

The Ghettoization & Vulgarization of St. Lucia's Culture

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Ghettoization of St. Lucian Culture

In St. Lucia things happen in seasons. So as the birthdays of our Nobel Lauretes are approaching, we are gearing up for the season of high culture. And this time around we can expect high culture to reach its zenith because Derek Walcott, our literature Nobel Laureate, and his twin brother, Roderick Walcott, would have turned eighty.



This season of high culture brings to mind the first M&C awards I attended, in 1991, when I had freshly resettled in St. Lucia from the USA. It was a glitzy, inspiring, place to be seen affair. The Cultural Center, sitting on top of Barnard Hill, overlooking Castries, could not hold all the attendees so the audience spilled unto the grounds. It was St. Lucia's equivalent of the Academy, Tony and Grammy Awards all rolled into one.

My only question then was how come the artists being honored were not allowed to say anything, instead the attention seemed focused on some white folks who appeared to have liberal access to the mike? And the thought struck me, I never knew there were so many White St. Lucians! Where have they been hiding? With my heightened racial sensitivity acquired from the US, my thinking was that this ceremony seemed more about giving white folks the opportunity to show the nation that they are here, that they exist, than to celebrate art and culture.

You see, I was born and raised in Vieux Fort and left the island at the age of twenty to study in the U.S., and it was only during my brief visits to St. Lucia that I became fully aware of Rodney Bay and Cap Estate. Hence, since St. Lucia's white population was concentrated in Soufriere and north of the island, I had little sense of the island's white population. What I didn't know then was that some of the white folks who I thought were dominating the awards were members of the Devaux Family, founders and main sponsors of the M&C Fine Arts Awards. And later still, what I came to acknowledge was that under their management the awards ceremony, as far as the artists were concerned, was as good as it gets.

The following year I attended the M&C Awards with greater eagerness than the first time. You see, my novel, *Death by Fire*, would be considered for an award. With M&C in charge of the awards, everything happened on schedule. The entry forms were made available in August and handed out by a friendly lady at the M&C shipping office off Bridge Street. The deadline, well publicized in the media, was in September, and like in the previous year the awards ceremony, with plenty of media announcements and advertisement, was held in January. This the second time the event was just as glitzy, just as inspiring and even better attended. When my name was called to receive the main literature prize for *Death by Fire*, I walked up stage, trembling legs, in full view of my fellow artists and a cross-section of St. Lucian society. Nervousness aside, it was a beautiful thing.

A few years later, accompanying a change of government, the Department of Culture was renamed the Cultural Development Foundation (CDF), and with the name change came a new Executive Director. Though continuing to provide financial support, the M&C group of companies handed over to CDF the management of the art awards. CDF quickly changed the format of the awards. Borrowing from Barbados, the one-night ceremony was turned into several weeks of activities that included theatre, art exhibitions, and performance poetry, and which culminated into the award night.

The first year that CDF took over the Fine Arts Awards, it was staged jointly with M&C. The event was publicized than never before. So large was the audience that special tents equipped with viewing screens were placed outside so that those unable to find seats inside could still be part of the ceremony. There were improvements. The evening was helped along with a heavy dose of live entertainment. The police band, a folk band, actors on stage, guest singers including Elra Ermay with her magical creole song, *E Quittez Mwen*. And with M&C in the background, the prize awards doubled in size.

The one addition that would have made the event perfect for me was that instead of bringing all the winners (third, second and first) on stage to receive awards, thus using up plenty of time, only the first-place winners would be invited on stage. This way there would be sufficient time for the artists to say a few words. Also, the works nominated for awards should have been placed on a viewing screen (or in the case of literature a short reading) so that the audience would get a sense of the work of the nominees. This way greater attention would be focused on the artists and their creations, which was what the awards were for in the first place.

