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Caribbean Culture vs the Cultural Industry

It was the evening of a recent Sunday at the 40th birthday party of a cousin of my wife Monica's. The party had begun around 1:30 pm and by late evening most of the guests had taken their leave. Remaining in the living room was a group of the birthday boy's friends from school days, and when I walked in, I found them in semicircle around the TV watching football - not soccer, but the American NFL. It was a scene right out of a US living room; the men clustered around the football game, the women in conversation elsewhere.

The scene was a reminder that the culture we consume in the Caribbean is over 90% imported. The only surprise was that the game on the TV was from the NFL and not the English Premier League. Whether we think of music, literature, painting and sculpture, or sports, most of what we consume is virtual and very little is local or in person. The local market for culture anywhere in the Caribbean is very small.

The Caribbean cultural industry consists mostly of producers of culture; their main audience is abroad. What they may earn locally is very little because the domestic market is so small to begin with, and most of our cultural consumption is produced abroad. What is more, the fact that the Caribbean does not share

a common currency means that performances by and cultural services from other Caribbean producers have to be paid for in US dollars, just like those from any foreign source. Cultural practitioners have to travel to their markets to provide services, unlike providers of tourism services whose customers travel to them. Their incomes are earned abroad and most find it more convenient to live abroad. As a result, there are no local spinoffs from their performances and the cultural events in which they participate.

Caribbean culture is changing, as are cultural practices around the world. The advent of the 21st century has witnessed the emergence of a new era of global communication, with profound effects on the way cultural products are produced and consumed, as well as on the nature of the products and services themselves. Cultural producers may access the global market from anywhere, but that does not mean that any country, however small, can build a domestic cultural industry. The cultural practitioner needs a platform through which to gain access to the global market and only the mighty corporations from large countries have the resources to provide those platforms.

As suggested in an earlier commentary (October 2025) the most effective support Caribbean governments may provide to cultural practitioners is to facilitate access to foreign currency. Public investment in sports and performance facilities of a standard required to attract international events has proved to be a loss-making exercise almost everywhere in the Caribbean. They have failed to attract enough business to support ongoing maintenance and an adequate administrative staff, draining scarce funds from the public purse and exhibiting repeated cycles of disrepair and refurbishment. They represent a negative return on public investment, both economically and socially.

The preferred policy of support for culture by Caribbean governments is to provide modest subsidies for community groups and non-profit institutions, as has been a long-standing practice. Venerable institutions which are evidence of the success of this policy include the Institute of Jamaica and the Barbados Museum and Historical Society. These institutions are run by a Board of Management elected by their members, and they are financed by membership subscriptions, revenues generated by visitors to their facilities, merchandise sales, rentals of their premises, consultancies and other revenues, in addition to a government grant.

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