

UNIT 4

Caribbean Identity and Culture

Overview

In the previous units we learnt about the historical development of sociology and the implications for its philosophy on the study of human beings. We can gather from the units several points of interest but a recurring theme is the contestations that seemingly exist between the extent of the perceived influence of social institutions on human beings and the amount of control human beings exert on their choices and behavior. This is an issue for debate, but it is risky accepting one side of this debate over the other. When we think of social institutions and the role they play in society we can think about their role as an effort to standardize interaction and behavior, as well as, to help with ordering of society regardless of your place of residence, ethnicity, socio-economic status. These universals which are transferred through teaching exist, but do so, however, alongside subcultures. Universals have been and can be championed only by a few, a position which Marx argued, and this can be problematic and stir up conflict in a society.

The place of residence, ethnicity, socio-economic status (SES) are all categories used to help persons in the Caribbean (and in other parts of the world) to define and understand who they are and what makes them identifiable (and different) from others. Identity then is both a matter of relation and a matter of context. This is the framework in which we look at Caribbean identity and explore Caribbean culture which helps us to understand Caribbean identity. Is there one Caribbean identity or is it that an attempt to determine one Caribbean identity would produce the kinds of problems with universals as we described in the previous paragraph?

Caribbean identity is heavily contested because of the differentiation that exists between peoples. This has found itself in politics and is most noticeable in the representation of racial and ethnic groups in countries like Guyana and Trinidad. While there may be an appearance of division amongst Caribbean people at home, it is remarkable however that Caribbean people or people born in the Caribbean seem to band together when in other territories on the basis that they are from the region. So, relation and context, as we can see from this example, do matter. Geography, along with other symbols of Caribbean-ness, provide a platform for the sense of belonging that those who have left the periphery, cling to for identifying themselves distinctly from other

groups. We will discuss this more in the next unit. This unit is a precursor to the topics and issues that will be discussed in Unit 5. Students will be expected to reflect a lot on what they have read in the previous units and their own experience of residing in the Caribbean. You are not from the Caribbean? Do not worry, as everyone will engage in some research and share their findings for discussion.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this Unit you will be able to:

1. Discuss what is meant by African Retention in the Caribbean.
2. Explain Caribbean cultural forms through the lens of African and Creole influences.
3. Critically review understandings of Creole culture.

This Unit is divided into three Sessions as follows:

Session 4.1: African Retention

Session 4.2: Creole Culture

Session 4.3: Caribbean Cultural Forms (music, song, dance and fashion)



Readings & Resources

Required Readings

Baron, R. (2003) Amalgams and Mosaics, Syncretisms and Reinterpretations: Reading Herskovits and Contemporary Creolists for Metaphors of Creolisation. *The Journal of American Folklore*, 116 (459), pp. 88-115. Available via [UWILinC](#).

Bolland, O.N. (1998) Creolisation and Creole Societies. A Cultural Nationalist View of Caribbean Social History. *Caribbean Quarterly*, 44(1/2). Available via [UWILinC](#) at <http://search.proquest.com/library.open.uwi.edu/docview/855606024?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:primo&accountid=42537>

Mustapha, N. (2013). *Sociology for Caribbean Students* (2nd edition). Module 1. Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers. Available via [UWILinC](#).

Recommended Resources

- Chamberlain, M. (2002). Caribbean Migration: Globalised Identities. Available via [UWIlInC](http://lib.mylibrary.com.library.open.uwi.edu/Open.aspx?id=44265) at <http://lib.mylibrary.com.library.open.uwi.edu/Open.aspx?id=44265>
- Charles, C.A.D. (2003). Skin Bleaching, Self-Hate, and Black Identity in Jamaica. *Journal of Black Studies*, 33(6), pp. 711-728. Available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3180843>
- Hope, D.P. (2006). Passa Passa: Interrogating Cultural Hybridities in Jamaican Dancehall. *Small Axe*, (21), pp. 125-139. Available via [UWIlInC](http://search.proquest.com.library.open.uwi.edu/docview/195805048?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:primo&accountid=42537) at <http://search.proquest.com.library.open.uwi.edu/docview/195805048?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:primo&accountid=42537>
- Neely, D.T. (2007). Calling All Singers, Musicians and Speechmakers: MentoAesthetics and Jamaica's Early Recording Industry. *Caribbean Quarterly*, 53(4), pp. 1-15,106. Available via [UWIlInC](http://search.proquest.com.library.open.uwi.edu/docview/221227674?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:primo&accountid=42537) at <http://search.proquest.com.library.open.uwi.edu/docview/221227674?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:primo&accountid=42537>
- Premdas, R. (2011). Identity, Ethnicity, and the Caribbean Homeland in an Era of Globalization. *Social Identities*, 16 (6), pp.811-832. Available via [UWIlInC](http://search.proquest.com.library.open.uwi.edu/docview/221227674?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:primo&accountid=42537).
- Rohlehr, G. (2001). Calypso and Caribbean Identity. *Bucknell Review*, 44 (2), pp.55-72. Available via [UWIlInC](http://search.proquest.com.library.open.uwi.edu/docview/221227674?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:primo&accountid=42537).

