

## ***CONVERGING CULTURES:HERITAGE, ART & IDENTITY IN THE CAYMAN ISLANDS***

An exclusive to Cayman Net News

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### **BACKGROUND:**

Over the past few years, there have been a number of policy initiatives which have brought the issue to cultural identity and balance to the forefront. Among these are the following: the need to balance economic and financial growth with social, cultural, and intellectual prosperity; the debate and controversy relating to the proposals arising from the “white paper” published by the Foreign & Commonwealth Office of the U.K. Government; the liberal European Union (EU) policies on the institution of marriage and the family; the various reports and initiatives on Immigration (including the “status fiasco” of 2003, and the new Immigration Law of 2003); and the impacts of the mass media (particularly the Internet, as well as local radio stations’ programming, and TV programming such as BET and others). Considering these factors, especially when analyzed together with the overall need for sustainable development, provides an interesting foundation for thesis of sorts.

In this presentation I will try to reflect on the issue of Caymanian culture and arts from the perspective of a visitor and a foreign worker, and attempt to provide some clear strategies for building a lasting legacy for Caymanian culture and arts, even within a world that is rapidly embracing globalization and our own community which itself is rich with diverse cultures.

### **INTRODUCTION:**

My family repatriated from the Isle of Pines, Cuba, in 1968. While I do not recall a great deal about our arrival on the Island on that bright sunny October day, I recall vividly our drive from the airport through George Town towards a temporary new home with our family members in Boatswain Bay. One of the things, that I recall which impressed me,

even at a young age of 5 in 1968, was the cleanliness of the Island, the friendly and inviting attitude of the people, and the safe and orderly atmosphere, which prevailed.

I cannot say that in my early days of growing up in West Bay, and indeed even as a teenager, that I was exposed to or even made intimately aware of a great deal of Caymanian culture and arts, except what evolved within our neighbourhoods and amongst my peers. As children we did many different activities than children do today; TVs, computers, computer games, and after-school activities were scarce. Instead we: went to the beach after school and on weekends and played on the “slippery ledges”; we went fishing at the baccadere in Morgan’s Harbour or on the iron-shore; we made our kites and flew them – and if the line broke or they got tangled we would retrieve, repair and re-commission them. We also raised chickens and pigeons as a sport (and sometimes as a business), we played a lot of “hide and seek”, in our yards and even in larger sections of our neighbourhoods. During the summer holidays we made tents and grass huts in the fields or “grass pieces”; we also had summer football leagues in our makeshift football fields in these “grass pieces”. Summer jobs were not plentiful, and those which were available were quite humble – such as yard/gardener jobs. I remember competing very hard to secure these yard jobs for the summer. One summer at the age of 13, I landed a big yard job and this caused me to hire two others to help me! At the end of the summer I had made enough money to buy my first new 10-speed red bicycle, and a few other things. In those days, most children had to work to get luxuries – as opposed to today.

Even growing up and attending Primary School in West Bay, I cannot recall any lasting impressions of particular cultural or art emphasis in the school. We did have classes and projects in art, generally, we had a few agricultural projects (some are still offered today), and also there was an annual Art & Craft competition and awards put on by Mr. Ed Oliver, (I was a finalist in 1975). Until recently Mr. Ed was still active in the development of the arts in Cayman. There was the occasional drama presentation (I for example played the Prince in Cinderella in Grade 6 at John Cumber) – the teaching or reinforcement of Caymanian music, songs, and dance in the drama presentations were however scarce. Even after moving on to High School, I do not recall the expression or promotion of

Caymanian culture, arts, and crafts to be particularly robust. I cannot empirically take a position on whether this may be due to the fact that there is such a high percentage of non-Caymanian teachers or whether it was simply a symptom of the embryonic state of our cultural expression.

Is it any wonder then that we complain that the Caymanian culture is very subtle and almost non-existent? Should we then be surprised when people from other cultures come to live amongst us, and we see the introduction of other sub-cultures because the Caymanian culture is so subtle and diluted?

### **THE CULTURAL DILEMMA**

In an interview in a year 2000 Issue of the Britannia Magazine, Dr. Philip Pedley (then the Director of the National Archive) said, “there seemed to be a general feeling in the 1970’s, as development began to pick up, that in order to move forward, you had to forget the past – the past could be a kind of a hindrance. In the 1980’s, however, there was a feeling that things had been moving too fast and that there was a need to stand back and to take stock”

It is very interesting, and instructive, that in the year 2006 we are still trying to come to grips, in Vision 2008 Strategic Plan and otherwise, on how to enhance the cultural identity of these Islands. Intentions are all fine and good, but it is the translation of those intentions into concrete items – that can make the difference between becoming a vibrant and sustaining culture, or falling behind in an ever-changing world and ceasing to be a player at all.

How then can we build a lasting culture and promote the identity of the Caymanian heritage and arts in a sustainable and effective fashion? How can we voluntarily attract tourists and non-Caymanian residents to authentically embrace the Caymanian culture and artistic offerings and not try to dilute it, or dismiss it instead for their own “comfort zones”.

