

The Diaspora and Dominican Culture

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by

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I was born in Delices a small village on the southeastern coast of the island of Dominica. In preparing to talk about culture as an artist, my thoughts reflect back to growing up in such a setting. I thought of the music that made the first impression on me: the sound of *lapo kabwit* drums during weeks leading up to the annual masquerade. In my mind echoed the work-songs of men hauling logs to the village from the hills, men and women gathering singing worksongs and playing *ti bwa* at the cassava and toloman mills, making the burden of hard work lighter through the spirit of rhythm and cooperation. I thought of village feasts and traveling to nearby villages for these occasions, seeing women beautifully dressed in brightly colored national wear and feeling the elating atmosphere.

I reflect on these occasions and the art forms involved not merely for nostalgia, but knowing the benefits of these practices. I have made it my mission to restore the arts to their rightful role in society as part of daily life. They make life easier for everyone, not in the escapist ways of some contemporary commercial forms, but by creating the spirit of cooperation during the work songs. *Koudmain* is a system of cooperative work and labor swapping that resulted in greater production at minimum cost to the participants and hosts. In examining such concepts, we must remind ourselves, as Dominicans living abroad, of their benefits and of the need to create more 21st century *koudmain's*. For, in examining the shared beliefs and practices that identify us as a people, we need to explore ways to maintain the positive elements of our culture.

Bear with me as I dwell on memory lane a little longer, for in those days I remember the tidy village competitions, which fostered a sense of pride in one's environment. At village level people were awarded prizes for vegetable gardens. Of course, this benefited the families involved nutritionally as well. The flower gardens, hedges and tidy, well-kept yards were judged. Prizes ranged from certificates to small cash prizes but the import effect came from everyone doing their best to create a healthy environment with great aesthetic value. In the end, the villages would compete on a district level against each other for village prize and there again, I firmly believe that the big prize was the spirit of community and belonging.

We have to give thanks for having been blessed with the leadership of E. O. Leblanc at a time when it was most necessary. While we can spend time talking about his major political accomplishments and his achievements re resisting class and color privilege in Dominica, I believe his greatest accomplishment has been the revival and restoration of our folk and traditional arts. Just think of the renewed pride we now have for our Creole language. The competitions that climaxed with National-Day celebrations, now Independence celebrations, are a cultural revival of historic proportions. Of the literary

competitions I want to make a special note. We need to begin to focus on literature and more contemporary aspects of culture including intellectual activities. This leaves me asking, what happened to the days of great debate among elementary and high schools in Dominica? Shouldn't we be promoting more of these?

With this historical background, I want to focus directly on what you expect me to address. With privilege and honor, I want to thank the organizers of this symposium, the Joint Dominican Associations (DUKA, DONA, DDA), in conjunction with the High Commission for the Commonwealth of Dominica, for inviting me and for creating the opportunity for such an occasion. In honor of our ancestors, I want to thank you for reviving the spirit of *koudmain* and bring the different associations together. It is history in the making, which should not go unnoticed. We need to go to the top of the mountains and shout that Dominica and Dominicans are on the rise and nothing can stop us. We are setting a precedent for Caribbean immigrants. We are turning back to our roots and nourishing them by creating organizations like the DAAS, bringing together the finest minds from different fields from all parts of the world. The possibilities are limitless. With such a bank of intellect and experience, we are on the dawn of the awakening of a great nation and people.

In order to move forward, it is necessary for us to celebrate some of the past achievements, and acknowledge the customs mentioned earlier. However, we also need to address some of the negative aspects of our culture.

I want to make note of a few of these problems and some practical ways to address them:

- Every one who grew up in a village knows the role of the rum shop as a gathering place and a place to discuss gossip, politics and religion. What we never question is the number of alcoholics that are bred of such a social system. I am not advocating the ban of rum shops. I am highlighting the need for more prevention education to address alcoholism as a disease, so that every young person will be aware of the disease of addiction, thereby cutting down on many social ills and other costs to society.
- We need to help fight and stamp out the slave mentality and the negative impacts of colonialism. The Diaspora needs to sponsor educational programs in our communities that address the following issues.
 1. Racism. Stop discrimination against Caribs. We need to elevate them as the first people, help to instill pride in the community, and promote the territory as a major tourist site. We need to organize more secondary technical, college and university scholarships for Carib students.
 2. Sexism: We need to promote respect for our women and insist upon gender equality, We must celebrate and award the contributions of women to our communities, the nation, and the arts.
 3. Party Politics: Corrupt politicians need to be challenged. Politicians should be challenged to address the voters with concrete development plans and clear thoughts on how those plans will be carried out and financed.