You are also advised to locate and read: Additional papers relevant to the topics covered.

Session 4.1

African Retention

Introduction

In a region in which descendants of various 'people who came' currently reside, the search for identity takes us to the culture of our ancestors in their motherland. There is interest in tracking what vestiges of culture have been retained by the descendants. Hence it will come as no surprise that the pre-occupation with the African retention debate focuses on how much of African traditions remained despite the attempts by the Europeans to impose their ideologies and way of life onto the enslaved blacks. In other words, there is interest in how much erasure of the culture did take place because of the assimilation practices the enslaved had to undergo. This imposition did not happen easily as the enslaved, not just in the Caribbean, but elsewhere, such as Sierra Leone and the now United States, managed to keep their cultural traditions and did not lose all of these. The main proponent behind this school of thought is Melville Herskovitz, an anthropologist. He identified three ways in which African culture survived. We will consider these later in the session.

African Retention

While we referred to the retention of African cultural practices earlier, we will now shift our focus years ahead to the post emancipation era during which there was still contestation between imposed culture and cultures of the enslaved. However, survival was also present as not just the Europeans but the Asian communities living alongside freed blacks and also had to mix to an extent and segment their own values and traditions for community. As we will see in the next unit, writers such as M.G. Smith described Caribbean society as pluralistic but groups would "mix" and not "combine".

Talking about African Retention today stimulates thoughts about the degree of survival of African customs and cultural practices. This is impacted by the use or passage of these practices and customs through key social agents such as the family. But it may not be the case if we readily accept that inter-racial marriages, for example, existed. We can also explore this some more when we discuss Creolization. Before we go further let us examine some important concepts required for studying this section.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 4.1

Groups and Culture

Read Mustapha (2013) **pages 91-98** (end after reading Multiculturalism) and do the following in the designated forum:

1. Create a list of **Important Points To Note** on all of the topics listed below.
2. Explain for each of the lists the reason you consider the points noted to be important to an understanding of the topic
3. Identify any areas in which you think the definitions are lacking. Identify the lack and make suggestions for an improved understanding of the terms.
4. Identify two new things you have learnt from this reading which have explained situations/practices in your country/community. In responding you must describe the situations/practices
5. Critically review the posts of at least two of your peers.
 - A. Dominant culture
 - B. Subculture
 - C. Counter culture
 - D. Multi culturalism



READING

For further reading on this topic you should read [Premdas \(2011\)](#) pages 810-818 which is listed among the recommended resources for the unit.

Now that you have an understanding of the conflict that can develop in culturally diverse societies such as those in the Caribbean, move onto the next two Learning Activities.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 4.2

Looking In At My Own Society

Read [Baron \(2003\)](#) in your required readings and then post your response to the instructions which follow:

1. Using your own words, make short notes on the three processes where Herskovitz saw retention of African cultural practices occurring.
2. Reflect on the extent to which survival, syncretism or reinterpretation is evident in your country/society.
3. Respond to the post of at least one of **your** peers.
 - A. Survival
 - B. Syncretism
 - C. Reinterpretation

Having read about Herskovits' ideas on the retention of African cultural practices let us now apply, in a more empirical way, these ideas to our community.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 4.3

Seeking Out Cultural Retention

In this activity you will be required to engage four residents of your community two of whom are between the ages of 35-54 years and the other two who are 65 years or older. You are attempting to learn more about cultural practices they have learnt from their parents or seen practiced in their community. The main objective is to derive an understanding of the cultural influences on some people's practices, focusing on the meanings attributed to these practices.

