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RESPECT AND UNDERSTANDING :
ENGAGING CREATIVE DIVERSITY
THE CARIBBEAN EXPERIENCE
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Two or so years ago the Commonwealth Caribbean enjoyed a presence among a group of so-called Experts or Eminent Persons as part of a Commonwealth Commission on **Respect and Understanding**. The Commission was established in response to the decision at the 2005 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) to request the Commonwealth Secretary General “to explore initiatives to promote mutual understanding and respect among all faiths and communities in the Commonwealth”.

The Commonwealth Caribbean presence was not accidental, since the region constitutes, some would say, a microcosm not only of this polyglot aggregation of souls called “the Commonwealth” but also of all of Planet Earth.

- “With a third of the world’s population, the Commonwealth is home to rich and poor, young and old, and people of every colour and creed”, reads the Report (Executive Summary). “It is also an organization that strives hard to make democracy a way of life. Its composition is inclusive of all political and economic groupings – its 53 members come from every geographical region, represent every stage of development and include people from all the major religions.

- The shared history and traditions of Commonwealth members have yielded administrative, educational and legal lessons that provide fertile ground for the exchange of ideas and best practice. The Commonwealth has used these to good effect, particularly in its support for the poorest and the most marginalized – women, young people, indigenous groups, and the rural poor – particularly those in least-developed countries, including those in small island states.
- The Commission believes that the response to confrontational problems should be rooted in the Commonwealth’s agreed fundamental emphasis on human rights, liberties, democratic societies, gender equality, the rule of law and a political culture that promotes transparency, accountability and economic development. It is also important to appreciate that the Commonwealth is not just a family of nations; it is also a family of peoples. Furthermore, the Commonwealth provides a shared forum in which governments and civil society meet as partners and as equals. With over 85 pan-Commonwealth professional associations and civil society organizations, [of which the Commonwealth Association of Museums is one] the Commonwealth family connects through institutional as well as personal links, and operates through cultural as well as political, social and economic affiliations.
- Drawing on the participation of and consultation with its civil society partners, the Commonwealth makes decisions on the basis of negotiation, dialogue, precedent and consensus. This so-called “Commonwealth approach” of working ensures that members respect each other and try to understand, as fully as possible, the

points of view of others. It is to this that the great leader of our time – and former President of South Africa – Nelson Mandela referred in 1994 when he argued that ‘the Commonwealth makes the world safe for diversity’.” (my emphasis)

The final report entitled **Civil Paths to Peace** clearly sent the message that the world’s contemporary traumas turning on violence (physical and psychological) and terrorism betray in large measure the absence of respect and understanding among the tenants of Planet Earth. The need, then, for new thinking about conflicts in the world, for an acknowledged equality for every individual in political participation irrespective of religion, race, caste, language or community or for that matter their date of immigration and arrival (should that be an issue), for the encouragement of the growth and development of civil society in all its myriad manifestations, for the recognition of the pivotal role of women in societal maintenance, for the education and socialization of the youth, and for the responsible and unfettered involvement of the media in public education.

One thing that came through strongly to the Commonwealth Caribbean participant in the extensive deliberations was, indeed, the challenge of the **dilemma of difference** which characterizes human existence, the need to come to terms with this and to forge the **Unum** out of the **pluribus** that has been the challenge of human aggregations over time – from empire to nations and transplanted entities as is the case with all of the Americas of which the Caribbean (Commonwealth and otherwise) is an integral part.

Indeed, the Munyonyo Statement on Respect and Understanding following the presentation of the Commission's Report to the CHOGM in Kampala in November 2007 began with – “The Commonwealth is a global organization and embraces many of the world's great civilizations and cultures. It is a body well placed to affirm the fundamental truth that diversity is one of humanity's greatest strengths. Heads of government recognized their special responsibility, as leaders, to seek the most effective means to address intolerance, fanaticism, violence and terrorism”.

The key factor of **diversity** and the positive approach to engaging it in the interest of growth and peaceful development could not have escaped the Commonwealth Caribbean's attention since such diversity in its call for creative response is, indeed, the region's defining point in its half a millennium history of exploited labour through slavery and indentureship, colonial subjugation and post-colonial economic blight with dire consequences for the present, if not for the future, generation.

