

The Death of an Illusion

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It was in Room One, Form One, during my first term at the Vieux Fort Junior Secondary School, in Teacher Ryan's history class, several decades ago, that I experienced the most traumatic event of all my school days, that my sense of wholesomeness was shattered, that I started to see the world through a different pair of eyes. There I learnt for the first time I was descendent of slaves, there for the first time I learnt of the slave triangle, there my education on the plight of my ancestors on the sugar plantations began.

Now, my first reaction wasn't pity for my slave ancestors, or anger at their slave masters—that would come later. My first emotion was shame. A deep, heart-wrenching shame. A shame that shattered my world, my sense of security, my sense of well-being, my sense of self-worth. A shame that my race had been subordinate to another. Now, it wasn't that there weren't any signs of St. Lucia's slave legacy. But as a twelve-year-old boy growing up in Vieux St. Lucia in the early seventies, I didn't think much of the fact that most of the women working as bank tellers had long hair and "light" skin. When I tried to chat a "light" skin girl and in disgust she said, "*tiwé kò-ou douvan mwen, ou nwe kon kaka kochon, get away from me, you black as pig's shit,*" I took it she just didn't like me, and, besides, I was black in truth, blacker than most. When I heard people, especially older people, saying: "*neg mizéwab, niggers are miserable;*" "*neg mové, niggers are wicked;*" "*neg modi, niggers are cursed;*" "*sé kon sa nou neg yé, that is how us niggers are,*" I took it that this was just some of the things the old people say. In fact, I thought *neg* was just the *Kwéyòl* name for black people. It was only nine years later, when I went to America to study, that I came to realize *neg* meant nigger, one of the most derogatory words in the English language.

When people referred to government property as "*bagay bétjé, things belonging to the white man,*" I reckoned this was just their way of referring to the government. Little did I know that at some level people saw the government and any other authority as synonymous with their ancestors' slave masters, the white man. Yes. When people were describing someone they thought was good-looking, they would often say, "the beautiful so and so with nice skin (fair complexion) and good hair (straight hair)." But that still didn't say being black is less than being white. I had never given much thought to such foods as breadfruit, salt-fish and green figs, pork feet, cow feet, souse, all legacies of slavery, and once survival disgraces. But then what could be negative about something like salt-fish and green figs, delicious and all, our national dish? I had given even less thought to such cultural expressions as our flower festivals of La Rose and La Marguerite, and our now proudly proclaimed folk music, folk culture. There was nothing like The *Jounen Kwéyòl* Festival, or Emancipation Day celebrations (at least none I could remember) or the Folk Research Center to educate me of my roots. Besides, even if these had existed, classifying most celebrations as things of the world, entrapments of the devil, my Seventh Day Adventist religion would have made sure (as it did) I stayed as far away from my culture as possible, so I might have remained ignorant.

In a place where both rich and poor, Premier (then the head of state) and street janitors, teachers and pupils, managers and laborers, farmers and banana stevedores, and 97 percent of the population looked no different than me, there were no ingredients for developing any type of

identity crisis or inferiority complex based on skin color. Maybe based on income and education, but not race.

Growing up in Vieux Fort, I had no way of knowing white people, or almost white people, owned the largest and most fertile estates—Roseau, Cul-de-Sac, Mabouya, and some others in Soufriere—a direct legacy of slavery. After all, the only farmers I knew were either Black, Indian, or *dogla* (mix of Black and Indian). I was yet to go on a school field trip to the old sugar estates to see the remnants of the sugar mills my ancestors had slaved over.

No. In a country where the few whites I saw were mostly tourist or Peace Corps volunteers, there was no white population to speak of to hint at slavery. Besides, back then, these few whites were mainly of the hippie type. In my Seventh Day Adventist's eyes they were dirty, unhealthy and immoral. They seemed to sleep with every beach bum and wharfrat they could lay their hands on. Since these, in the main, were the kind of white people my friends and I and probably most of the people in my community were exposed to, it was natural for me to think of my race as superior in all ways, except wealth, to the white race. And if there were any doubts of that, the Black Power Movement, the rise of Mohammed Ali, and the Rastafarian Revolution took care of that.

So unless I was told my race, a race I thought was superior to all other races, was once the slave of another race, a race I thought was far inferior to my race, the thought would have never occurred to me. And when I was told, I was devastated, my outlook on life changed forever.