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Cultivating Caribbean cultural regionalism Kingston, Jamaica*

I am pleased and honored to have been asked to give this first Rex Nettleford memorial lecture which was to have coincided with the anniversary of his death and the launch of another of his books; this time a collection of eulogies. Rex's contribution is so timeless that I do not think that the delay of few days will impair the relevance of my remarks to his life and work. I am amazed at the number of eulogies he gave and the persons from so many disciplines and walks of life whom he eulogized. I suppose he was asked to deliver eulogies and write tributes so often, not only because of his prodigious oratorical gifts, but also because of his humanism and because he obviously laid store by the number of persons whose lives he touched or who touched his life in a significant way. He related well to people and obviously cared deeply about many of them so it must have been relatively easy to "speak well" of them. The impressive spread of the eulogized across the Caribbean is also not surprising because he was a regionalist at heart and an open and unrepentant believer that there is something special, more than a natural mystic, which identifies us Caribbean people. It is the kind of regionalism he advocated and the instruments that must sustain it that are the burden of my remarks today.

I referred briefly to my concern for regionalism in my graduation addresses of 2010 when I expressed sympathy with the sentiments in a paper that the Guild of Students presented to our meeting of the Finance and General Purposes Committee in which they emphasized the importance of a Caribbean unity and bond. The students said:

"The Inter Campus Guild Council believes that the true essence of the UWI-its history of developing regional strength, Caribbean oneness and a vibrant exchange of West Indian cultures, which should be at the pinnacle of our student mandate-has been dormant to our operations"

This is my final quote from their excellent paper:

"As the leaders of this University, we believe that an effort should be made to restore the West Indies back to the University of the West Indies".

* The Inaugural Rex Nettleford Lecture and launch of *From the Heart Eulogies* by Rex Nettleford, Kingston, Jamaica, 17 February 2011

I was moved and impressed by this call from the students to have the University be a more vocal and persuasive advocate for the Caribbean regionalism which was one of the main reasons for its establishment and indeed watered the roots of its very beginnings. I am taking their call seriously and can find no better occasion than a lecture in honor of Rex Nettleford to explore the nature of what regionalism should mean to us and how it can be promoted. I do this with some nostalgia, as in those days when Rex and I were undergraduates at Mona the nature of Caribbean regionalism and the aspirations of the Caribbean people to establish their particular identity and claim their place, if not pride of place in the company of the world's nations as an identifiable region, was the stuff for vigorous debate. There was no doubt that we had to be exploring in sport, the arts and education the ties that should bind us together. With the passage of time I have become perhaps less starry-eyed about many of the things I debated when I was young, but I am even more convinced now of the notion of a Caribbean regionalism and the benefits that it confers.

This call for West Indianness and regional cohesion by the young is not unique to University students. The members of the CARICOM Commission on Youth Development headed by the late Barry Chevannes have also affirmed their vision for a Caribbean Community that is united and strong enough to earn the respect of first-world countries. They lament the limited cultural, political, social and economic affiliation among the countries and the lack of connectedness. This is part of their frustration and drives some regretfully to consider migration.

Regionalism can be a qualifier to art or governance and the concept can also be applied to particular characteristics of a state or part of a country. However, it is the notion of regionalism as applied in international relations that is assuming greater salience in the world today and which I wish to explore in the Caribbean context. Regionalism in international relations has been described as *“the expression of a common sense of identity and purpose combined with the creation and implementation of institutions that express a particular identity and shape collective action within a geographical region”*.

Within the past few years as our paths intersected more frequently around University matters, Rex and I shared some concerns about that sense of identity and purpose and on more than one occasion agonized over whether we as West Indians were sufficiently conscious of that regionalism as it applied to us. Did we feel it viscerally? We perhaps came at the problem from different angles and could describe the contributions of branches of knowledge that have sometimes been artificially separated into disciplines, but we arrived at rather much the same conclusions about how the institutions that must create that sense of purpose and foster collective action should perform.

It is still a valid question put by many how can a region that is defined by ethnic and social diversity, and some would say political diversity, be concerned about regionalism and value it beyond the sentimental. How would the growing pluralism in institutions and in politics be comfortable within a regional space and embrace more than the fact of simply belonging to that space?

