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THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTING THE AFRICAN DIASPORA IN THE CARIBBEAN

Roots of Jamaican Culture. Mervyn C. Alleyne. London: Pluto Press, 1988. xii + 186 pp. (Paper US$ 15.95)

Guinea's Other Suns: The African Dynamic in Trinidad Culture. Maureen Warner-Lewis. Foreword by Rex Nettleford. Dover MA: The Majority Press, 1991. xxii + 207 pp. (Paper US$ 9.95)

A recent trend in anthropology is defined by the interest in the role of historical and political configurations in the constitution of local cultural practices. Unfortunately, with some notable individual exceptions, this is the same anthropology which has largely ignored the Caribbean and its "Islands of History." Of course, this says much, much more about the way in which anthropology constructs its subject than it says about the merits of the Caribbean case and the fundamental essence of these societies, born as they were in the unforgiving and defining moment of pervasive, persuasive, and pernicious European construction of "Otherness." As Trouillot (1992:22) writes, "Whereas anthropology prefers 'pre-contact' situations - or creates 'no-contact' situations - the Caribbean is nothing but contact." If the anthropological fiction of pristine societies, uninfluenced and uncontaminated by "outside" and more powerful structures and cultures cannot be supported for the Caribbean, then many anthropologists do one or both of the two anthropologically next best things: they take us on a journey that finds us exploding the "no-contact" myth over and over (I think it is called "strawpersonism"), suddenly discovering political economy, history, and colonialism, and/or they end up constructing the "pristine" anyway by emphasizing those parts of a diaspora group's pre-Caribbean culture that are thought to remain as cultural "survivals."
Whereas the issues are the same, the stakes (epistemological as well as political) are somewhat higher for those defined as “native scholars” – even if native scholar is not an unproblematic definition in the Caribbean (see Trouillot 1992:24-25). The stakes are higher because so much of theoretical debate has turned on the issue of the native scholar’s supposed ideological baggage and class and ethnic affiliation (for an early discussion, see Pearse 1956:134-35). And the stakes are higher still for those of us (“native” and “foreign”) studying diaspora groups within Caribbean “nations.” For the native ethnographer, as Carnegie (1992:20) argues,

Nationalism becomes a double curse: Even as it urges its observer-scholar to survey all from the deck of the capital’s centralized promontory, it also draws with narrow sharpness the boundaries within which they might focus. The imagined national community, given form by geography, constrains the native ethnographer as tenaciously as the geography of the former empire determined the varieties of exotic others that their own anthropologists could sample.

In Williams’s cogent model (1990, 1991), Caribbean nationalism (and, I would add, that of much of the New World) is characterized by competition among ethnic groups to dominate the discourse that determines which group has contributed most to the building of “the nation,” a process involving the claims to cultural distinctiveness as “proof” of these contributions. And this is in spite of (or better, accomplished through) national mottoes such as Jamaica’s “Out of many, one people” and Trinidad’s “Together we aspire, together we achieve” that would appear to preclude such claims of distinctiveness but which really become vehicles (and there are many others) through which the “real” culture of the nation can be defined, promulgated, and displayed.

I recognize the politics of “native” versus “foreign” scholars and how either may use their status as a weapon (see Dominguez 1986). Yet I point out this distinction here for two reasons – first, because Mervyn Alleyne (pp. ix-x) and Maureen Warner-Lewis (pp. xix-xxi), both Trinidadians who work at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica, refer to themselves as part of the societies they are studying and attempt to reach those therein engaged in the process of self-definition, and secondly because both authors avowedly seek (although in somewhat different ways) to establish through historical and anthropological data and theoretical models the “African” cultural contribution to Caribbean nations. Thus, these books are something more than academic exercises. They can be read as sustained responses to colonial and anthropological notions that New World Africans had/have no culture of their own. At the same time, they can also be read as both criticisms of the construction of “non-ethnicity” (e.g., the national mottoes) by
the post-colonial multi-ethnic state and, paradoxically, as part of nationalist discourse that seeks to provide an anthropological basis for legitimate and authentic national culture.

Early on in his book, Alleyne states that he is concerned to explore "the African contribution to the culture of Jamaica" (p. vii, although he hedges somewhat later on, p. 57) by examining the aspects of contemporary Jamaican culture that have parallels in West Africa and by looking at the "transmission of what I shall call an African culture in Jamaica." While acknowledging that various ethnic groups have "contributed to the Jamaican cultural mosaic," he says that the descendants of African slaves "played a central role in this creative process." Moreover, this group "is demographically the largest, and it is the reservoir and agent of what is most distinctive and defining about Jamaican culture" (p. vii). Further, he endeavors to show that it is not just a generalized "Africanness" but that "In Jamaica one African ethnic group (the Twi) provided political and cultural leadership" (p. ix). Thus, like Haiti and Cuba, Jamaica is a place where "one African people dominated and assimilated others" (pp. 18-19).