I left the event with great expectation and anticipation of what would obtain when the event was under the total control of CDF. But unfortunately for the artists and the St. Lucian public, the event has disappoint. Since then the date of the event kept shifting and no one had a clear idea of when it would be held. No one was clear when entry forms would be available nor the deadline for entries. In some years the event received so scant media attention, that the artists themselves, the potential nominees, were hardly aware of its occurrence. Changing the format of the Award activities and changing its name from M&C Fine Arts Awards to St. Lucia National Awards Festival, did nothing to arrest its apparent decline.

Not only were there plenty of inconsistencies surrounding the Awards, but its implementation appeared to lend a hand to the ghettoization of St. Lucian culture. Take for example the last National

Awards Festival that I attended, which was held in 2006. That year the traditional award ceremony was split in two parts.

Part I was called the opening of the 2006 St. Lucia National Arts Awards Festival. It was a night of glitz and wonder. The ticket prize was \$50.00 or \$60.00. The Cultural Center was overfilled. The elites of St. Lucian society, including government ministers and the Governor General were present. There were plenty of entertainment and guest performances. It was a place to be, a place to be seen. This event was reminiscent of the first year that CDF (together with M&C) staged the event, of course minus the awards.

Part II, the evening of the awards presentation. The Cultural Center was only half full. Three-quarters of the audience comprised of a crowd of screaming teenagers. Some of the nominees were dance and drama groups, which explained our excitable young persons. Gone were the glitz and fan-fair. Gone were most of the entertainment. Gone were the government ministers and the leaders of industry and civil service. The artists names were called, and they were unceremoniously herded on stage to receive their awards. Rather than feeling exalted and glorified, the artists felt like beggars. The trip to the stage probably the most demeaning act they had performed as artists.

At the very least this was the impression of one artist. And it wasn't a case of sour grapes. Because, given that the prize awards had doubled in size, that year the artist won six thousand dollars in total prize monies. Five thousand dollars for the main prize in his category, and \$1000.00 for a first prize. The artist said, "You know, in the days of M&C I used to look forward so much to come and receive my prize, not so much for the money, but the recognition. But now you come and receive your prize and it feels more like a let down than anything else." So essentially, the artist was saying that CDF had ghettoized the prize giving ceremony, and thus it was no longer an event to look forward to with pleasant anticipation. Maybe Part I, but then one had to either cough up \$60.00 or be extended a complimentary ticket, for which our lowly artist may have had to wait a long, long time.

Yet the award presentation wasn't the most demeaning aspect of the new CDF format. With M&C, the cash prize was received along with the award certificate and trophy on the night of the event. But with CDF, you had to climb Barnard Hill to pick up your check. When you arrived on the date that you were told the check would be ready, you were told to come back on another date. When you climb the hill a second time on that postponed date, you were told the check has not been signed, so wait awhile. So you waited for your check, waited as if you were a beggar pestering CDF for money.

It seemed that CDF had forgotten that the purpose of the awards was to focus attention on the artists and to gain public support for them. What better way to focus attention on the artist than by announcing and publishing the nominees of the awards long before the event, and the nominees making media appearances to discuss their work, thus allowing the media and the public to anticipate the winners. And after the event the winners announced and publicized in the media and making media appearances as part of their acknowledgment and celebration. It seemed to me if one truly cared about culture and the creation of art, then one would do one's utmost to celebrate artists and their art. With the advent of CDF, it seemed even less attention was being focused on the artist. It would appear that many an artist are longing for the days when the M&C group of companies were running the show.

In this season of high culture CDF launched its 2010 National Arts and Cultural Festival with a series of activities including a visual arts exhibition, a book fair, a drama night, and a Film & Audio-Visual Night. Given these activities and the fact that CDF replaced its first executive director with one who seemingly has a better appreciation and understanding of St. Lucian culture, maybe there is hope that the Arts Awards will return to its M&C glory days.

Vulgarization of St. Lucian Culture

It is ironic that in the ghettoization of St. Lucian culture it appeared that CDF, supposedly the bastion of St. Lucian culture, wasn't about the exaltation of artist and their art. If so, then what was CDF about? The good book says it is by their fruits you shall know them. So what were the fruits of CDF. Well, since CDF replaced the Cultural Department, it had been engaged in large, populous and fanfare-filled projects that invariably attracted attention to itself.



