

AFRICANA STUDIES IN THE ANGLOPHONE CARIBBEAN

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There is no African, Africana or Black Studies Programme in existence at any institution of learning in the Anglophone Caribbean. There are courses taught at the University of the West Indies and the University of Guyana the contents of which deal with Africa, African Americans or other Africans in the diaspora, but there is no teaching or research programme which emphasises the study of the African phenomenon in any significant way. Inquiry reveals that the following courses are taught which focus on Africa. One is the History of Africa from Earliest Times to 1800. Another is the History of West Africa from 1800 to the Present. Politics in Africa and African political philosophy are also taught as part of wider courses on Comparative Politics and Political Thought which focuses on non-western political systems. African religious and social systems and their retention in the Caribbean are also examined in a course called the Anthropology of the Peoples of the Caribbean and in one entitled Caribbean Social Structure. African literature in French and English is also featured in courses taught in the English Department and in the Department of French and Spanish Literature.

Attempts have also been made to teach Yoruba and Swahili at the University of Guyana and at other institutions which seek to emphasise the study of things African, but these have not been sustained for one reason or another. These limited offerings suggest that those who have responsibility for shaping the curriculum of the Caribbean school System are not unequivocal in their commitment to make Africa and things African a central focus

of study as some believe it ought to be. One thus agrees with Milfred Fierce when, following his fact finding visit to the Caribbean to assess the status of Africana studies, he reported that the "potential for Africana studies in the Caribbean is much stronger than the reality".¹ In her essay, "African Studies in the English Speaking Caribbean", Margaret D. Rouse-Jones also observes that "although African Studies is recognized as an important area of study, programmes have not progressed as they should".² Dr. Fitzroy Baptiste has said much the same thing in his essay, "The State and Prospects of African-Caribbean Studies at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad. To quote Baptiste:

"This University and this faculty has paid time and again lip service to the need for an extended programme in African and Asian Studies in Trinidad and Tobago. However the gap between rhetoric and actions remain mockingly wide".³

There is of course a substantial emphasis at the University of the West Indies, the University of Guyana and in the secondary school systems of the region on the study of things Caribbean and the historical and social foundations of Caribbean Society. There are numerous teaching and research programmes which focus on Caribbean political and economic history, Caribbean political and social systems, Caribbean economic problems, Caribbean integration, Caribbean literature etc., but these are not viewed as part of any coherent programme of African Studies but as a natural concern with understanding the Caribbean experience in its broadest sense.

That African and things African feature so little in teaching programmes in the Caribbean often comes as a surprise to those who are aware that Caribbean scholars and other professionals have made vital contributions to understanding or shaping Africana Studies programmes elsewhere. In this regard, reference could be made to the contributions of individuals such as Edward Blyden, Sylvester Williams, C.L.R. James, Eric Williams, George Padmore, Marcus

Garvey, Walter Rodney, Edward Braithwaite, Ivan van Sertima and Frantz Fanon to name but a few of the persons who have contributed substantially to our understanding of the African in world history, past and present. We are also aware of the substantial number of English and French speaking West Indians who worked as public servants, teachers, doctors and missionaries in Africa and the equally large number of them who make sterling contributions to African Studies Programmes in the United States and Canada and wherever else such programmes are located.

The absence of Africana studies thus has little to do with the inability of the institutions in the region to source the man-power to teach or conduct research in the area. It has to do basically with a belief on the part of the social, intellectual and political establishment that the study of things Africa should not be singled out for emphasis but should be treated as any other subject worthy of scholarly interest. In their view, Afro-centricity is intellectually questionable and politically dangerous.

This view is in part to be explained by the manner in which Africa was regarded in the colonial era by the people of the region. The black people of the Caribbean, like their counterparts in other parts of the Americas, were taught to despise things African. Africa, they were told, was a continent of barbarous tribes without history, without anything resembling a civilisation of which one could be proud, without anything that warranted the description of religion or philosophy. The slaves and their descendants were encouraged to reject and forget their African past and to adopt Western Christian values and institutions as substitutes. Wherever efforts were made by enslaved individuals or their descendants to nurture and maintain African religious and social practices, these were criminalised and deligitimised by a range of legal and political stratagems.