One of the enduring but by no means endearing myths of the modern age is the myth of homogeneity as a principle of societal organization determining **identity** (ethnic and cultural) rooted in racial purity, shaping **religious conformity** (faith in one and only one God, especially the Christian one), articulating **national cohesion** and **autonomy**, and placing Europe's **intellectual and cultural superiority** high on the totem pole of civilized existence as well as legitimating places of origin of inhabitants on Planet Earth. Chief among the mythmakers for the past four or so hundred years have been those who have held dominion residing in the North Atlantic, i.e. those in Western Europe and its extension, Caucasian North America (especially the United States of

America) and Europe's offspring tenanted not only parts of the hemisphere (especially in the Southern Cone of Latin America), but also the settler highlands of Africa (from colonial Kenya and the former Rhodesias down to Apartheid South Africa) as well as those lands in the Antipodes better known as Australia and New Zealand.

So there was up until the 1970s an active "*White Australia Policy*" leaving on the margin of Australian society, if not rendering invisible, the indigenous Aborigines as the Maoris virtually had been in New Zealand. In South Africa 'honorary Whites', admittedly of varying hues when visiting, were placed along with Coloureds higher up the racial/social totem pole than the Black Africans who constituted a numerical majority but were called upon to function as a cultural and political minority. That is after they were left with the Bible by the Europeans after expropriating their land, according to Bishop Desmond Tutu in one of his more whimsical moments. And lest we forget, it was in South Africa the young attorney Mahatma Gandhi facing racial discrimination and personal humiliation decided to challenge the colonial world to decency through his great work in passive resistance conducted from his home-base in India. His insistence on the promotion of respect and understanding in the face of cultural and ethnic difference between colonizer and colonized left us all the beneficiaries of his vision, courage and determination.

South Africa remains in the news. A United States Secretary of State (Condoleezza Rice) reportedly stated her wish to see the end of the "embarrassing" United States travel restrictions by the United States on former South African President Nelson Mandela and his African National Congress once dubbed "terrorists" and placed on the blacklist

throughout the Apartheid years. The ANC now happens to be the ruling party of South Africa which is a close and friendly ally of the United States. The “bureaucratic snafu” is here in defiance of commonsense and no doubt of respect and understanding (see report in **Barbados Advocate** of April 10, 2008 p. 23)

The United States has remained since Reconstruction in a class by itself, resplendent in its WASP culture accommodating hyphenated Others, with the Negroes **equal** in theory but **separate** in practice. They (the Negroes) were later to hyphenate themselves into “African-Americans” presumably to belong but remained permanently categorized among the “Minorities”. Another myth emerged assuming equality between Majority and Minorities swimming in a melting-pot stew. The resistance on the part of Minority Blacks to such defiance not only of commonsense but of reality was to bring about pictures of strange fruit, long-hot summers, ethnic profiling and all the attendant racist repugnancies that need not delay us here. For despite the transgressions, the society could not be less than true to itself. Retributive justice was to, as it were, catch up with the United States in the year of the Presidential elections. The possibility of an African-American (Barack Obama) or a woman (Hilary Clinton) getting into the White House has clearly been of historic significance. Race and gender are, after all, key elements in the phenomenon of diversity. The diverse and textured reality of all us “*migrants*” has always been too powerful to ignore. It is this diversity and texture that have produced for humankind great art, great science, great literature, great music out of the irreversible mix of arrivant-cultures over time. These have in turn given dynamic energy to a discourse that has taken on greater significance in our newly globalised world by forcing on all who tenant

Planet Earth the realisation that to ignore the cultural specificities of this or that corner of the Planet while relating meaningfully to the global whole is to invite a fate worse than death – a fate agonizingly manifest in a living state of chronic dehumanization of hordes of humanity.

The challenge will not go away, as Nature's retributive justice, Hurricane Katrina served to remind us all in 2005. To say that the delays in the official response to the agony of victims of the disastrous hurricane was blatantly racist would be too simple for serious discussion. But to ignore the fact that too many have lived in denial about the humane demands of the cultural diversity of an ex-slave society in the Americas is to rob ourselves of the possibility of rehumanising the polity bequeathed us out of slavery but now in dire need of the tolerance, understanding, mutual respect, compassion and caring expected of any civilized society, especially when it dares to boast about its commitment to equality and equity as landmarks of democratic governance, not to mention its missionary zeal in making the world safe for democracy if even via regime change and pre-emptive strike, and with the fearlessness of the self-righteous.

It is that diversity and what it ought to mean in praxis that should still engage the intellect, imagination and policy vision of people throughout the Americas. Only so will we be able to deal with a proposition someone like myself has often made to persons of Caucasian stock in the Americas – namely, that until they are able to accept the notion (or fact) that they are as “negrified” as I am Europeanized there can be no peace in the land and certainly no less cause for the self-contempt and guilt complex that flourish on either side of the divide.