Alleyne places himself squarely within the debate on "continuities" and "creation" — that is, between those who see the cultures of blacks in the Americas as basically continuities of African cultural forms or as created on the spot — and thus cannot transcend this debate. Culture creationists, he claims, must hold that important cultural and ethnic divisions existed between enslaved Africans and that "African culture" was not able to withstand slavery and its attendant murderous processes. He comes down unequivocally on the continuities side, drawing (uncritically in my view) on Melville Herskovits for sustenance and sparring with those like Sidney Mintz and Richard Price whom he charges with supporting the hypothesis that Africans were stripped of their culture during and after the Middle Passage and slavery. Yet Alleyne's view is very similar to Mintz and Price's — which they themselves acknowledge (1992:viii) — and he shares with his supposed adversaries the idea that there was an underlying cultural unity that transcended West African ethnic differences, which continues to be manifest beneath the level of consciousness. Warner-Lewis, citing Alleyne's earlier work, supports this view (p. 159).

In apparently seeking to revamp (or resuscitate) Herskovits by incorporating the notion that West African culture was "to a large degree one system" (p. 7; see also pp. 19 and 50, for example), Alleyne endeavors in Chapter 1 to develop his own model of cultural contact and cultural change. He rightly urges throughout the book that we take a historical perspective on culture. However, his theoretical approach cannot logically incorporate such a perspective. For example, he develops (pp. 23-27) the concepts of
"base" and "target" cultural forms, where "When two cultures are in contact, acculturation and assimilation can be seen as a movement away from the base towards the target" (p. 24) – a "target," we find out moreover, which "has been constantly changing over the years and centuries" (p. 26). Yet the very concept of a "base" presupposes a (historically distinct) "target," and thus is anything but historical. Relatedly, Alleyne posits that, even though some individuals and groups in Jamaica practice more African continuities than others (such as the religions of the slaves versus those of the Maroons, p. 85), "the main trend in situations of contact between Europeans and Africans in the New World is for the subject culture to undergo progressive loss or decay" where this loss is "rapid but gradual," in "both its inner form and in its outward manifestations" (p. 25). But the notion of continuities (read survivals) which can only suffer "loss or decay" undercuts any notion that culture is made and remade – that is, that culture is historical. Later in the book (pp. 146-48), he gives the example of Rastafarianism as a continuity, but anyone familiar with the origins of Rastafarianism in 1930s Jamaica will see it as a readily identifiable, meaningful "invented tradition." Thus, his approach is hardly anthropological as it considers no emic perspective on the construction and invention of "Africanness" in Jamaica.

Further, we have no idea what historical process or structure acts to produce cultural loss or decay, except for concepts that are inimical to his main tenets. For example, there is the perfectly reasonable proposition that "the distribution of power is the chief factor determining the direction, nature, and intensity of cultural change," which, "as in the case of slavery, results in massive cultural change in the subject group" which must adopt some of the dominant cultural forms (pp. 13-14). However, these statements contradict his earlier proclamations against the culture stripping and creation hypotheses. Indeed, he is quite hostile to the idea that, through resistance, slaves created a culture of their own (pp. 19-20), acknowledging, though, that "True, there was an important link between religion and resistance, but religion was taken to Jamaica from Africa and was an important basis for resistance; it was not created during the course of that resistance" (pp. 21-22) – a view which, in any case, he contradicts later (p. 91). So Alleyne's way out of evidence that points to the impossibility of continuity and the likelihood of creation is to argue that creativity is itself a continuity: "Afro-American culture is no more and no less creative than other New World cultures. The kind of creativity demonstrated by Afro-Americans is probably a legacy of Africa" (p. 22). And this after stating without irony: "Needless to say, it is often difficult to say for sure whether a particular cultural form is a 'continuity' or a 'creation'" (p. 22). Thus, Alleyne's theoretical apparatus is wrought with teologies, contradictions, and caveats. It renders almost meaningless
his potentially valuable theoretical concept of a "continuum of cultural differentiation" (pp. 7, 15-16).

After two chapters designed to prove the provenance of Jamaica’s Africans, there are three very rich chapters based on secondary sources, “African Religion in Jamaica,” “Music and Dance,” and “Language” – in which examples of dominant cultural forms are traced to the different Africans from the area of the Gold Coast (now Ghana), which Alleyne subsumes under the designation Akan, who spoke closely related dialects or mutually intelligible languages like Twi and who practiced aspects of a common culture (pp. 44-49). While there were a number of other groups, Gold Coast Africans became dominant, although he variously describes differences between the groups as “superficial” (p. 71) and as “sharp” (p. 122) for the same period. I am not sure why (or how) such contributions can be distinguished (e.g., Akan versus Yoruba) if there was so much of an underlying unity among West African peoples. Nevertheless, while he often makes culture stand for language, his main contribution is his discussion of the African influence on the structure of Jamaican English (pp. 65-68, Chapter 6) and it is here where some of his earlier theoretical propositions are justified.