I will be the first to admit that not in all cases do non-Caymanian residents (expatriates) and/or tourists shy away from becoming engaged in Cayman's culture and arts simply because it is in an embryonic state. In fact, it is encouraging that more and more expatriate residents are embracing our cultural and artistic offerings, especially in the Theatre; this may be in part due to the good job which has been done by the CNCF and its friends to make the Caymanian cultural and artistic expression more visible, and more importantly to practice the Caymanian culture of inclusion rather than exclusion.

There are however some expatriate workers who certainly make no effort at all to learn about or appreciate the culture and heritage of their host country. It seems as if a number of very definite sub-cultures are emerging. Often when a Caymanian visits a nightclub, or sports bar / lounge in the metropolitan area, he must feel that he is in a different country – maybe somewhere in North America or Europe. There appears to be no attempt to interact with the locals in these instances, and there appears to be total insensitivity to any form of cultural diversity. Additionally, from the perspective of the tourist, they may also experience cultural deprivation because everywhere they turn, in the shops, bars, restaurants, hotels, they are bound to see very few Caymanians. There are certainly good reasons for this, it is simply a matter of labour economics (supply & demand), but it also certainly presents a challenge for a rich cultural experience that many tourists expect.

## **DIVERSITY**

I am a great believer in diversity. I believe that visitors and non-Caymanian residents can learn a lot from the Caymanian culture, and Caymanians in turn can learn from those other rich cultures. When I lived overseas during my university days, and when I visit other countries I make a conscious effort to learn about their cultures and what “makes them tick”. I also believe that the respect for all cultures is important for social harmony. In an increasingly “global village”, many successful corporations are now viewing diversity and cultural differences as tools to be leveraged for business success, rather than obstacles to be overcome. These organizations also now seem to believe that, strong as their corporate culture may be, the template for the behaviour of the organization or its employees is not narrowly-focused, but from the national culture. These successful and

leading global organizations are also of the view that an inclusive climate increases profitability and productivity. A cultural diversity study called “Global Literacies”, pointed out that the most globally successful companies are clearly those that have learned to be culturally confident enough to teach the world and culturally humble enough to learn from the rest of the world.

At this stage, the question must be: what is the practical application of cultural diversity in the Caymanian context. I think that the application is that we must respect all cultures, but we must make the Caymanian culture so tastefully attractive that Caymanians will support the various events and efforts, and tourists and foreign residents will be attracted to become fully engaged in it.

“When in Rome, do as the Romans do” as the famous saying goes may appear to contradict the argument of diversity which I have just advanced. However, I think that in some cases we must draw a similar line on some issues. Take for example the arguments advanced by some foreign and Caymanian business-people, in pursuit of the almighty dollar, that we should abolish our traditional conservative music and dancing laws (opening hours especially), we should abolish our Sunday Trading Laws, and we should allow national gaming (gambling and lotteries). There are some who feel that they can have loud music emanating from late night “sessions”, ear-drum bursting music emanating from their cars, and loud music which incites hatred and violence emanating from even public places – this is not the Cayman that I know, and this is not the cultural expression that has made us a leading tourist destination or a tranquil society thus far. There are even those who suggest we should dilute our Christian heritage and condone the homosexual life-style, simply to be expedient. How can we reconcile these radical economic initiatives with our cultural norms and core values of being a Christian, peaceful, family-oriented, and conservative society?

## **BUILT TO LAST**

But how do we build a sustainable culture for these Islands to last into the twenty-first century? Many of us seem to be at a loss about how our core values correspond with our

cultural or artistic practices, institutions, and initiatives. To be successful as a culture I feel that we must translate our cultural ideologies or beliefs into tangible mechanisms aligned to send a consistent set of reinforcing signals. It must attract people, create a sense of belonging through practical methods, and promote mutual understanding amongst other cultures. It is our core cultural beliefs that will provide the bonding glue that will hold these Islands together, even as it grows, diversifies, and expands globally. It is not what you believe that sets you apart so much as that you believe in something, that you believe in it deeply, that you preserve it over time, and that you bring it to life with consistent alignment and inclusive with all other interested parties. Simply put, without culture there is no country.

And so, what are some tools to consider to better define and nurture the Caymanian culture and arts? I maintain that a pre-requisite is to reach agreement on what core values or beliefs of our society and heritage we wish to consciously project.

Once we have aligned our core values, I believe that there are four practical tools which can be used when building or fine-tuning our culture and artistic offerings. These are Selection, Communication, Orientation, and Recognition, and I would like to quickly share them with you:

In regard to SELECTION, we must decide on which of our offerings can best be developed or promoted to leverage our core values, some options are:

- Quadrille dancing;
- Caymanian music (singing & the use of unique instruments – goat skin drum, grater);
- Story telling;
- Fishing techniques, and fish net making;
- Rope making;
- Plaiting and other craft skills, the end result being thatch products & handicrafts ;
- Farming techniques;
- Cooking on the caboose, or other traditional skills.