What began as coercion over time became internalised by the victims of such coercion. As the historian Edward Bryan observed:

Of the miserable people thus condemned to perpetual exile and servitude, though born in various and unduly separated countries, it is not easy to discriminate the peculiar manners and native propensities. The similar and uniform system of life to which they are all reduced, the few opportunities and little encouragement that are given them for mental improvement are circumstances that necessarily induce a predominant and prevailing cast of character and disposition.⁴

Melville Herskovits also noted that "the system of slavery ... deprived the Africans of psychological security by rendering meaningless traditional African institutions and their validating sanctions". Herskovits however observed that in certain "focal areas", resistance was achieved. Slavery destroyed only the "formal aspects, the broader institutional structures" of African culture. "The essentials were carried on ... Under freedom, they emerged ... as distinctive aspects of Negro culture everywhere in the New World ... giving its own significance to European institutions".⁵

Despite cultural stripping and tribal fragmentation, Africanisms survived very powerfully in Haiti, Grenada, Suriname and Jamaica. In Trinidad, members of the same or related tribes did manage to cluster in villages and sectors of the main population centres in the years immediately following emancipation. Yoruba, Kru, Congo, Ashanti, Fulani, Hausa, Rada and Mandingo villages are known to have been in existence around the mid-nineteenth century. Secret societies similar to those which exist in West Africa were also found as were clan feuds and rivalries. Burial and marriage rituals, drumming, dancing, voodoo and other forms of religious activity were used as vehicles of social protest and resistance.⁶

But concern with Africa was not a mainstream impulse, but something limited to a few, though on occasion Afrophilic sentiments would be aroused. Such was the case for example with the

humiliation and rape of Abyssinia by Mussolini in the 1930s and the do nothing attitude of the League of Nations. As Calder Marshall noted, "the betrayal of Abyssinia is nearly as much to blame for the riots in Trinidad and Tobago as is the high cost of living".⁷ While that event contributed significantly to the stimulation of African consciousness in general and Rastafarianism in Jamaica in particular, it perhaps did more to strengthen anti-colonial sentiment and nascent Caribbean nationalism.

In the post World War II period, the anti-colonial struggle waged by African elites based in England, Europe, the United States and in Africa itself also aroused interest in the African past and the possibilities of the African future and Caribbean intellectuals like CLR James, George Padmore, Eric Williams of Trinidad and Sydney King of Guyana and others were quick to see the link between what was taking place in Africa and their own struggle against colonialism in the Caribbean and against racism directed against African people elsewhere in the Americas and Europe.

In the fifties and early sixties, political events in Africa generally and in Ghana, Nigeria, Southern Africa, Algeria, and Guinea in particular were keenly followed and references to the ideas of Kwame Nkrumah, Sékou Toure, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Awolowo, and Senghor were liberally quoted by Caribbean political leaders as they sought to mobilise the Caribbean people against colonialism and for the achievement of political independence. These developments were however not mirrored in the school system which remained fundamentally Eurocentric.

Following independence, voices began to be heard that there was need to refashion the Caribbean school curriculum to give recognition to new global realities and the importance of Africa in that new reality. But these voices were drowned out by others which warned that excessive emphasis on Africa would trigger class,

religious and racial conflicts which Caribbean island societies would have difficulty managing.

The question of the role of African studies at the educational system was ventilated in Trinidad and Tobago in the nineteen sixties when Dr. Eric Williams proposed that an Institute of African and Asian Studies should be established which would promote research into the African and Asian antecedents of the peoples of the Caribbean as well as the social and cultural experience of their descendants in the New World. Such an Institute was in fact created in 1963 at the St. Augustine Campus of the University, but it was never adequately resourced and its achievements have been extremely limited.

