "under class" created in response to the banning of the traditional African skin-headed drum. The percussive yet musical steel pan was introduced to St. Kitts in 1949, and by 1953 some seventeen steel bands had been registered: virtually every village had its own. It was the musical ensemble of choice for public dances and private parties, concerts and street jamming, displacing the pre-eminence of the horn-based orchestra which had appeared earlier, the String Band which had always been few in numbers, and the Big Drum. The assemblage of cut steel drums of various depths and tones, was adapted by its talented and skilful exponents to play all kinds of music from the latest imported crazes to European classical, Latin American, and of course, calypso; and it achieved a large measure of "respectability" to the extent of even being welcomed into the more established churches. Many of its practitioners discovered a good measure of fame and decent livelihoods playing and living abroad.

When Carnival was introduced to St. Kitts at around the same time, the street crowds gravitated to the steelbands, leaving sparse audiences for the traditional Christmas Sports, although some accommodation was arrived at when the steelbands waited until the late afternoons to come on the road. However, the traditional folk performing troupes, already in retreat, were further undermined by the larger, more structured, noisy and spectacular street parades which dominated the theatre which downtown Basseterre became on Boxing Day and New Year's.

There was the view, still held by many, that the Trinidad-style Carnival, celebrated in countries with predominantly Catholic populations in the days leading to the Lenten observation around February-March, should continue, but at a different time of year; that it also impacts negatively on the spiritual/religious/family-affirming purpose of the Christian Christmas feast. It has also been suggested that the spending for home repairs and refurbishment, food, gifts, overseas family and friends returning for the season, tickets for the various shows, and the energy expended in all the foregoing by citizens, leaves little money and time to become involved (except as spectators) in the street pageantry, which is the hallmark of Carnival. The Queen Shows and Calypso Finals have however proven to be enduringly popular; and there is no question that the latter has promoted creativity among large numbers of the "grass roots" and

provided a valuable platform for social and political commentary. The calypsonians are the voices of the people who otherwise are not heard widely or listened to.

In reaction to the restrictions particularly affecting Nevis of the nationalization of Carnival following the debacle of two rival simultaneous and politically charged carnival celebrations in St. Kitts during the mid 1960s; and in recognizing the decline of traditional folk culture, the Nevis Dramatic and Cultural Society inaugurated the Culturama festival, held every year around the August Monday (now Emancipation Day) public holiday. That festival has come to include Calypso and Queen contests as well, but gave prominence, at least in the early years, to the Christmas Sports tradition. It is however true to say that Culturama has become another carnival with its emphasis on street parades of revelers in organised costumed bands; while the Christmas Sports hardly perform any more on the streets of Charlestown at Christmas time.

<u>The 1970s and 1980s: Cultural Renaissance?</u>

The forces which contributed to the creation of Culturama can be viewed as a movement, Caribbean in scope, which found expression elsewhere in the country, as a new "consciousness", particularly among young university undergraduates and graduates, teachers, urban workers and secondary school students. It was influenced by the Civil Rights struggles in the USA, the increased awareness of the oppression of African people by racist colonial powers and the concomitant identification with aspects of African culture. Furthermore, as some Caribbean states became Independent and others were moving towards that status, there was a thrust among the Region's intellectuals towards identifying and affirming the cultural elements which underpinned national identity. There was also a growing recognition of the commonalities of Caribbean culture among the "Continent of Islands" and among the "Caribbean Diaspora" in Europe and North America. Sports, music and scholarship helped forge closer bonds; and the Caribbean Festival of Arts (Carifesta), first held in Guyana in 1972 brought the Region's painters, writers, sculptors, actors, dancers, musicians and other cultural activists together. Rastafarianism, an inchoate blend of religion, philosophy, iconoclastic practices such as the growing of locks and the smoking of cannabis and its affirmation of the strength of African people and the richness of African culture, moved throughout the Caribbean and resonated among many urban youth.

This "consciousness movement" was not a mass movement. It was indeed distrusted (and even demonized in some quarters) by the political establishment and by much of the middle and upper sectors of civil society. But it was influential. Cultural and community clubs and associations were established for the promotion of Afro-Caribbean culture in St. Kitts as in Nevis: drumming and dance groups, drama societies. Plays were produced, free concerts presented. Traditional folk culture was researched and documented and presented on stage and in the hotels as theatrical productions. Gradually but decisively, this new wave, based upon traditional forms, pervaded and became integral to the Carnival Queen contests and other productions. Community festivals arose throughout the islands and many are now firmly fixed on the calendar.