Your engagement of these persons is randomized, informal and based on their convenience. Your description of them is based on quick observation. Then respond to the instructions which follow:

1. Create a log sheet similar to the one below and complete it with the information the respondent gives. Do not spend more than 60 minutes on this exercise.
2. Can you identify how long these practices have existed? Do these persons know?
3. When you are done, look at the data you have collected and share with your colleagues what you found.

Interviewee Description (male/female etc.)	Practice that was learnt from parents	Explanation of Practice/ Meaning Attributed to Practice Example of a tradition/
E.g. Male (65 years, dark skinned, sitting on	Washing the eye with boiled tamarind water	Don't know
E.g. Female (wearing a uniform, tall, speaks only Creole)	Melting candle and mixing with oils to rub on part of body that is aching/paining.	Excess craving of a food resulting in child having birth mark of that food.

Did you find that the practices identified fitted into Herskovits' framework? Were there any practices for which you could find no explanation for their origins or presence?

Session 4.1 Summary

In this session we began by exploring how cultural diversity could lead to conflict, but we also understood how important it is to have a value system that represents inclusiveness and does not repress those particularistic values held by certain ethnic groups. That has been difficult though, especially where women and values of certain ethnic groups for instance are concerned. For example, values based on the supremacy of men, what is defined as male and the masculine, can have serious challenges for women pursuing education, employment and delaying having children. We also learnt that:

1. African retention has a lot to do with the survival of African traditions transplanted to the New World/Caribbean by the enslaved blacks. But it also has to do with the spread and sustainability of these traditions alongside the intensity of globalization.
2. Dominant culture is associated with the elite while subculture can be associated with ethnic groups.
3. The focus of sociology is on understanding how and why societies work the way they do, and not about making judgements.

Session 4.2

Creole Culture

Introduction

In the previous session we examined African Retention and discussed some key concepts that would find themselves into a conversation on the survival of a culture. While African retention has a lot to do with the influences of African culture that persisted even with the harshness of European doctrine, there were other constraints as well, such as the fact that the enslaved came from different tribes, spoke different languages for example and these details made it hard for them to come together. Constraints like these brought out needs to adapt and assimilate. How they adapted and assimilated for survival will be referred to as the innovation and produced products symbolizing the occurrence of syncretism and new forms of behavior. This melting of different cultures into each other became evidence in religious practices and family life for instance.

Calling All Caribbean People

This unit is entitled Caribbean Identity and Culture and, against the background of the melting cultures we associate with the region, how do we define the Caribbean person? Do we all have a universal interpretation of what this person is or ought to be?

Let us see what our region's artistes have been saying, or rather, singing, about that person and the implications.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 4.4

Web Search

1. Do a web search for the two songs entitled **Caribbean Man** done by The Tradewinds and Black Stalin, respectively.
2. Listen carefully to the lyrics and, in the designated forum, discuss which of the ideas presented in the songs best explain who or what the Caribbean Man ought to be and why.
3. Respond to the comments of at least two of your peers.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

This learning activity produced a discussion that is an interesting one and brings to the fore the complex strands of our heritage and the ways in which these strands have come together. It brings our attention to a topic which is very much at the core of theorizing around Caribbean societies: Creolisation. Have you ever thought about what that term means?



LEARNING ACTIVITY 4.5

Creolisation

Read Bolland (1998), specifically the Introduction which ends just before the sub-heading **The Plantation Society and Plural Society Models**. Then follow the instructions outlined below:

1. Make notes to help your understanding of the discussion.
2. In the designated forum, explain how useful each of the interpretations of the term, Creole, is in helping you understand your society. If there are any aspects that you are finding difficult to understand, list these in the forum so that your peers and tutor can assist in clarifying these.
3. Comment on the observations shared by two of your colleagues and help to clarify any areas which are not fully understood by your peers.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

After completing this activity and reviewing the lessons learnt, are you convinced that there is any value to add to our understanding of Caribbean society from the discussion of a creole society?

Session 4.2 Summary

This session focused on the mixing of different cultures that took place in slavery and continued beyond emancipation as people started to live alongside each other. We learnt that the melting was largely between African and European cultures, but it would be ridiculous to ignore the melting of other cultures that also took place, especially in the advent of the indenture ship of Chinese and East Indians labourers. We will discuss these flaws in the creole society/culture hypothesis more in the next unit, but it is critical for us to understand that this melting produced characteristics, like the influences on our art, we see daily in Caribbean society. This is what we will examine a bit more closely in the next session.

