

Cultural Policy- -Making Ole mas

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*darkness has entered
at the pores of love
and joy and grief
and art and song
now sound is silence
silence
silence
a man has passed into the heart of darkness – Eric Roach*

Having written these words in 1974, our poet Eric Roach dived into the waters of Quinam Bay never to return....what has been our collective response since then to the pain and desperation experienced by those who commit to reveal who we are through their artistic genius? What have we done to safeguard our way of live, our environment and so protect our culture? I thank the Think Forum for inviting me to participate and share some of my thoughts which I hope will widen discussion.

In 1981, based on an aide memoire between UNESCO and the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, a document entitled Towards a Policy for Cultural Development was produced. It scanned the local environment and reported that *“a complete review of the Government structures in the field of cultural policy must take into account the role of the other Ministries ... and that apart from the Ministries; the Prime Minister's Office has direct responsibilities in some aspects of cultural policy,”* indicating that if the country is serious about cultural policy, commitment must be present at the highest level. The report also warned back then that such policy needed to be expedited since the country was beginning to experience the kind of economic growth that could lead to shifts in habits and practices towards foreign tastes. How prophetic!

Another Government policy document in 2002 linked Culture and Attitudes. It articulated a shift for examining culture in our very diverse society, from the popular view which tends to emphasise how people differ, to a view of culture that reveals how our society organizes to:

1. Feed
2. Clothe and
3. Shelter people regardless of differences and our people's approach to
4. Procreation and
5. Recreation.

Each of these 5 areas was further broken down into targets aligned to international cultural indicators on which the Government must routinely report. Strategically, this approach set the stage for 3 things:



1. An opportunity to develop the necessary backward linkages in order to report on these cultural indicators
2. Develop mutual respect based on common goals regardless of primordial loyalties
3. Broaden the view of culture to capture common practices and aspirations

International cultural indicators signal the all encompassing nature of culture with categories such as:

1. **1.Cultural Context e.g** Education, Health, Social Security, Environment, Demographics, Economic
2. **Cultural Trends and Activities** e.g Newspapers, Books and support for local publications Film, Libraries.
3. **Cultural Practices and Heritage** e.g Languages, Religions, Folk and Religious festivals, Natural and Cultural sites
4. **Ratifications** e.g UNESCO; ILO: Human Rights Conventions
5. **Cultural Trade and Communications Trends** e.g New Communication Technologies; Tourism as measured by International Tourism, Cultural Trade as expressed as % GDP
6. **Translations** e.g Translation of Books into Foreign Languages and most frequently translated authors

Does Trinidad and Tobago have the policies and mechanisms to accurately measure progress and development and report on many of these areas - NO. So where are we in 2011? For the first time we have a Ministry named Ministry of the Arts and Multiculturalism. But this has come at a time when there is a debate as to whether multiculturalism gives people a vision of the society to which they belong. In this regard, David Cameron, Britain's PM says State Multiculturalism has failed.

Basically there are 2 positions this presentation takes:

1. National Cultural Policy exists.
2. Festival events present certain inherent difficulties as catalyst for a national cultural policy as such an approach serves to reinforce a popular view of culture as festival events. The paper proposes a wider view of culture for a society as diverse as Trinidad and Tobago's.

Therefore the safeguarding of our rich diversity should be the catalyst for developing policies that strengthen what we have in common, bringing our various strands into a community with a common understanding of what we do as a people, and how we do it; what we need as a



country and how we strive to accomplish it. So, we need to have the confidence to question the rhetoric of public policy as stated in public documents like manifestos and budgets developed ostensibly with ‘*people centeredness*’ and ‘*sustainability*’ as core goals...and we need to utilise international cultural indicators as a backdrop against which to decipher whether existing national economic and social policy is in alignment with our culture – the way we live, the way we are. National cultural policy should be in effect the bedrock on which all other policy stands.

The 2011 Budget like many before it makes some general provisions in the Government Development Programme under Heads such as:-

Social Infrastructure - almost all Ministries and Departments

Multisectoral and Other Services – almost all Ministries and Departments

Public Buildings - approx 14 Ministries

Recreation and Culture - at least 9 Ministries but

Culture – as expressed in provision for Theatres, Museums, Libraries and Archives as well as limited research capacity exists in only one Ministry - the Ministry of Arts and Multiculturalism. Possibilities exist therefore for the wider view of culture to be embraced and supported through a reorientation of programmes and activities that reflect our culture - who we are as a people.

But to do this requires calling on our collective imagination, believing in ourselves and our abilities to reinvent our world using innovative strategies, and working tirelessly and relentlessly at creating the kinds of arrangements and practices that demonstrate cultural policies at work. Our dilemma is not unique. Many countries of the world, despite the rhetoric of cross cutting themes and multisectoral approaches are grappling with ways to shape nationalistic cultural policy in the 21st century – a century driven by technology and morphing into what William Irwin Thompson calls a “planetary culture.”

George Lamming points out that the word culture is derived from agriculture and carries within its meaning the notion of care. When we talk culture we’re talking care - Care for our land, our water sources, care for children, our elderly, our disabled, our poets and musicians, care for our people and the labour of their hands; caring how we drive on the road, taking care of our open spaces and buildings, taking care with the way we engage in public discourse and especially looking at how we care for our youth at risk as we work on behalf of future generations with great humility and respect for the efforts of those past. Culture viewed this way, in Lamming’s words, should be regarded as “*the soil that nourishes daily life.*”



If we are to use our collective imagination and take a broader view of culture we must be mindful that the popular view of culture tends to be rooted in positivist ideology that has informed much of how we think of identity. Positivism was challenged by Marxism which saw ordinary people's beliefs, reflected in popular definitions of culture as really supporting the dominant class. In more recent times, Humanism which had emerged during the Age of Enlightenment as a rejection of the scientific tradition is gaining ground today in the form of what is referred to as the new humanism, challenging traditional ideologies.

