Caribbean Contributions to the U.S.A. Community

By D. Elliott Parris

The Caribbean presence in North America predates the American Revolution. Not only were slaves who had been born "seasoned" in the Caribbean sold to American plantations, but free Blacks also migrated to the North American continent. Immigrant Prince Hall, a free Black from Barbados, became the father of African secret societies in the United States by starting Masonic African Lodge No. 1 in Boston on July 3, 1776. In 1827 a Jamaican, John B. Russwurm, later one of the founders of Liberia, was the first Black to graduate from an American college. Throughout the 1800s, West Indians continued to distinguish themselves in the United States. In the early 1900s many more Caribbean immigrants came to the United States via Panama, where they were used as labor force in the building of the Canal.

Until 1965, discriminatory immigration laws kept the influx of Caribbean peoples into the United States strictly controlled. The New Immigration Act of 1965 resulted in a dramatic increase in Caribbean immigrants, but the percentage of Caribbean peoples to the total U.S. population remains relatively small. One million legal immigrants entered the U.S. 1820-1970 from the English-speaking Caribbean, yet West Indians comprise only one percent of the total black population. Nevertheless, West Indians have made their presence felt in the United States far more than what their size would indicate, especially in terms of their achievements in many areas, their leadership roles in a wide spectrum of group activities, and their visibility in civil rights movements and protest politics.

Many analysts attribute the success of the Caribbean immigrant group to a highly developed Protestant ethic. It is thought that the social structure of the Caribbean inculcated this work ethic into the poor Black man, because while Whites and light-complexioned Browns in that culture could depend upon racial and color characteristics to ensure their success, the only hope for the poor Black man in the Caribbean was to make it through hard work. This attitude toward work, plus the natural motivation common to people who have migrated in order to improve themselves, has made the Caribbean immigrants particularly upwardly mobile in America. For the most part, however, Caribbean immigrants kept aloof from their host society, acting as sojourners rather than permanent settlers, keeping in their hearts the dream of future return to the Caribbean. This may have been a defense mechanism, a reaction to the discrimination they faced as Blacks and the resentment they felt as foreigners.

Recently these attitudes have been changing. The changed legal status of Blacks in the United States society due to the successes of the Civil Rights struggle, the growing bonds of Pan-Africanism shared with Afro-Americans, the pride in the political independence of several Caribbean nations, and the growing acceptance of "cultural pluralism" rather than "Anglo-conformity" as a model for the United States, are all factors that have imbued the contemporary Caribbean immigrant community with the confidence to proclaim and practice openly their Caribbean heritage.

An obvious example of this is the proliferation in many North American cities of the Caribbean festival of *Carnival.* In Boston, Hartford, New York, Montreal, Toronto, and Los Angeles, this festival has emerged as a full-scale annual community celebration, while in Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Miami, and other cities, some aspects of Carnival can be seen on a smaller scale. The degree of acceptance of such festivals by the American public is a measure of

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the integration of the Caribbean community into the American plural structure. One function of these carnivals is the impetus they give to the internal unification of the Caribbean communities themselves. Considerations of class and island origin have tended to divide members of the American Caribbean community from each other. But the carnivals have emerged as Caribbean, and their acceptance by the community as such holds the potential for even greater unification in the future.

In addition to Carnival, the Caribbean immigrant community is contributing to the American scene in sports, religion, music, dance, literature, and the arts. Cricket, once considered an elite British game, is the sport that every child is introduced to in the Caribbean, whether it be the game as traditionally played, or the West Indian variations of "marble cricket," "bat 'n' ball," "beach cricket," or "kneeling-down cricket." West Indians have been credited with bringing to a game that was once considered stylish but stuffy a spirit of fun and *fête* that makes it a joy to watch. It can now be enjoyed any Saturday or Sunday afternoon in West Indian communities in such cities as Hartford, Boston, and New York.

In Miami, New York, and Washington, the distinctly Caribbean religions of *Santeria,* the worship of *Vodun* (Voodoo), and Rastafarianism, can be found. *Santeria,* practiced by many Cubans, is a unification of Roman Catholicism with the Yoruba religion of West Africa. *Vodun* a Haitian religion, is a similar blend of Christianity and the religious worship of ancient Dahomey. Rastafarianism, however, is a modern religion that originated in Jamaica in the 1930s based on the belief in the divinity of the former Emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie, and the perception of Ethiopia as the original homeland to which Blacks in the Western Hemisphere should be repatriated.

Caribbean music is now very much a part of the sound of many an American city—whether it be the Yoruba drumming of *Santeria,* the reggae rhythms that originated with the Rastafarians, or the rhumba, the samba, and the calypso. There is even evidence of union between these Caribbean rhythms and the rhythm-and-blues beat of the United States in such new dance beats as the "salsa" and "soca" (soul-calypso). Meanwhile, Caribbean folk poets can be seen peddling their latest poems or reciting them at folk festivals, and the steelband soloist has joined the ranks of street musicians in Greenwich Village.

Caribbean contributions to American community life include, therefore, an impressive record of achievement and an infusion of cultural forms that add to the vitality and diversity of American life—a vitality and diversity that has historically been strengthened by the contributions of immigrant communities.

Suggested Readings

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