Session 4.3

Caribbean Cultural Forms (Music, Dance, Song and Fashion)

Introduction

Much of what we discuss in this session will be restricted to the English- Speaking Caribbean for ease of reference. But it does not mean that the French, Dutch and Spanish speaking Caribbean are without similarities that are products of resistance to European culture or absorption producing new forms of cultural expression. When we speak of cultural forms we are speaking of these intangible and tangible representations of identity captured in our way of life. These representations are distinct such as a language as in French or Spanish Creole, Creolese from Guyana and Jamaican Creole. Music, song, dance and fashion are more readily identifiable forms/expressions. These intangible and tangible forms of expression exist and are rooted so deeply in the perception of who we are that a flag is not even needed to announce where we are from. That is to say, they are easily recognized by others and tell them we are from the Caribbean. It is a controversial thought, however, for some when matters of nationhood become subsumed in this broad identity framework that is called Caribbean.

According to Mustapha (2013) even though the Caribbean had several “bloody” uprisings these also had elements of the fusion taking place between African and European culture. The fusion took place within the context of a protest culture. He highlights drumming, the blowing of the abeng as some examples.

The Evolution of Cultures

We have said before that cultures like individuals and societies do not remain static. They respond to the needs and movements of a variety of pulls. We are going to explore some of these movements to evolution and some of the pulls to which Caribbean cultures have responded.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 4.6

Creating a Log

Read Mustapha (2013) pages 99-115. Taking your cue from the examples of interculturalisation (fusion) evident in cultural forms highlighted by Mustapha (2013), create a log of cultural forms/ expression in your country and indicate any representation of a fusion of cultures. These expressions would include music, song, dance and fashion. When you are done share your log in the designated forum and comment on the post of at least one colleague. See an example of the log here:

Cultural form / expression	What makes it a fusion?
E.g. La Woz and La Maguerite festival in St. Lucia	French and British influence in costuming, Songs sung in Creole language, drumming

Read also for your own information the logs of your peers so you can learn more about these expressions across the region.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 4.7

Diasporic Culture

The previous exercise exposed you to traditions that people in our society have been able to sustain despite society's change and advancements. Traditions and culture in the Caribbean continue to face ongoing threat from globalization which has eased migration and mixing of communities.

1. In this learning activity provide short notes, supported by two scholarly references on the meaning of:
 - A. Globalization
 - B. Diaspora
2. After reading the works of two Caribbean writers, explain in your own words why it might be posited that Caribbean culture is diasporic. Share your post in the designated forum.

Session 4.3 Summary

The session focused on practices that have become tradition for people and also illustrated that across Caribbean societies, there are cultural forms reflecting the presence of Africans. We also discussed mento in Jamaica, and calypso in other Caribbean societies and the role they continue to play in shaping the political discourse in these societies. Students also did some field work and were able to interview persons regarding traditional practices they were exposed to as children.

UNIT SUMMARY

In this unit we examined material that informed us of a contestation taking place in pre-
emancipation society and spilling over in the Caribbean region's latter periods and becoming
more challenged in the advent of intense globalization. As we leave this unit and start to think
more deeply about Caribbean identity we can note a few things.

1. Caribbean identity has been defined based on geography. Language, cuisine, and music
for example can set apart Caribbean people from others who may be Canadian or British
based on their own cultural practices and peculiarities.
2. African cultural practices have not been erased in totality and there is an understanding
that the enslaved for reasons such as assimilation created new forms of cultural expression
that blended theirs and other cultures. This implies a presence of Africa in our cultural
products and creative industries and even more so levels of syncretism.
3. The issue of a diasporic Caribbean is not new really as what constitutes the diaspora is a
transplantation of people to begin with and the consequence of migration due to economic
challenges in the region. Caribbean people living outside of the region talk of their
homeland and maintain the practices and networks associated with folk from the
Caribbean as also a means of sustaining links to their culture. Carnival in Toronto and
Nottingham are examples of Caribbean people living abroad converging for the
immersion in a cultural space satisfying of cuisine, music, language to name a few.

The next unit continues our discussion of Caribbean identity but we will spend more time
reviewing models of Caribbean society that have been proposed by Caribbean thinkers.

References

- Baron, R. (2003). Amalgams and Mosaics, Syncretisms and Reinterpretations: Reading Herskovits and Contemporary Creolists for Metaphors of Creolisation. *The Journal of American Folklore*, 116 (459), pp. 88-115. Retrieved via [UWIlInC](#).
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