There is need to re-think our worldviews and the paradigms we construct to bring meaning to our lives. It is ironical that even while President Bush was able to say publicly that he was aware that poverty was historically rooted in racial discrimination, a prominent son and daughter from the Black oppressed minority felt obliged to bleed the New Orleans Katrina phenomenon of the reality of race-related issues and dress the wounds with the bandage of economic determinism supposedly deemed to be intellectually sound and politically correct. History may not repeat itself but it often casts a long shadow on posterity. And those of us descended from European, African and Asian migrant ancestors occupying since 1492 the real estate of the Native Americans who have tenanted the Americas time out of mind but have long been made to function from the margin, need to code-switch to the new reality of an intercultural, complexly textured, spiritually enriched hemisphere the continuing denial of which reality is arguably the most un-American activity so many of us have come to embrace.

Western Europe (and especially the United Kingdom, once the modern world's greatest imperial power) is now discovering the full implications of the agonizing presence of "alien souls" on their own soil as a result of what one of our Caribbean poets once described as "colonization in reverse" and the latest response to which, a Guyanese-born Brit living in London has had reason to describe as Britain "sleepwalking its way to segregation."

For a number of Britons it would appear that the current problem condition is the rapidly changing ethnic profile of their blessed verdant isles – what with the post-War influx of arrivants after the Second World War from the West Indies, India and Pakistan. Those green and

blessed isles are now full of noises in response to the perceived threat of Caliban in Prospero's domains. Crassly put, there is the articulated fear of what a Member of Parliament referred in 2001 to the "*mongrelisation*" of a refined and purified race in the wake of unrestricted migration into Britain of persons of darker hue and lesser mien. Such a position is by no means new to British experience at least not since the sixteenth century if not earlier. A student of slavery studies, Dieudonne Gnamankou, not so long ago reminded readers that "hostility towards black people was at such a level that Elizabeth [the First] (1533-1603) ordered their expulsion from the country in 1601. The policy of exclusion of Africans from Europe is therefore not a 20th century invention," he takes pains to emphasize. Such a position has been prompted/informed by notions of ethnic purity and of homogeneity as the primary principle of social organization and a basis for the now well known exaggerated claims to cultural certitude and racial superiority. Neither Indians, Pakistanis, nor immigrants of African ancestry have escaped this obscenity still practised at the seat of Empire and arguably of the very Commonwealth now concerned with respect and understanding.

Flowing from this are further notions within the binary perspective of the North Atlantic – of high culture versus low culture, of a classical aesthetics at the apex of a cultural hierarchy with "*ethnic*" spontaneity (once universally viewed as black-face minstrelsy) at the base, of a Great Tradition versus a Little Tradition. And all these correspond in turn to a highly structured racial/cultural and class differentiation signifying the place or standing of different specimens of the human family. The abolition of slavery, the abandonment of Asian indentureship and the disappearance of classic imperialism notwithstanding, old obscenities

retain a tenacious hold in the West on humankind's consciousness, enough to warrant a regretfully unsuccessful world conference sponsored by the United Nations at turn of century, on "Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance." It was held in South Africa – a highly symbolic locus for such a happening since Mandela-land remained almost up until then the last bastion of racism as a formal and official guiding principle of State organization and control in the Western world.

That the entire world is now challenged by a reality that is better known to some people than to others, is something yet to be fully acknowledged. The evidence that all great civilizations are the products of cross-fertilization is too frequently and conveniently forgotten by the powerful and especially by those whose own origins are rooted in such diversity evident from the days of antiquity to contemporary times. The hyphenated Anglo-Saxons are themselves a perfect example of such 'mongrelisation' or cross-breeding not to speak of the later add-ons from Scots, Irish and Welsh "*contaminants*" as well as the Huguenots and Jews of yore who found safe haven in Britain and brought to it their remarkable skills, artisanal and intellectual. And to deny to ancient Greece and Rome the diversity which afforded them the richness of a mix from Europe, Africa and the Orient is to indulge the folly of laying claim to purity of blood which not even the Iberian Spaniards, enriched by the presence of the Jews and Moors until the fall of Granada in 1492, could themselves justify. It is well to remember that in the minds of some, when Spain expelled the Moors and the Jews, it lost its intelligentsia and much of its imagination. The Americas have not been shortsighted enough to indulge such folly despite evidence of habits of exclusion. We have a way of exiling certain of our citizens making

them strangers in their own land.