The reasons for this undersourcing have to do both with politics and with reservations within the intellectual community as to the desirability of establishing such an institution. In the context of politics, one has to note that the population of Trinidad and Tobago at the time was 37 percent Indian. Indians were deeply suspicious of anything which sought to promote the fortunes of the African community since they felt that this would be achieved at their expense. Dr. Williams was always aware of this concern, and it is to be noted that the Institute was to have both Africa and the Indian sub-continent as its intellectual focus. Williams also conjured up the "spirit of Bandung" in his political speeches and made as many reference to Nehru and Tagore as he did to Nkrumah and Azikiwe. The Indian community in the main was however suspicious of Williams whom they saw as the champion of the African community and not of the Indians who looked to their own religious and political heroes. There was thus concern that far from enriching understanding of Africa and Asia, the Institute would foster division between the two communities. As Fitz Baptiste observed, there was the fear that the search for identity by the African and Asian components of the population may end with "Mother Africa" and "Mother India" and detract from the goal of nation

building. Official sensitivity relating to the African and Asian Studies programme at the University Campus grew with the so-called "Black Power Riots" of 1970 which stimulated an increase of "African-ness" and "Asian-ness" among segments of the two major ethnic groups in the society. That the establishment of the Institute stimulated ethnic consciousness and gave rise to the creation on the University campus of the Society for the Preservation of Indian Culture (SPIC), the Society for the Preservation of African Nationalism (SPAN) and the Islamic Guild. The dilemma surrounding the African and Asian Studies programme at St. Augustine thus mirrored a more fundamental dilemma about race in Trinidad and Tobago.⁸

The Indian population, it should be noted, was not religiously monolithic. The Hindus constituted 61 percent of the Indian population, 15 percent were Muslim and the remainder (24 percent) were Christian. There was concern that the Hindu experience would be given precedence to that of Islam and that the latter would not be adequately resourced in the teaching and research programmes of the Institute. What languages would be taught in the programme, for example? Would it be Hindi, Urdu or Arabic? Some Muslims also began to lobby for the appointment of a Professor of Islamic Studies and to lay plans for the establishment of an Islamic University in the city of Port of Spain. Muslim activists also started raising funds in the Middle East for this purpose.⁹

Considerations of class were also operative. The established classes, who were mainly European or of mixed ancestry and Christian in religious affiliation, were suspicious of any attempt to give undue emphasis to the study of Africa or India which they feared would give rise to demands for a reallocation of social and economic resources in the community to "Africans" or "Indians" as opposed to Trinidadians and the building of a "rainbow" national community without reference to race. In such an arrangement, resources would go to those best positioned to capture them rather

than to groups organised on the basis of quotas or concerns about affirmative action. The "rainbow" notion thus concealed an unarticulated ideological premise which benefitted the white and mixed gentry.

The Institute thus foundered on the demographic realities of Trinidad society. These concerns about the likely politicisation of the Institute's programmes were reinforced by a general indifference in the academic community to the intellectual considerations which prompted the Williams' proposal. The dominant view was that what was needed was an emphasis on Caribbean reality and not on Africa, India or Pakistan except insofar as it was important to make reference to the latter in order to understand the former. It was also argued that African, Asian and other "area studies" were not disciplines and that courses on Africa or India should be taught in the departments of history, sociology or literature which is precisely what happened in the end. The Institute thus lost its *raison d'être* and its tutors were left with little more than Caribbean Studies theses to supervise. Its funds and status were also subsequently taken away. As Baptiste complained in 1979:

