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Thematic Debate: « **Mobilizing the Power of Culture** »

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Summary

The 1990s have been marked by very considerable and rapid change as national cultures have been drawn into new global inter-connections. There are new challenges, new risks, new uncertainties and new struggles. The issue though is not just one of adopting new policies, but one of re-conceiving policies so that they are effective in an environment of inter-dependence and are effective at a time in which the imperatives of promoting better mutual appreciation between cultures, of eliminating stereotypes and of forging peace between people is of supreme importance.

In this scenario, universities too, need to play a different role, because young people must be able to build meaningful connections with their inherited cultures as they increasingly find it hard to adapt to the values which drove the cultures of yesterday. So it is time to re-examine our educational systems and formulate new ways of addressing the needs and aspirations of young people in a rapidly changing world. Our paper examines how universities can fulfil this role. Their curricula and methodology are key tools by which they can achieve their objectives. Their role should be to articulate cultural policies in a world where cultural diversity has emerged as a crucial social factor and they should be capable of developing co-operative strategies which involve higher education and ensure that cultural heritage and values are preserved. They must be able to broaden the context in which education is imparted, without focusing primarily on technique. Universities must revamp their educational agendas so as to be able to inform young people about "other cultures" - those of the past as well as those different from our own.

Universities: Mobilising the Power of Culture A View from the Caribbean

by Professor Rex Nettleford

For two-thirds of the world a university exists strategically as a development resource for the peoples and countries of that world and serves its clientele through education and training in disciplines critical to tenancy of a diverse, competitive world in which science and technology (including communications technology), culture and society and the demand for life-long learning are inescapable variables in the equation of survival and beyond.

Such a remit in places like the Caribbean is informed by the cultural diversity engendered by accidents of history and today, by the power of galactic transmission via satellite. This now dictates acts of discovery, through the exploration of lived reality, of new and appropriate ontologies, new and appropriate cosmologies and, by extension, new and appropriate epistemologies. The globalized world which is Planet Earth places humankind in a "cross-roads civilisation" akin to that of the ancient Mediterranean where Greece, Rome, Egypt and the Orient met and later the Iberian Peninsula when Arabs, Jews and Iberians Europeans mingled to great creative effect. Such a "civilisation" offers directions for research, analysis and explication forged in the crucible of such cross-fertilisation.

The wider world like the two-thirds developing part of it is too textured and contradictory a civilisation to entrap itself into a mono-dimensional definitional framework. The university as an agency of higher learning and of creative discovery has a real responsibility to prevent the latter and to sustain the former while pointing directions to continuing development without fear of social disintegration.

It is against such a background that a university like the University of the West Indies serving the Commonwealth Caribbean region has embarked on what is called the Cultural Studies Initiative, the aims and objects of which speak to the growing awareness of arts and culture being a point of power in the shaping and sustenance of society. A University must of course first understand that it benefits most when the feeder sources for its undergraduate population are themselves enriched by traditions of exercise of the creative imagination.

A child learns the meaning of process and is better able to relate outcome to effort, if he/she is encouraged to create a poem or a song, act in a play, make up a dance, sing in a choir or play an instrument in an orchestra, as a normal part of his/her education. The discipline that underpins the mastery of the craft, the demands made on continuous re-creation of effort and application, the challenges encountered on the journey to excellence, the habits of realistic self-evaluation, the capacity for dealing with diversity and the dilemma of difference whether in the performing arts or in key branches of sports (themselves belonging to the family of performing arts) constitute excellent preparation for **learning to be** (the stuff of ontology), **learning to know** (the substance of epistemology), and **learning to live together** (the essence of the creative diversity which characterises Caribbean existence and is about to overtake the entire world) - all of which must serve the individual throughout his or her life.

It is the opportunity to exercise the creative imagination from an early age that is likely to ensure safe passage throughout that life. And the educational process in all its modes - formal and informal, curricular and co-curricular - provides an excellent channel through which all this can flow. Adaptability, flexibility, ready code-switching, innovativeness, and a capacity to deal with the complexity of complexity are all attributes of the creative imagination which provide yet another route to cognition other than the Cartesian rationalism we have inherited. For if we **are** because we **think**, we also **exist** because we **feel**.

The separation of these two states of experience into irreconcilable wholes is part of the binary syndrome of a tradition of intellectual discourse and epistemological reductionism which constitute an expensive luxury for any people who have survived these past five hundred years on the basis of their creative diversity and a multisourced reality in everyday living.

The world's universities need to take a look at the long haul of human history and locate their different societies where they appropriately belong – that is on the trajectory of human “**becoming**” via that process of cross-fertilisation which enriched ancient Egypt, ancient Greece, renaissance Europe, Iberian Spain during the times leading up to 1492, the Americas of modern times as well as Europe of the immediate future which promises that promontory of Asia a challenging dose of multiracial multiculturalism. Part and parcel of this is the phenomenon of unity in diversity.