Warner-Lewis, too, focuses on language (but also much more), especially the Yoruba language and culture in Trinidad’s history. But in addition to being sensitive to her own upbringing in multicultural Trinidad (pp. xix-xxi), she is careful to point out that if “this collection gives the impression that by ‘African’ is meant ‘Yoruba,’ then I must again caution against such a facile interpretation,” stating that “it would be a distortion to conclude, at this stage of investigation, that Trinidad’s African heritage is either exclusively Yoruba or overwhelmingly so.” She also indicates that her ongoing work on Congo speech and songs “may produce a somewhat different picture than appears at present” (pp. xx). Indeed, later she provides examples of conceptual links with other African cultures (e.g., pp. 112, 132) and practices (p. 117), and traces Yoruba consciousness of pan-African links (pp. 126-27).

*Guinea’s Other Suns*, a collection of previously-published and unpublished papers, is based on Warner-Lewis’s oral history research in Trinidad mainly between 1966 and 1972 among the grandchildren (and even children) of the thousands of Africans brought to Trinidad as indentured workers after the end of slavery (see Chapter 3). This painstaking research is bolstered by her knowledge of the Yoruba language in addition to her deft use of contemporary nineteenth-century sources and secondary historical sources for both the Caribbean and West Africa. Weaving these sources together involves some crafty detective work. The rich data that these methods reveal will make many of us question our views on the post-emancipation colonial Caribbean.
For instance, in her long excellent chapter entitled “Africans in Nineteenth-Century Trinidad,” she points to distinctions among Africans and shows how ethnic hostilities in Africa, for example between Hausa and Yoruba, were played out in Trinidad. But she also points to evidence of creative interaction between such groups and their conflict with creole society: Africans not only had to accommodate to white colonial norms but to black creole society as well. In this regard, her discussion of African domestic space arrangements giving way to creole forms (pp. 42-43, 48) is important for showing the everyday practice that constituted creole culture, as well as religious practices (p. 51) and others (pp. 53-55). She also maintains that African Muslims had little or no religious interchange with East Indian Muslims, but this conclusion may be premature, as another reviewer has also argued (Schuler 1992:244-45).

The main corpus of her study is a collection of poems, songs, and chants in the Yoruba language gleaned from Trinidadian informants. Through these media, her informants “remembered” not only wars in Africa but the experience of exile, as in the lament (p. 89):

\[
\begin{align*}
Mo \text{ gbèdèrè} & \quad \text{I speak the language of strangers} \\
Mo \text{ gbé àrè o} & \quad \text{I live among strangers}
\end{align*}
\]

Focusing on semantics as well as meaning, she analyzes in detail the structure and use of allusion and metaphor in virtually every song, poem, and chant she provides. This allows her to show the cultural work involved as Africans and their descendants passed down language as well as ideas. It also allows her to interpret how these contributed to other cultural forms, from the consciousness-raising of the Garvey movement (pp. 72, 74), to the present-day attempts to purge Christian elements from the Orisha religion, to the African tradition of masking and its relation to Carnival, to Yoruba and other African phraseology as the basis of Trinidad Creole language and the calypso, and even to alms-giving traditions as a basis for modern social work.

While she speaks of “African culture overseas” being “retained by way of ritual act and secular mores” (p. 113), pointing to “African survival elements” (p. 79), nowhere does she bring theory to bear on the nature of these “survivals.” Her theory, instead, remains dangerously implicit. This is not to say that her data do not present more than plausible explanations of cultural traditions. But the data, used for purposes more sinister than Warner-
Lewis's, might give impetus to "prove" African cultural continuities and to justify the legitimacy of "African" culture – at the expense of others – in the national context. In the delicate words of the poet laureate,

Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape. It is such a love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments, the cracked heirlooms whose restoration shows its white scars. This gathering of broken pieces is the care and pain of the Antilles, and if the pieces are disparate, ill-fitting, they contain more pain than their original sculpture, those icons and sacred vessels taken for granted in their ancestral places. Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent (Walcott 1993:8-9)

NOTES

1. The phrase is Marshall D. Sahlins’s (1985).
2. Mintz and Price (1992:9-10) state that: "An African cultural heritage, widely shared by the people imported into any new colony, will have to be defined in less concrete terms, by focusing more on values, and less on sociocultural forms, and even by attempting to identify unconscious ‘grammatical’ principles, which may underlie and shape behavioral response.”
3. The term is Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s (1983).

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