The Institute [was] not given its head to develop according to the original rationale. The reasons for this are many. Finance or lack of it was a factor, though this is hardly the case currently given the wind-fall in oil revenues which has come the way of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago,,,, the sponsor of the Institute, since the OPEC-inspired increases from 1973. Another reason was within-institutional i.e. the attitude of established Departments such as the Department of History to the creation of the Institute. For years, the small resource personnel of the Institute had to concentrate a lot of energies on fending off several stratagems of the Department of History to absorb it fully. The History Department has more or less had its way. Today, staff of the Institute have a dual assignment. In their functions as teachers of undergraduate courses in the history of Africa and India, they are assigned to the Department of History. For purposes of research work, the administrative body is a Committee for African and Asian Studies, headed by a Chairman (generally one of African and Asian staff in rotation) and with control over budgetary allocations. The arrangement underlines the on-going problem of the status of the Institute.¹⁰

Dr. Brinsley Samaroo of the History Department concludes similarly with respect of Asian Studies in the Institute:

The Trinidad and Guyana "Asian" Studies Programmes are really Indian history and Hindi courses. St. Augustine's Institute of African and Asian studies is no more than an offering of African and Indian history courses, for which reason it has almost been absorbed into the St. Augustine History department. But there are more fundamental problems involved in the setting up of these Indian studies programmes in Trinidad and Guyana. For one thing, in both these societies, the East Indian community consists of a majority of Hindus and a minority of Muslims. These groups have not remained unaffected by political and religious conflicts between Hindus and Muslims on the Indian sub-continent. And this is reflected during periodic disputes between these groups.

The sending of Indian educators to the Caribbean has been interpreted by the Muslims as an attempt to spread Hindu culture, and the author has heard repeated complaints from Muslim academics and students that these Indians leave out or under-estimate the Muslim role in the sub-continent's history. And this has led to Muslim requests that either Pakistan or a Middle Eastern country ought to endow chairs in Islamic Studies in Trinidad and Guyana. So what we have really done is to re-enforce into our society the traditional friction of the two Asiatic peoples.¹¹

Samaroo noted that the Indian professors, like missionaries before them, often became involved in cultural activities outside the campus and became poles of rivalry and controversy within the community in terms of what was orthodox or politically correct. In his view, the Institute served to divide rather than to unite:

The problem of Indian/African conflict is fuelled by these courses in African and Indian history. Both in Trinidad and Guyana, the Indian courses have strongly tended to attract East Indians and vice versa. There is a noticeable absence of the meeting of Africa and India in the classroom Against the background of these considerations one is forced to ask the question, namely, whether our current programmes of African and Asian Studies are really clearing up regions of ignorance or whether we are girding up, in our Universities, the racial and religious problems of the larger society.¹²

Renewed demands for greater Afro-centricity in the educational system emerged in the late sixties and early seventies in response

to what was taking place in North America in the name of "Black Power" and power to the people. One by product of this was the establishment of the African Studies Association of the West Indies (ASAWI) which was founded in 1967. In its constitution, ASAWI indicated that the "term African Studies shall be interpreted to include African survivals outside the African continent, e.g. the West Indies and elsewhere in the Americas". Following its establishment, ASAWI organised seminars and international conferences and began publishing a *Bulletin* as part of its contribution to the "Africanisation of consciousness in the region". The Association claimed that its aim was "to foster a scholarly interest in African Studies in the Caribbean area" by focussing both on the continent itself and on African continuities and phenomena in the Caribbean and the New World". ASAWI also pledged to make Africa more than of strict academic interest to the West Indian public. As Arthur Drayton noted in his introduction to *Bulletin* No. 8:

We are particularly mindful of the thousands of yearning minds, with or without specialist knowledge in some aspect of African studies, longing for quick introductions and background surveys in one or other of these fields. We think in particular of school teachers who are called upon increasingly to perform in African Studies and who need to supplement such areas of competence as they already have.

Secondly, we are aware of the widespread ignorance of the many African communities and nations outside Africa and our own of their history, their achievements, their culture, their problems, their needs. We propose to accept and commission studies on different aspects of the African communities of the diaspora and black peoples in such varied places as Australia, Papua and New Guinea, Brazil, Mexico, Santo Domingo, Canada, Cuba and Britain.¹³

To satisfy the market, ASAWI promised to publish essays and survey articles which would not necessarily be work of original scholarship encumbered by scholarly paraphernalia but which would enjoy the widest general readership both in the *Bulletin* and as reproductions in other organs. The *Bulletin*, which was first published in stenciled form in 1968 became the *Caribbean Journal* of

African Studies in 1976. The *Journal* however ceased publication in 1977. The Association itself was poorly financed and ceased being active though its founders have for the most part remained on the University campus teaching courses which have African content.