One here speaks culturally to a totality of human experience and not simply a little parcel of dance, of music, of drama, of verse-speaking or of literature. One speaks, as well, to a totality of meaningful articulations of environmental integrity, the cause, occasion and result of one's culture (the teaching of science would do well to start with this rather than with the computer). It is the bifurcation of knowledge into science and “**the rest**” that has served to misguide many among the educated in the two-thirds world and irresistible for a more textured millennium already upon us.

It is now conceded in large measure that both capitalism and apocalyptic socialism, in their would-be purest of forms, have been basically **a-cultural** in their approach to development. Neither has had a place for the specificities of experience culturally determined over time and among particular sets of people. Development, it was felt, had to be scientifically determined and pursued universally according to immutable laws, whether of the market or on the basis of unrelieved class conflict. Any invocation of cultural particularities and differences has been considered reactionary or revisionist. And although popular cultural expressions have been tolerated, they have been obliged to appear, in both dispensations, as an ornamental folkloric element only.

Many who have abandoned this position have drifted indiscriminately towards another panacea - the culture of technology. But the task of education has to be to ensure that the source of technology - science- finds a central place in the process without prejudice to the Humanities. An editorial of 1995 from a reputable First World newspaper put it better than I ever could. And I share it by way of warning to all who are willing to immolate themselves on the altar of the new panacea:

“The technology card has often been a useful one to play. Yet it is no basis for a social vision. What matters is not that all pupils have access to a laptop, but how they use them. Fibre optic technology does not teach children how to spell or add up. Nor does it necessarily teach adults how to be better citizens... In the midst of this new political vogue, it is worth remembering that technology is not an end in itself but one means among many. The celebration of technology does not excuse politicians [and I may add teachers] from the duty to spell out their plans and principles. The hardware is important; but it is the software that counts.” [**The Times**, London, October 6, 1995].

Perhaps it is culture that really counts at this time in the important pursuit of all levels of education defined on traditional lines but adaptable to the changed and changing circumstances of the contemporary world. I see teachers and the institutions of learning in whose name they labour as major contributors to, and principal facilitators of, the cultivation of the kingdom of the mind with rank shoots of creativity sprouting from the exercise of both intellect and imagination, and these in turn working in tandem to produce a self-reliant, self-respecting, tolerant, enterprising and productive community of souls.

Such is the motive force behind the Cultural Studies Initiative in place in a Caribbean (developing region) university. As the university with a major responsibility for the honing of human resources of the region, it was set up to serve, the University of the West Indies recognises that it must take the lead in developing a cadre of persons, grounded in a sensitive understanding of their own history and cultural heritage, who can articulate and infuse this understanding into the society at every level. Their research will form the basis of a new approach to education, with changes in the curriculum which can create the building blocks for a just and more humane Caribbean society.

Some of the fields being researched under the Cultural Studies Initiative are: Ethics, Governance for the 21st Century, Creativity and Empowerment, the Media and Cultural Expressions, Heritage Tourism, Culture and Health, Cultural and Social Capital and Caribbean attitudes to authority, justice, citizenship, work, etc. Hopefully, the findings will be able to provide the governments of the region with research data which can inform decisions being made on matters of economic development, and to ensure that the policy makers of the region are aware of the interlocking which exists between an understanding of one's culture and the possibilities for economic growth.

The findings will also lay the foundation in the University of the West Indies for an ongoing programme of Cultural Studies which will underscore, through strategies to be developed in all the Faculties, and through a study of the curricula, the fundamental importance of a sensitive understanding of one's culture to the enhancement of the quality of life and dignity of the human being. The ultimate goal is to empower every child, and to ensure a clearer understanding of the real purpose of a university which is to empower, enliven, enrich, and generally make the community in which it exists a better place, allowing the society to which it relates to see with new eyes and new minds.

The threatened destruction of the fabric of Caribbean society (still in formation) presents a major challenge to the University. Development in all its forms is the goal of all Caribbean leaders, but this can only be accomplished in an atmosphere of safety, and with a population grounded in respect for itself and for humankind. It is becoming more and more evident that no lasting development can be guaranteed in a society where a large percentage of the population feels undervalued and with little sense of self-worth.

The Cultural Studies Initiative is intended to address the underlying problem through a diagnosis of the root causes, an analysis of these causes, and recommendations for a new dimension to the education process, both in the schools and through public education for the wider society, so that every member of the society can feel valued and capable of making a contribution. This will relate to current urgent social problems of drug-trafficking, violence and urban criminality as well as the chronic/endemic ones of under-productivity, unemployment and the lack of will for self-reliance.

The two areas that suggest themselves in implementing any such initiative are Research and a Programme for Artists in Residence. The combination of research findings and one-on-one contact

with creative minds that have established themselves over time through the integrity of their own unique efforts could bring a new dimension to the academic life of the university – a dimension that will contribute to the concept of education in its very best sense, as against certification which too often characterises institutions of higher learning transformed into degree factories.