- Making of the famous fish run-down, heavy cakes, candies, jellies and other delicacies.

In regard to COMMUNICATION, we must demonstrate that we care for and have pride in our culture, and must be consistent when communicating our culture to ensure that it reinforces our core values and beliefs.

The Caymanian culture has been expressed in various ways in the past which reinforce the core values. For example, in the keeping of beautiful white sand gardens, we see the tranquility, peace, and charm; the neat work of our carpenters and boat builders clearly speaks to pride; the number of Caymanians who rose to the position of Captain on some of the world's largest ships speak volumes to the Caymanian work ethic and resilience; even the older Caymanian tradition of raising chickens in the yard clearly demonstrates a core value of care, love, and self-reliance.

How many tourists for example get to see the Cayman "sand yards" or gardens, unless they get a very personalized Island Tour or unless they visit the Botanic Park? I think that it would be neat if a Caymanian sand yard and flower or rose garden could be incorporated into the landscape design of hotel or condominium complexes on the Island. Another deficiency in the communication of our culture and arts, which should be addressed, is how to encourage the continuity of such events and skills that our youth acquire in school – which they could take through life. Some of these include: the playing of various instruments (including the steel pan), art, dance, handicraft manufacturing, rope making etc. These skills should not be left at school after graduation to unfortunately not be used again in life.

However, how do we promote these cultural values effectively? Are new methods needed? How can we capitalize on the opportunities of the Internet? Perhaps we need a natural forum or symposium where we can examine these questions further.

The ORIENTATION of tourists and foreign workers can sometimes be perceived negatively, however (as mentioned previously) in an increasing move towards

globalization many multi-national corporations are emphasizing cultural sensitivity and diversity amongst its internationally mobile employees. For example, in the orientation of new employees at coming in from overseas to work with us, there should be an orientation on local culture, activities, and expectations. This type of orientation builds a good awareness and sensitivity, and is beneficial to the visitor, employee, employer, and the host country.

I am aware that there are a scattering of information and guides on Cayman's history and heritage, found in various publications. I recommend that all of these should be reviewed, with a view to producing a new comprehensive booklet on culture, as well as on cultural and artistic norms and activities. This guidebook would be recommended reading for new expatriate workers (including teachers), other new residents, and stay-over tourists.

My fourth tool for building that lasting culture is RECOGNITION. In the interest of time I will just generalize to say that for any type of recognition to be effective it must be holistic and consistent. All of the stakeholders must be recognized and encouraged to keep developing Caymanian culture and arts, in support of those pre-determined core values and beliefs. CayFest, the Children's Festival of the Arts, the various offerings and displays of the Museum [to name a few], go a long way in achieving this goal.

I have accepted, and we must all recognize that the Caymanian culture is still in its formative stage, and to a certain extent has been over-shadowed by the high levels of economic growth in the past 20-30 years. We must however continue to build a system of cultural expression upon a good foundation of core values, and which strikes a balance between culture and economic reality. There are some countries in our region where one can visit, and upon arriving at the airport one can recognize that they have a rich culture – it is buzzing loudly in the air. A drive through those streets provides a flamboyant expression of culture: from the loud road-side boom boxes, to the smoking jerk centers, and onto the street-side gatherings and pedestrians taking over the streets, one can certainly get a pot pourri of culture. This is a different expression and is not compatible with Cayman's core cultural values. Our economic growth and labour force dynamics

have dictated that Cayman is a “melting pot” of cultures; we must therefore gain strength from diversity but ensure that the Caymanian culture is predominant.

When I began this my contribution I wrote of my drive through the Island in October 1968, and how I felt. I believe that we must align our cultural expression so that, amidst all of the converging cultures in these Islands at this time, we do not dilute our heritage and identity and thereby leverage our children’s future for short-term economic gain. Notwithstanding the commentary and recommendations foregoing, I am pleased to say that immediately after Hurricane Ivan and continuing onto today, I was pleased to see the Caymanian culture of cleanliness and order emerge. Even in the midst of devastation, Caymanians (with the help of many expatriates) were not content to live in squalor, and did not accept the debris and mess as normal – and we busied ourselves with cleaning-up (despite the shock and discomfort). Today, our Island of Grand Cayman, joins our two Sister Islands, is looking great again, and may the good Lord protect us and help us to maintain our culture of “cleanliness is next to godliness”.

Those core values of tranquility, accommodation, and safety, which I spoke about, are the attributes which become the first impressions of visitors to our shores. These attributes, which I believe are based on a strong Christian heritage, are what attracted so many tourists and residents to our shores, and we must build upon that foundation as we build a culture that can stand strong in the “global village” of the twenty-first century.

Mr. Editor, thank you very much for the opportunity to share these thoughts, and hopefully it may be instructive to cultural thought leaders and decision-makers.

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