Most would agree that Caribbean regionalism has proceeded along three fronts which should not be not entirely separate or mutually exclusive. There are the political, economic and

cultural fronts and they should reinforce one the other. The formulation I have found most attractive is that of overlapping circles for these three main components with each one influencing the other. If there is one criticism that I have leveled frequently at the major social partners in the Caribbean is that they have adopted a stove-pipe approach and tried to separate them almost rigidly They have led our citizens to genuflect and worship fervently at the altars of political and economic regionalism but keep faith less assiduously with the cultural dimension and articulate its value. I have had to face the argument that there are indicators of progress with regard to political and economic regionalism which are not available for cultural regionalism. I would argue that there are many measures of the inputs and outcomes of cultural regionalism although I could premise without being false to my background and training that the notion of identity which is critical for the appreciation of self-worth does not, cannot and perhaps should not be counted by using some vulgar metric. That does not diminish its importance and I suppose I could use the quip attributed to Einstein

“Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted”

Emilio Pantojas Garcia in an analysis of economic integration and Caribbean identity published recently in Caribbean Studies, reflected on the problem in these words:

“The analysis of the integration experience in the Caribbean suggests that the basis for achieving a durable and structurally deep regional integration goes beyond traditional technocratic designs such as customs unions and free trade agreements. Regional economic agreements are important building blocks but regional integration may require the development of complex institutional and normative frameworks. That is, in a context of geopolitical, economic, historical and cultural heterogeneity, such as the Caribbean, regional integration may require the construction of a political project of integration that includes the construction of a shared regional identity. Put another way, regional economic integration necessitates the construction of a shared political and cultural identity, as well as coherent institutional, normative and economic frameworks. Until these common regional frameworks are developed and aligned, integration will not materialize in the Greater Caribbean beyond the traditional cultural and linguistic regions.”

I warm to his thesis that there can be no integration unless there is a solid base of the identity and purpose of a cultural regionalism. I am not pessimistic and will not deny that there has been progress in the political and economic spheres, and I give credit to the many who have struggled mightily to find the formulae to solve the equations for that progress. The several Commissions and Task Forces on appropriate governance mechanisms for the Caribbean Community are a testimony to a genuine desire to find solutions that are acceptable to all. I, like most Caribbean people am aware of the intense discussion on the need for or appreciation of the benefits of mature regionalism. This has been espoused as a form of political organization in which the critical policies and decisions of the Community as taken by the Heads of Government will have the force of law, consistent with CARICOM remaining a community of sovereign

states and I do not wish to deprecate in any way the importance of the discourse around that concept.

Nor must I discount the slow but meaningful progress that is being made in economic regionalism. Many wish it would be faster, but sometimes we forget the progress being made by the private sector in regional activities through regional transnational corporations. And let us not forget the traveling traders-the higglers, colorful of dress and language who have been hawking their wares throughout the Caribbean for generations without caring one bit whether their activities could be labeled as an example of economic regionalism.

There is obviously great difficulty in accepting any formulation that diminishes state sovereignty or independence of action. It is rather amusing to read the predictions of those eminent persons who thought of political independence for small states as farcical. No less a person than CLR James wrote as late as 1973

“Those little islands by themselves cannot make it. For me increasingly, independence and future adequate development of Grenada, St. Lucia, Barbados and the like as independent territories is an absurdity, and to analyze the future of their independence is either immorality or sadism”

It is important to be able to establish the similarity of the backgrounds of the Caribbean people as a prerequisite for understanding the threads that fashion the yarn of cultural regionalism that binds us today. Rex would never weary of pointing out that we all came from the same cane field or more graphically cane piece. He would never tire of showing that there was enough evidence of shared historical and cultural traits to produce a distinctive Caribbeanness. He would repeat on numerous occasions that it was the brutality of the struggle of all the major racial groups here and the apparent distance of a decent exit, except perhaps one that was horizontal, which would lead the sufferers to retreat into those parts of their consciousness which he labeled the labyrinths of the mind. There they could cultivate what he described as a creative intellect and a creative imagination that has been their legacy to us. It is that possibility of bringing light out of darkness and giving shape and form to the imagination that is in so many ways the essence of the regional identity.

Part of the proof of the existence of these qualities is shown in the extent to which the Caribbean with really rather limited resources and not yet reaping the full benefits promised for economic regionalism has done so well in enhancing its development. I refer to its human development as described by UNDP as “the expansion of human freedoms to live long, healthy and creative lives: to advance other goals they have reason to value: and to engage actively in shaping development equitably and sustainably in a shared planet”. These are the concepts that underlie the essential freedoms and capabilities espoused by Amartya Sen and the qualities that Eric Williams described as nothing more, nothing less than the face of man.