The University of the West Indies has a unique role in the Caribbean with a clearly defined mandate to act as a catalyst for regional development. The region comprises some 13 territories served by the UWI with close association with such neighbours as Suriname, Cuba, Santo Domingo, Haiti, Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico and Central America and the French and Dutch Antilles as well as Puerto Rico, the American Virgin Islands and the British dependencies of Cayman Islands and Turks and Caicos Islands. The 1996 Conference on Caribbean Culture hosted by the University and attended by some 500 registrants, highlighted the great need for an understanding of Caribbean heritage as the basis for any hope for economic growth and social development. Here was an example of a university mobilising the power of culture.

Since then a Research Fellowship Programme has been established at the University of the West Indies. The objective is to develop a cadre of persons, grounded in a sensitive understanding of their own histories and cultural heritages, and who can articulate and infuse those understandings and research findings into social and economic policy-making at every level as well as into designs for social living.

Specific areas being considered are:

- * Information in the way in which people connect economic activity to other aspects of their life and culture, their normative, ethical and spiritual beliefs and their aspirations for themselves and their fellow citizens.
- * Studies in the role of Gender relations in Caribbean social transformation.
- * Studies of local and regional networks for the purpose of developing mechanisms for regional and local decision-making in the development of cultural industries and other productive sectors, e.g., the economic scope and potential of popular music, cultural tourism in the African Diaspora, dance, literature, carnival; analysis of the economics of the international entertainment industry and the scope for increasing Caribbean participation in the value chain.
- * Culture and entrepreneurship: attitudes and behaviours of different sections of the population to: business as an occupation, savings and investment vs. consumption, long vs. short-term investment, capital accumulation, risk taking, innovation, science and technology and different kinds of economic activities.
- * Strategies and mechanisms for designing more efficacious systems of economic and social management, especially at local and regional levels as well as economic potential of the Diaspora as a source of capital, entrepreneurship and technology.
- * The encouragement of the creativity of ordinary people and the specification of methods of realising this creativity for social/cultural/economic development.

- * Culture and work: attitudes and behaviours related to work, employment, self-employment, work-related discipline, types of work (e.g., manual, clerical, intellectual), labour relations, co-operation, teamwork, flexible production, employer attitudes and values towards training and skill upgrading.
- * The development of planning methods which return human-kind to the centre of all planning activity.
- * Everyday understanding of economic concepts such as savings, investment, unemployment, wages and salaries, prices, economic development, inflation, the market and how it functions, devaluation and their relation to cultural phenomena.

This is a mere beginning but one that hopefully will help bring into the mainstream of research in the academy, a greater appreciation of the centrality of cultural variables in the development equation and the paramount importance of the human being to the development process everywhere. Universities that ignore this imperative in their remit are not likely to enjoy safe conduct into the third millennium.

Strategies for Future Action

Culture and Knowledge:

According culture a central role in intellectual life and not a peripheral one. This implies encouraging universities to acknowledge and actively incorporate the culturally situated nature of the entire teaching, learning, research and service functions of the university.

Inculcating Respect for People and their Heritage:

The curricula of universities should instil in their students a respect for other communities, the heritage and the environment as a precondition for building a harmonious society. The subjects covered in the curricula could include culture and identity, culture and human rights, culture and the environment, cultural heritage and the role of the artist.

Community Cultural Service:

Provide opportunities for voluntary or community work with a strong cultural component. This could be a part of the compulsory university curricula by substituting for credits or internships. This approach would help to build inter-generational solidarity and also serve as a source of self-expression and creative production.

Universities as Brokers:

The international dimension of universities and their role as 'brokers' of intellectual communication and exchange needs to be encouraged.

Universities and Cultural Industries:

Studies of local and regional networks for the purpose of developing mechanisms for regional and local decision-making in the development of cultural industries and other productive sectors, e.g., the economic scope and potential of popular music, cultural tourism, dance, literature, etc., need to be encouraged.

Economics and Culture:

Universities should be capable of providing information of the way in which people connect economic activity to other aspects of their life and culture, their normative, ethical and spiritual beliefs and their aspirations for themselves and their fellow citizens.

Creation of a Network Between Universities, Museums and Archives:

To start a process of establishing a network between universities of a region in order to promote understanding of the history, culture and science of the region. A further possibility would be to introduce the museums and archives of the region into this network. If universities were linked together in such a system and backed by government support, much of human knowledge would be readily available to all, not just university students.

A Cultural Mandate:

A university education should be, as part of its mandate, a culturally informed education giving students a knowledge of the 'other' which in turn makes possible a fuller understanding of the 'self'.

Research Issues:

Issues of research and pedagogy related to culture and society and to the broad cultural responsibility of universities needs to be encouraged.