Other efforts were also made to focus interest on Africa inside and outside the University community. In Barbados a Center for Multi Racial Studies was established in conjunction with Sussex University, but seemed to have achieved little and has since been closed down because of lack of funding. In Jamaica, an African Caribbean Institute was established in 1972 as a division of the Institute of Jamaica. The Institute was responsible for the "study and dissemination of information on Africa, the African heritage and culture as it relates to Jamaica and the Caribbean". The Institute publishes a newsletter in which research by its staff is published. It also maintains an audio-visual archive for materials relating to Africa, Jamaica, and the African Caribbean.

There are also a number of extra university groups in Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica and Barbados which over the years have attempted to teach African languages such as Yoruba in the case of Barbados, (where a Yoruba Foundation was established in 1980), sponsor courses or lectures on African history or politics (such as Club L'Overture and the Institute of Race Relations in Trinidad and Tobago which was sponsored by the National Joint Action Committee). But none of these groups either had the human or material resources to sustain programmes of any significance. The same holds for groups such as the United Negro Improvement Association founded by Marcus Garvey in Jamaica, the Trinidad African National Association and the Confederation of African National Associations of Trinidad and Tobago (COAAT). These groups sponsor conferences, lectures about African ancestors and heritage during African History Week and events to mark African emancipation from slavery.

These activities are however intermittent and often founder on organisational and turf rivalries. The scramble for the scarce resources which the society makes available for activities relating to the examination or celebration of the African experience also serves to undermine the effectiveness of the groups. They nevertheless continue to keep alive that interest in Africa which has always been abroad in the Caribbean but which has never succeeded in becoming a preoccupation of the mainstream which remains wedded to insular and regional concerns and with the European and American parameters of those concerns. The indifferent performance of African nation states in the post independence era also helped to fortify these elements in their view that nothing was to be gained materially or spiritually by paying more than passing attention to what takes place on the continent nor or what took place in the distant past.

It is fair to say that at the present time there is no ^{demand for} Africana studies in the Anglophone Caribbean. Even if such a demand were to arise, universities are under pressure to cut budgets and switch to technology related studies and are unlikely to respond positively to such demands unless funding were to be obtained from outside which seems unlikely.

FOOTNOTES

¹*African Studies Outside the United States: Africa, Brazil, the Caribbean*, Cornell University Africana Studies and Research Center Monograph Series No. 7, 1991, p. 55.

²*African Research and Documentation*, No. 40, 1986.

³Paper prepared for UNESCO Meeting of Experts on The African Negro Cultural Presence in the Caribbean and in North and South America held in Barbados, December 1979. Mimeo, p. 1.

⁴*The History Civil and Commercial of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, Vol. II, London 1801, p. 51.

⁵Melville Herskovits, *Trinidad Village*, Knopf, 1945, p. 4, 12-13.

⁶Cf. Maureen Warner, *Guinea's Other Suns*, Karia Press, 1991.

⁷*Glory Dead*, London, 1939, p. 254.

⁸Baptiste, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁹Cf. my *Muslimen Grab for Power, Race Religion and Revolution in Trinidad and Tobago*, Inprint Trinidad, 1991.

¹⁰Baptiste, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

¹¹"Caribbean and Asian Studies", Unica Survey, p. 41.

¹²*Ibid*, p. 43, Samaroo preferred an interdisciplinary syllabus organised around themes rather than a country by country focus. He also argued for the inclusion of China, the Middle and Far East in the Institute's programmes since these areas were also ancestral places of the Caribbean peoples.

¹³ASAWI Bulletin, No. 8, 1970, p. 2-3.