4. Attitude to artists: We need to educate our people on the value of our art and artists. Let us give awards to people like Phillip 'Chubby' Mark and Ophelia Marie while they are alive. We should promote the establishment of a bust of Chubby at Tet Lale, Grand Bay. We should encourage naming a Lawrence Brumant Circle in Paix Bouche, an Ophelia Lane in Point Michel, a Gordon Henderson Square in Portsmouth, Pat Aaron Circle in Newtown, a Gramacks School in St. Joseph and an Alwin Bully Library in Roseau. Such actions will inform and encourage the contributions of future generations.

Some of the basic needs, but essential for the local community that the Diaspora can give serious consideration to funding include:

Adopt a village:

Specific sectors of our communities need to adopt villages in Dominica and contribute to the economic cultural socio political development of these villages. Sister city programs can assist in a similar way. Strategies should include revival and promotion of the tidy village competitions and use these opportunities to sponsor best *wob douillette* and national wear competitions. Spotting cultural talent in schools and creating opportunities for such talented individuals is a necessity.

Music and Arts Education and Training:

We need to establish of after-school programs with computer and technology centers where youth and adults can develop computer skills and audio video recording and production skills. In order to curb the effect of mass migration of Dominican talent and the loss of our aging folk heroes, we need to support more music and cultural programs in schools as well as programs that foster mentorship of folk knowledge.

We need to make conscious efforts to promote Dominican culture in a big way. As individuals, we must buy Dominican music. Our writers, documenters, and TV producers need to write reviews of the music and produce TV and radio programs that place Dominican music in historical perspective. We need to undertake audience development projects, with free performances and workshops to help people to appreciate our rich traditions.

Revival of Local Theater:

The theater traditions established by Alwin Bully in the form of Calypso Theater, and the Popular Theater movement led by folks like yours truly and Sobers Esprit, used theater that incorporated folk traditions and engaged people in community education and organizing. This work needs to be revived.

Culture & Tourism:

Being aware of the economic relevance of tourism in Dominica, we need to explore our connections with universities, public and private radio, and television and create major and mini documentaries on different aspects of Dominican music, arts, and culture.

Carnivals in major cities bring together millions of people. We should develop major floats with uniquely Dominican themes. We can use these opportunities to promote Dominica as a tourist destination and a source of great music and entertainment. Major centers of Dominican populations outside Dominica need to create exhibitions of Dominican literature art and music at libraries and galleries in observance of Dominican historical milestones.

***Kweyol* Development:**

The efforts of The (KEK) *Komite Pou Etuid Kweyol* need to be commended and supported. So as well should the contribution of Felix Henderson to the preservation and promotion of Creole and his continued, effective use of the language as a medium of education for the masses. Too many unsung heroes exist in our society. The works of Marcel Djamala Fontaine in the form of publications like the *Kweyol* dictionary the collection of *Kweyol* proverbs equal that of many internationally recognized linguists. Such efforts need to be rewarded and supported. We need to explore the establishment of a Creole Center in Dominica that will be a museum and information center that preserves and teaches our Creole ways, language and cuisine.

Writing & Literature:

Our writers need to do more writing and our people need to promote and purchase the writing of our writers like Lennox Honnychurch, Gabriel Christian and Irvin Andre. A copy of such publications as gifts to 3rd and 4th generation Dominicans in the Diaspora is a must.

I can go on with a 1000 page of "to dos", but that would just be overwhelming and lead to nowhere. I therefore want to state that today's gathering is an occasion to create further opportunity. I want to recommend a process that will generate specific strategies for of the Diaspora in the development of Dominican culture at home and abroad.

We need to continue the work of DAAS. We need to identify a pool of resource persons for the writing of papers on cultural issues. We need to also create a resource inventory and develop strategies to explore those resources. We need to have electronic debate and discussion, and symposiums in North America, Europe, and Dominica. We need to plan these symposiums with input of artists and those connected with arts and culture, document the results, and draw concrete but organic plans from them.. Through such a process, we will arrive at realistic blueprint for contributing to the cultural development of Dominica and Dominicans.

I am a firm believer in practice. *Pawol en bouch se pa met*. I am presently coordinating a project called [**The Ralph Casimir and Orian Celestine Theophile Cultural Fund.**](#) of which details are outlined in the donation sheet circulated. Please get copies and support the Fund.

Thanks.

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