In the Human Development Report for 2010, there were six English-speaking Caribbean countries included in the analysis and ranking of countries according to their level of human development. Five of the six were classified as very high or high human development with only Guyana classified as medium human development. And of the three countries characterized as

having very high Human Development in the Region of the Americas one was from the Caribbean-Barbados. Given our lack of many natural resources, I would posit that some of this achievement is due to the efforts of our institutions that express a particular identity and shape collective action. I hope CLR James gets to read the Human Development Reports.

National security is one of the major concerns in our region and considerable time and effort has been spent by our Heads of Government in addressing the problem of security. This has traditionally been thought of in terms of the protection of the integrity of national borders, but with the exception of two of our Caribbean states there has been no credible threat to territorial security. But it has become clearer that the threat to national security does not only come through modern day Genghis Khans. It comes in more subtle and more deadly forms. The cultural penetration that is a byproduct of the interconnectedness of today, the transmission of drugs and ideologies, the ready movement of money and the availability and criminalization of sophisticated technology can threaten national security. But it is also matters of health and disease that can threaten national security.

However, important though national security is in terms of the stability and integrity of the nation state, considerable attention is now being paid to human security which is thought of as the availability to human beings of those things which make them secure as persons. Whereas human development represents the expansion of human freedoms, human security is ensuring against threats to those freedoms. The health of our people is essential for them to be able to feel secure and realize their potential for human security. There is an undisputed nexus between regionalism and Caribbean health that runs in both directions and the importance of critical institutions in protecting the latter has never been clearer. I will cite some examples of collective Caribbean action in health because they are in some way an expression of the Caribbean cultural identity factors and values such as sharing, kinship and reciprocity and cultural identity is one of the foundations of regionalism. As I do so, I am conscious of and comforted by Rex's concern that there needed to be "a greater appreciation of the centrality of cultural variables in the development equation". He would include matters related to health as proper dwellers beneath his umbrella of cultural studies. But I focus not health itself, but on cooperation in health matters as such cooperation is another one of the prisms through which we see the light of our cultural Caribbean selves.

The Caribbean has a long history of regional cooperation in health, perhaps longer than in any other area. Initially most of the cooperation was in the field of control of communicable diseases. The fear of contagion is a powerful stimulus to cooperation. The achievements of this region in the control of the childhood infectious diseases such as poliomyelitis and measles and more recently German measles have been nothing short of spectacular. The plans and strategies in this area have been codified as a formal program of Caribbean Cooperation in Health.

But more recently attention has been turned to the noncommunicable diseases such as cardiovascular disease which includes heart disease and strokes, diabetes, cancer and chronic respiratory disease which share a set of common risk factors, such as tobacco use, alcohol abuse, unhealthy diets and physical inactivity. The burden of these diseases weighs heavily on the Caribbean and as an example the leading seven countries for prevalence of diabetes in the Americas are in the Caribbean. It is estimated that about one in every seven Barbadian adults is

diabetic. The region has recognized that control of this new plague cannot be achieved by pious and not so pious admonitions to individuals to change their naughty behaviors. There has in addition to be action by the government such that the healthy choice is the easy choice. The governments have to alter the environment to facilitate the decrease in the prevalence of the risk factors. For example the increase in taxes on tobacco must be employed as the most effective method of reducing tobacco use and inhibiting the young from beginning to smoke.

So seized were they of the importance of regional collective action that the Heads of Government met in a Summit in Port-of-Spain in 2007 to discuss these diseases and the approach to their control. That summit was a global first of its kind. But the collective action went further. Aably led by the Prime Ministers of St. Kitts/Nevis and Trinidad and Tobago the Commonwealth Heads of Government when they met in Port-of-Spain in 2009 adopted a major declaration on the approach to prevention and control of these diseases. But collective action has gone even further and the Caribbean governments have spearheaded the adoption of a Resolution at the United Nations calling for a United Nations High Level meeting with the participation of Heads of State and Government to address this scourge of noncommunicable diseases. This is a historic achievement. It is only the second occasion in the history of the UN that there has been a meeting at this high level to address a health issue-and it was initiated and promoted by collective Caribbean regional initiative.

The collective action in health is not only in advocacy, but there is good evidence of action in the region. One of the more recent developments is the formation of a Caribbean Public Health Agency that will be a major advance in providing a Caribbean response to the shared Caribbean health problems in such areas as disease surveillance and control, nutrition and environmental health.