In 2005, to commemorate St. Lucia's 25 years of independence, CDF staged a calypso concert on Pigeon Island at which a selection of the 25 best Calypsos (one per year) since independence was performed by the calypsonians in question (if at all possible) and backed by an all-star band that included the likes of Boo Hinkson. The show was recorded and released on the market as a DVD. All around

(attendance, music, public appreciation) the show was an immense success. Without a doubt CDF as an organization was highlighted. But despite the success of the event, it begs the question, should CDF be directly involved on the commercial side of art and culture? Or should CDF be providing private entities with the necessary support to commercially exploit art and culture. Is it the case that by getting too deeply into any given activity, especially on the commercial side, CDF spreads itself too thin and thus cannot sustain nor do an adequate job of what it was actually set up to do? That is the development of St. Lucia cultural expressions and the creators of those cultural expressions.

Out of that event CDF released a DVD on the market. But after a few months little was heard of the DVD, pointing to another weakness in CDF acting as a commercial entity. Beyond staging the event and getting some publicity, no one at CDF has a stake in the commercial success of the product. After all, the proceeds don't enter the pockets of anyone at CDF, and the cost of the venture didn't come out of their pockets either. So CDF doesn't have much of an incentive to properly promote the product and leverage it on the domestic and international market. But with a private entity, the picture changes drastically. Therefore, in terms of distribution, promotion and keeping the product alive, a private entity is likely to better serve.

Patterning itself after the Tourist Board and the Jazz Festival, CDF it seems has completely taken over the organization and implementation of carnival and calypso. So much so that it gives the impression that CDF is mostly about carnival and calypso and thus the promulgation and preservation of popular or main stream St. Lucia culture. The very activities that need little help for their continuance. That is equivalent to the Smithsonian Society or the Rockefeller Foundation taking as its mandate the promotion and preservation of Rap, Rock and R&B. Again, the country is better served if a separate entity (The St. Lucia Board of Calypso and Carnival) is allowed to manage carnival and calypso with some help from CDF.

If CDF wishes to get directly involved in any art form, then it would need to be the art forms that are in danger of dying out (our Folk Music, for example) or those that are fledgling or floundering (drama, dance, film, etc.). An ideal project for CDF would be to go about recording the music of our folk musicians, most of whom are well up in years, thus the window of opportunity to fully document their music is rapidly closing and closing for good.

In the 50's and 60's an American by the name of Allan Lomax sojourned across several islands of the Caribbean, St. Lucia included, conducting anthropological research and recording and documenting the islands' traditional folk music. With the death of Allan Lomax, the Center for Black Music Research at Columbia College in Chicago became the repository and guardian of the entire St. Lucia Lomax collection. Beginning in the 1970's, recognizing the cultural and possible commercial value of this wealth of folk music, Msgr. Dr. Patrick Anthony, founder of the Folk Research Center (FRC), fought hard and long for the Center of Black Music Research to return the music to St. Lucia under the management of the Folk Research Center. Finally, in 2006 Dr. Rosita Sands, head of the Center, traveled to St. Lucia and handed over the collection to FRC in a formal hand-over ceremony.

Now, the irony of all this is that if not for Allan Lomax, a total stranger to St. Lucia, a large portion of our indigenous music would have been lost to us forever. But the real shame and travesty is that although we went to such great lengths to regain some of our music (suggesting we understand the value of such collections), every year that passes we are losing plenty of our music, because no one is systematically going about recording the music of our folk musicians. Yet this is exactly the purpose of a CDF. The question is, are we waiting for another complete stranger to come and record and preserve our music so that 20 years later we have to beg and fight hard and long to have the music returned to us?

If CDF wants to get involve in carnival then it should focus on the development of calypsonians, and writers and arrangers of calypsos, the development of calpyso bands or musicians, the development of internationally competitive recording studios.