The Commonwealth Caribbean is by no means perfect in these matters. An Opposition Senator, Wade Mark, was reported in the **Trinidad Express** of April 10, 2008 (p.22) as questioning the balance in the ethnic composition of judges appointed to the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ), one of the foundation pillars of a would-be integrated region. He reminded listeners of the critical mass of 1.4 million people of Indian ancestry inhabiting Suriname, Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago (all Caricom member-states). Yet, he observed, there was no Indian judge named to the Court. Could this be an oversight or a manifestation of lack of respect and understanding in the Caricom fraternity?

However, the peoples of the Americas and the Caribbean which as an iconic part of the Hemisphere have on balance acted and survived on an understanding for three and more centuries, of the power and efficacy of such creative diversity.

An appreciation in the light of the history of the Caribbean region, then, is critical to a fuller understanding of contemporary realities and future challenges. For the Caribbean shares in the great drama of the **Americas**, whereby new societies are shaped, new and delicately tuned sensibilities are honed, and appropriate designs for social living are crafted through the cross-fertilization of disparate elements. The process has resulted in a distinguishable and distinctive entity called "**Caribbean**" which makes it possible to establish a number of regional institutions sharing a common vision for socio-economic, political and educational development. (e.g. **CARICOM, CDB, UWI, UNICA, ACS** etc). The process is intensely **cultural**.

The encounters of Africa and Europe on foreign soil and these in turn with the indigenous Native Americans on their long-tenanted estates and all in turn with later arrivants from Asia (India and China) and the Middle East, has resulted in a culture of texture and diversity held together by a dynamic creativity severally described as creative chaos, stable disequilibrium or cultural pluralism. An apt description of the typical Caribbean person is that he or she is part-African, part-European, part-Asian, part-Native American but totally Caribbean. To perceive this is to understand creative diversity and many do comprehend the phenomenon. To fail to grasp this is arguably the most un-Caribbean thing I can think of. It is also a most un-Commonwealth way to think in defiance of the “Commonwealth approach” of dialogue and consensus.

This understanding comes through in the interesting orientations one finds in the region among those who are not yet existing in the Independence mode. The French Caribbean which constitutionally is metropolitan France overseas (despite the cultural differences between Paris and Point-a-Pitre), the Netherlands Antilles, the British dependencies of Anguilla, Montserrat, Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands and Turks and Caicos, now transformed into British Overseas Territories, the America dependencies of the US Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico (despite Puerto Rico’s “**Commonwealth**” status) and Bermuda (itself a very special case) are none of them willing to risk the agony of choice in becoming Independent at this time. None wishes to be “**oil-poor or debt-rich**”, as some would deem post-colonial Trinidad and Jamaica respectively to be. But what they all seem to have in common is a full grasp of the power of cultural action in affording a sense of place and of purpose to the inhabitants of their territories.

They therefore tend to identify with the Independent Caribbean in this area, despite the differences in political systems.

The 'differences in political systems' are in fact part of the overall dilemma of difference which is a manifestation of the complex process of diversity demanding of all in the region the capacity to build bridges not only between classes and races of people within countries of the region, but also between zones of former imperial influence among countries and between continents of the world, themselves represented in the region through centuries of migration and continuing interaction via tourism, commercial transactions, and professional contacts.

The Caribbean, itself the expression of such diversity and of its survival and beyond, has struggled for all of five centuries with mastering the management of the complexity of such diversity. Such have been the phenomenon and challenges, that today it is possible to say with a fair degree of certainty that we, especially among the countries of the English-speaking Commonwealth Caribbean, have learnt to live together rather than simply side by side. In any case, the communications technology revolution and the tremendous improvement in travel facilities have dictated the urgent need for people to learn to live together, to deal with the dilemma of difference in ways that will serve the enhancement of the quality of life for human beings and to ensure positive human development well into this third millennium.

My claim on behalf of the Caribbean may seem strange against the background of a failed attempt on the part of the Anglophone segment to federate some five decades ago and the on-going difficulties they have trying to achieve effective modalities of closer co-operation between people who have shared a common history of labour exploitation via slavery and indentureship of the plantation, colonialism and its close relation, globalization.

The important thing is that the fight has not been given up; no more than it was in Europe after centuries of similar failures. The region at a subliminal level understands and trades on the unity which underlies the differences. That unity is “**submarine**” according to West Indian poet Kamau Brathwaite himself a deeply textured Caribbean man; and in a region of limestone and volcanic rocks separated by divisive seawater one can understand the metaphor and grasp the difficulties in transforming the creative diversity of floating island spaces, colonial historical experiences and language differences into an integrated whole expressed in a common humanity.