I will cite one final example of a successful, collective Caribbean health enterprise. Everyone knows that the Caribbean has suffered and continues to suffer grievously from the plague of HIV and the consequent AIDS. But the Caribbean approach is less well known. Ten years ago last Tuesday-Valentine's day, five of us affixed our signatures in Barbados to a formal document creating the Pan Caribbean Partnership against HIV/AIDS (PANCAP). That Partnership has survived and thrived and has been recognized globally as a best practice. It has mobilized approximately 80 million US dollars in support of the programs in the Caribbean Regional Strategic Framework and has supported the training of over 200 professionals in HIV related areas. Of course there is lot more to be done, but they have been 10 years of solid achievement.

I have spoken mainly about health, partly because I believe that things cultural go beyond attention to the visual and performing arts and also because it is the field I know best. It is a source of a little pride that no other region in the world can claim the number of successful collective and cooperative health initiatives as we have seen in the Caribbean. I also cite these examples of collective, cooperative Caribbean action in health because they are in some way an expression of the Caribbean values such as sharing, kinship and reciprocity and our cultural identity factors which are recognized as one of the foundations of regionalism.

Less I be accused of disciplinary jingoism let me hasten to say that there are other areas such as education, in which many of the same arguments could be made and examples of regionalism drawn. Most of this would not have been possible without the competent support of the CARICOM Secretariat. When brickbats are thrown at CARICOM and there is lamentation over inaction or slowness of action in political or economic issues, it is well that we also note those areas in which there has been effective action and strategic support for regionalism.

I have contended that it is in this area of the cultural regionalism that the functional cooperation that underlies the work of the Caribbean Community is best seen, although there is no doubt that there is functional cooperation in other aspects of the Community's work. It is functional cooperation in this area that can touch the lives and hearts of the Caribbean citizens and have them accept that they have a stake in this Caribbean enterprise. There may be skepticism over the possibility of economic regionalism and discussion over whether the instruments necessary for it such as the CCJ should be adopted, but there is no opposition to the premise that collective regional action in health as an aspect of cultural regionalism is beneficial to every state and bears fruit for every one of its citizens.

What is the role of the University of the West Indies in stimulating regionalism and the search for the answers to the solution of those problems which prevent us from going further and faster? The Vice-Chancellor has established a Task Force to examine the barriers that inhibit the University strengthening its regional character, and as the students phrased it, 'putting the West Indies back in UWI'. No doubt there will be a menu of suggestions as to how the work done here and the organization of scholarship can contribute to a better appreciation of its West Indian origin. In addition attention will no doubt be given to facilitating the interaction of students from the region to create that sense of that identity which is essential to regionalism. Given the vertiginous growth of the technology of communication which has fed the interconnectedness that is the essence of globalization, it cannot be beyond us to reduce the capacity of physical distance to inhibit the creation of a common West Indian purpose and identity. I do know that our paradigms of connectivity will change for the better to facilitate the capacity to interact. The young of today have become adept at navigating the digital cosmos in such a way that they will make obsolete our formal networks and licenses and utilize an information architecture that allows them to defy distance and tether time, coupling it with social software that allows a fluidity of intercourse at which persons of my generation can only marvel.

But there are other dimensions to restoring the West Indies in UWI besides creating the opportunities for reducing the physical separateness that that is an inescapable consequence of our spread all over the Caribbean. Creating knowledge in our University about our own reality and our products is essential for several reasons. First, the application of local evidence to local problems gives more assurance of the relevance of the solutions proposed. But in addition, the University can burnish its brand and strengthen the feeling of institutional and regional identity through promoting and disseminating knowledge about its products-specifically its heroes. I know I am not alone in feeling a certain pride in and identification with the Caribbeanness of Rex Nettleford and Derek Walcott and Eddie Baugh and Ken Standard and many others like them. Good institutions create indigenous pride by having the young identify with great men and women who once walked where they now walk and played where they now play.

Mr. Chairman,

It must be obvious that I have a deep and abiding faith in this regional enterprise of ours and hold that we can foster the many aspects of cultural regionalism that strengthen it. I am confident that our University will find ways to address the concern of putting the West Indies back in UWI. This is not beyond the capacity of that Caribbean creative spirit which Rex espoused so well and the virtue of which he articulated in so many ways. We continue to be indebted to him for his creativity and compassion, and especially for his commitment to cultivating Caribbean cultural regionalism.