From what I understand, most of our carnival costumes are designed and manufactured in Trinidad. Yet the designing and sewing of carnival costumes could be the spring bed of a fashion industry in St. Lucia. Clearly, this is yet another area CDF can play a role. Encouraging and giving support to St. Lucian costume designers.

Nudity, drunkenness, and lewdness need not be all what carnival is about. Carnival parades could

also be about street theater. And for that we need not look far. Adrian Augier's 2006 carnival parade presentation of the work of Dunstan St. Omer, St. Lucia's most celebrated painter, is a case in point. As street theater it was beautiful, educational, truly celebrative of art, and certainly more interesting than the all-look-alike costumed mass of carnival paraders.

The Martinique and Guadeloupe parade bands who in recent years have been gracing our carnival with their participation is another case in point. Their accompanying music all drums and percussions, their costumes and theatrical themes go deep into their history and culture. Nothing vulgar about their dancing. Its rhythmic and well-orchestrated. Their presentations certainly more interesting and uplifting than the writhing mass of barely clothed St. Lucian revelers. Even old mass, a staple but small part of the carnival parade, another example of street theater, seems of greater entertainment and thematic value than the populous carnival parades. Clearly, conceptualizing carnival as street theatre is a good thing. So if CDF insists on getting deeply involved in Carnival, may be it should take up the mantle of making street theater a more prominent part of carnival.

The thing is, CDF single-minded focus on carnival crowds out its support of other art forms and cultural activities and cause it to do a bad job of everything else. The tourist board organizes the Jazz Festival, so CDF should see its role as using the event to spearhead the development of jazz and other musicians and the development of the music industry in St. Lucia. In this role, CDF can seek to provide scholarships to study sound engineering and event management, and to liaise with the tourist board to ensure that St. Lucian artists are well represented in the lineups. But CDF should not be organizing carnival and calypso any more than it should be organizing the Jazz Festival, or Country and Western Concerts, or Gospel Music Festivals, or Reggae concerts. However, CDF can lend support to all of these.

CDF is not alone in the vulgarization of St. Lucian Culture. It seems that what the commercial houses are most willing to support invariably has to do with bacchanal, intoxication, and blocko-like events. Year after year the commercial houses pour hundreds of thousands of dollars into carnival, a large portion of which goes to CDF, the main organizer of the event. Seeking sponsorship for soberer, uplifting, conscious-raising activities such as literature is an extremely hard sell. No wonder that CDF has focused its attention on carnival where most of the money is to be had.

It is as if the commercial houses have concluded that the raising of consciousness is bad for business. Of course there may be some truth to that. A socially, culturally, and spiritually conscious person is less likely to engage in conspicuous consumption. And of course, from the point of view of the commercial houses, they get much more bang for their money sponsoring events with mass public appeal. After all, they are in business to make money, not to sponsor St. Lucian culture.

To the onlooker it is as if CDF and the commercial houses are conspiring to vulgarize St. Lucian culture and society. This is why the M&C group of companies establishment, management and sponsorship of the M&C Fine Arts Awards for over 25 years was such a departure from the norm, and a remarkable act of generosity and empathy.

CDF is not alone in dancing to the tune of the commercial houses. Looking at the success of soca artists like Alpha, Ninja Dan and Nicole Davis in securing sponsorship from commercial houses,

several conscious reggae artists from Vieux Fort, who, a few years earlier, considered it diabolic to sing soca, have now ventured into soca with a passion.

We all know that carnival and other bacchanal-like events come with unintended hangovers. Excessive drinking, promiscuity, unwanted pregnancies, the spreading of AIDS and other venereal diseases, family breakups. In short, a corruption of the society. Fine, these events are part of our culture, our way of life, and undoubtedly serve as frustration, depression, stress relief valves. But while we engage in our bacchanal, invest, promote and encourage the other more sobering side of our culture, the conscious-raising activities that would act as a counterbalance to our bacchanal hangover. I cannot think of a better way to celebrate our Nobel Laureates and show our appreciation for the artistic and intellectual heights they have climbed.