Admittedly the eloquence of the differences is powerful. We continue to speak of a region of some 30 or more million people as Hispanic Caribbean, the Anglophone Caribbean, the Francophone Caribbean, the Dutch-speaking Caribbean and so on despite the sonority of such creole languages as Sranan tonga, Papiamentu, Kweyol and Jamaica Talk. The hyphenated fragmentation merely serves to emphasise the legacy of a heritage of separation and shattered identities. Yet none of this deprived us in our separate dispensations of that awesome process of becoming. Our people were able to survive the traumas of separation from ancestral hearths as part of the transatlantic slave trade and the indignity of dehumanisation in slavery for the vast majority by the

exercise of their creative imagination. What results from this has been the germ of a culture which shares more in common than many like to believe. And this is clearly evident all over -- from Paramaribo, Georgetown, Port of Spain through Bridgetown and the countries of the OECS grouping to Kingston, Belize and Nassau. People's sense of self teeters in the on-going quest for place and purpose once denied the vast majority by slavery and indentureship and continues today against a background of a corrupting persistence of the consequences of such a history of human degradation in the form of continuing immiseration and a threatening paralysis of the will.

As with the Caribbean presence in the deliberations on respect and understanding, so with the present concern by the Commonwealth Association of Museums which, as a Commonwealth civil society agency, would wish to know how its own programme of activities can serve to promote such respect and understanding, building on and extending existing programmes "at both national and international levels." As the Munyonyo Statement indicates, Museum activities could well target such cohorts as young people, women, education and the media as priority fields for action.

I am aware of the quiet visionary changes that have been taking place in the minds of museologists who see museums not as mausoleums of conserved dead artifacts securely entrapped in Perspex cases to lie in state for curious viewers or mounted on walls protected by do-not-touch signs but rather as educational tools to actively exercise the minds of viewers (particularly young people) and thereby add to their knowledge of the inherited world they inhabit, the villages, towns or communities in which they live and have their beings, as well as of themselves as creative stakeholders in the art of living as human beings.

The diversity of human existence, and the intertextuality and dynamics of daily living indeed demand of all the mutual respect and understanding essential to peace and civilized existence. These at once challenge museums to creative planning for displays based on in-depth research, scholarly and accessible information for young people and the general public. A classroom teacher should be able to take his/her class of students to a museum and conduct sessions on a wide range of subjects leading to greater knowledge of the culture and development of peoples in all the 53 countries of the Commonwealth and beyond. All that this needs is a little imagination, creatively exercised.

“Accepting diversity, respecting the dignity of all human beings, and understanding the richness of our multiple identities [are after all] fundamental to the Commonwealth principles and approach, and will also contribute to resisting the cultivation of a culture of violence”, we are reminded by the Munyonyo Statement. The Commonwealth Association of Museums needs do no more than have its programmes of activities informed, in part or in whole, by material based on the Commonwealth Commission’s **Civil Paths to Peace** which indeed “provides a thoughtful and considered analysis of issues relevant to building tolerance and understanding of diversity amongst and within distinct societies, cultures and communities” (Munyonyo Statement).

Modern technology, advances in public relations and marketing (the private sector and even the public sector have exploited this to the fullest in pushing their own interests), digital photography, film and DVD and the wide range of sound recordings can be utilized to provide museums with effective (and not necessarily overly expensive) means of communication to get their points across.

Apart from the material present in any specific community, themes transcending borders (demonstrating differences and similarities) abound. I can think of the role of women throughout the Commonwealth and family patterns, of artistic manifestations (from architecture through painting and sculpture to the performing arts), of the field of sports (cricket in the Commonwealth, track and field in the Olympics, as well as soccer et al), of religious expressions (multi-and inter-faith existence within one geographical area but also the creole native-born native bred religious expressions to be found in a region like the Caribbean with its shango, voodoo, pukumina, minty and candomble, Santeria etc).

Museums could help further in strengthening the rationale for current efforts at promoting/achieving mutual respect and understanding between peoples of differing race, class and creeds within nations thus forging a reconnection between Member States in the Commonwealth through **EDUCATION** and **CULTURE** (education based on interdisciplinary studies and culture through cultural exchange involving youth, young adults and the media and all forms of communications technology which have already brought young people worldwide together in a common sphere of appreciation and zone of relative comfort especially through music, dance, track and field, cricket, football world cup festivals – themselves a part of the performing Arts. In this Museums have a great role to play going beyond conservation and preservation to promotion of interactive intellectual and emotional engagement with the creative act of living.