So many of our ideas about culture and identity have come to us from the 'metropole' providing the lens through which we in the 'periphery' view world, but restricting us from having the confidence to believe in own genius. Lloyd Best and Kari Levitt gave us the plantation model to open our eyes to our own possibilities. Yet we have arrived at a point where this invention of our people's creative imagination - the Pan; the only new musical instrument invented in the 20th century - the Pan that put many a youth on a productive path and holds within it so much possibility, is now under attack by the very youth that it can elevate - targeted for destruction in its native land... How sad...how very, very sad.

We must therefore move with haste to embrace that wider view of culture in which our economic and social programmes are shaped, then examine and reorient our budgetary provisions to provide a fertile field for the people of Trinidad and Tobago to wake up to their collective responsibility for their native land.

When we speak of developing a national cultural policy we need to be clear, otherwise we really making ole mas' -why? – to make 'ole mas' is to string together whatever can be found and recycle it into product that has some creativity but is not refined in its manifestation and has a short shelf life. If a national cultural policy is promoted without a significant shift in the society's understanding of culture as the lifeblood of the people, the soil that nourishes daily life...then once again everything "tun ole mas"

Efforts must be made to bring together various strands of the society stripped of tribal markings, somewhat like what happens with Sport, in a kind of dialogue that generates constant interchange of ideas, action, reaction, maybe even non-action at times as part of revealing ourselves to ourselves and reflected in the policies we make to shape our world.

But policy and policy making is slippery business, shifting and bending to pressure and we really can only evaluate the effectiveness of policy based on outcomes. Guba (1985) argues that policy exists at three levels:- intention, action and experience. Evidence of cultural policy in intention as guidelines, tactics, ends and means can be found in utterances of political



leadership, budget speeches, official documents, Government manifestos e.g the manifesto of the present government has among its pillars the intention to do things that foster human development, sustain livelihood, reward creativity, establish new institutions responsive to people's needs as well as shape a foreign policy to build partnerships and leverage resources – Policy certainly with the intention of strengthening our culture-our way of life. But then the manifesto mentions two (2) policies – a policy for the arts and a national cultural policy which raises the question as to whether culture is understood as 'the soil that nourishes daily life.'

The 2011 budget speaks to "building a new momentum for the economy's growth and expansion'...the 'awakening and harnessing of the vast potential of entrepreneurs.' If culture is understood as 'the soil that nourishes daily life' then both these documents are culture policy in the widest sense, policy in intention that can only have meaning when translated into policy in action and so the real challenge is not in the WHAT but in the HOW! The inability to translate the underlying cultural ramifications of the rhetoric, to reveal ourselves to our selves through the way we implement the broad stated goals is what causes so many things to... " tun ole mas."

However this very fragile and tenuous cultural policy framework within the rhetoric can be strengthened by aligning how we shape cultural policy to international policy, more specifically UNESCO's international cultural conventions. Over the last five years through the efforts of the Trinidad and Tobago National Commission for UNESCO our country has become signatory to four major international culture conventions

1. UNESCO's major standard setting instrument the Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage - ratified 2005
2. UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage 2001- ratified 2010
3. UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions - ratified 2010
4. UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage - ratified 2010

Trinidad and Tobago is now duty bound to either bring existing legislation in line with these conventions or bring new legislation in accordance with the provisions in the Conventions and our own special needs. Such legislation will enable us to have stronger laws, access to international funding, training and protection in keeping with the main lines of action of the Conventions.

The Ministry of the Arts and Multiculturalism should drive the development of the Policy for the Arts and the Ministry of Planning and the Office of the Prime Minister take the lead in developing national cultural policy as the bedrock of all public policy, opening up possibilities



for incentives and measures for greater participation by the private sector, NGO's and citizens in general and give sound effect to the statement in the Manifesto.

A comprehensive approach that includes a policy for the arts and a national cultural policy will enable us to dream big dreams; to envision a society that embraces all while retaining the uniqueness of each. The policies therefore should be facilitating mechanisms that help the society to cohere and take care with its fundamental relationships - between governed and those who govern, among civic and religious leaders, ethnicities, neighbours and family. These policies should be enabling mechanisms for creative approaches to development. The Pitch Lake as a World Heritage Site offers one such possibility.

World Heritage site tourism is part of a special niche market destination requiring the development and maintenance not only of the site but a wider surrounding area. The site is regarded not only as one to be cherished by the country in which it is located but by the whole world as a gift from posterity to future generations. A World Heritage Site destination changes the way a country thinks of itself. The Pitch Lake brings back to our consciousness the memory of Iere the home of the First Peoples of this land, reminding us that as descendants of transplanted people we are all custodians of their legacy in both islands that comprise this nation.

If at Independence we had called ourselves Iereans we would have withstood many of the energy draining debates on national symbols. Fifty years later, to be Ierean is still a worthy consideration. The Pitch Lake as a World Heritage site will not only see the development of La Brea, but the deep South. It will be a testimony to remind us and the world that the Pitch Lake is a wonder of the world - the largest lake of its kind and that are most of the roads on this planet are paved with its asphalt.

The land today that First Peoples called Iere is in itself a wonder with so many different transplanted people dwelling in relative peace. And as we focus on that truth we should strive to keep it so for future generations – revealing to us all that culture is more than festival.