At the same time, there developed a growing awareness of the value and importance of the natural environment and of the built cultural heritage. Interestingly, this movement was

articulated principally by relatively few among the so-called middle classes, supported earnestly by a small volunteer "expatriate" community, and funded by external agencies! There was great mistrust of this development among all sectors of society, for many people had come to take the natural endowments of the country for granted, valuable only if exploited. Also, as expressed by some, the colonial public buildings, monuments, fortifications and plantation sites were, after all, relics of an oppressive era of slavery which had long passed and not to be revisited – should indeed be dismantled or destroyed, for they were symbols of another culture.

But, perhaps inevitably, a deeper exploration of the intangible culture led to a greater understanding of the integral relationship between it, the built heritage and the surrounding environment; that knowledge of the ecological balances between the mountains, forests, coral reefs, was fundamental to the sustainable use of the land and sea and the livelihoods of the people; that an investigation of the estate boiling house and chimney could bring to life the experiences of our forbears and instill pride for the way they mastered the skills to build them and the techniques to operate them.

This building of awareness and understanding was advanced by Government – Federal and Local – through education, the professionalization of Archives management in St. Kitts and in Nevis (thereby protecting and making more accessible to research, a fundamentally important repository of the country's history and heritage), and by the adoption of recommendations of regional and extra-regional agencies such as the Caribbean Conservation Association, Island Resources Foundation, the Organisation of American States and various United Nations Organisations; through the public awareness efforts of the Nevis Historical and Conservation Society, the St. Christopher Heritage Society, the Brimstone Hill Fortress National Park Society, Public Libraries, other Non-Governmental Organizations such as the Basseterre Beautiful Committee of the Chamber of Industry and Commerce; through the broadening perspectives of citizens by way of overseas travel, television and the internet; and through the eyes and words of appreciation of foreign guests.

During this period, numerous expert studies on the environment and culture of St. Kitts and Nevis were undertaken and many documents produced. The period saw the passage of the landmark National Conservation and Environment Protection Act, a pioneering work of legislation and model for the Caribbean which spoke to the protection of the diverse natural and cultural heritage of St. Kitts and Nevis. Furthermore, the sugar lands of St. Kitts – containing much of the built heritage and most of the cultural landscapes of the island; the crucible of folk traditions, adaptation, resistance and triumph of an oppressed people; lands exploited for three centuries for its riches by a micro-oligarchy of mostly absentee owners – these lands were acquired by the State in the name of the people, during this period.

Are we losing it?

Carifesta came to St. Kitts and Nevis in 2000 with the promise of a flowering of the creative artistic potential of its citizens through the establishment of cultural centres, theatres for the performing arts, dance studios and galleries. Nevis has gone ahead with the establishment of its Cultural Foundation and the opening of a Cultural Centre. In St. Kitts there are instead vacant community centres in nearly every village, established without the involvement of its inhabitants.

The National Conservation and Environment Protection Act, without the enabling legislation to give it teeth and a Commision (yet to be reappointed after ten years) to give it purpose, languishes even as the mountain trails are eroded by unregulated tour guides, "developers" remove the protective vegetation from the beaches and build concrete structures at the waters edge, artefacts are removed from beneath our noses (one hesitates to use the word 'stolen' since we don't seem to want them) and historic structures are demolished overnight (most of us don't seem to care), among other flagrant violations. The townscape of Basseterre is rapidly changing as agencies of the State and private commercial operators destroy rather than conserve its character, building tall structures and contributing to the congestion of the capital town. Sensitive development in Charlestown, on the other hand, maintains its character and demonstrates what is possible. In St. Kitts and in Nevis, large tracts of land are passing into foreign ownership in a rush for even more "development" with the grave risk of destruction to biodiversity, unique ecological features, uninvestigated Amerindian and African archaeological sites, and man-built historical structures.

Meanwhile, a generation of young people and another following close behind, barely rooted to the local culture, are becoming increasingly exposed to multifarious influences via cable television, radio, the internet and music festival. The world, of which we are a part, is moving at a fast pace and the landscape around us is changing rapidly. The question is: Can we yet hold on to more of what we still have of our cultural and natural legacies, so as to enable us to retain a firm footing, even as we borrow and take what the world has to offer? Are we sufficiently aware and appreciative of our cultural heritage and natural patrimony so as to be secure in our identity as a people and in our ownership of this small but still wonderfully rich country?

Selected references

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