

Foreign Invasion:

American media images reshaping Caribbean culture

By Rosalind Cummings-Yeates

The American media has done a pathetic job of capturing Caribbean culture; if it's not inane commercials featuring swaying palm trees and grinning servants, then it's insulting movie portrayals that never extend beyond Jamaica, dreadlocks and "yeah mon." Despite these shallow portrayals of island life, American media influences -- TV, movies, music -- have managed to infiltrate and change the way islanders view themselves.

Hip-hop and Top 40 tunes stream from radios as much, if not more than, soca, calypso and reggae. Local stands serving roti, patties or sky juice have been edged out by Wendy's, McDonald's, Baskin Robbins and Taco Bell. Young people idolize celebrities from "foreign" more than their own, homegrown role models.

The world is being influenced by American culture, so it's no wonder the Caribbean - being just south of its dominant North American neighbor - would be inundated too. What does make the region unique is that it's made up of Black countries that unlike those in Africa, have easy access to American TV shows and movies. The powerful visual impact of this has stimulated cultural changes that can be witnessed everywhere from Jamaica, to Haiti, to Barbados.

'Where's The FUBU?'

"It used to be that when you visited the States and you brought back perfume or soap, everybody would be happy. Now, they look at you like please, where's the FUBU?" Says Jackie Drake, a Barbados native who has owned a Caribbean restaurant in Chicago for the past two years. She believes that the combination of American media, tourism and property ownership has caused a crisis in the traditional values of Barbados.

"Everything is about the foreign market," says Drake. "You have so many Americans going to the Caribbean, retiring and building houses, that the prices have gone up and you have more U.S. residents owning property than anybody else. The basketball players are starting to buy houses... You add that to the music and TV and it's all a big influence on our young people. They don't respect the elders, they use profanity, they're into all the clothes from foreign, it's all totally different than the way it used to be."

According to The Program on International Policy Attitudes, which carries out research on public attitudes concerning international issues, only a small minority of Americans considers the global dominance of American culture a threat to other cultures. In other words, if it's American, it's all good. Indeed, some Caribbean nationals see a benefit to the increase of American media and the resulting cultural influence.

"Some people feel that Jamaica has become a little less homophobic because American shows like "Will and Grace" have brought gay visibility and another perspective. For the first time, radio stations are bleeping out anti-gay lyrics and this has never happened before," says Kingston native E. Akintola Hubbard, a doctoral candidate at Harvard University in Afro-American studies, with a specialty in anthropology. Hubbard has seen the negative effects of American culture in Jamaica, such as the popularity of night-time soap operas to the point that references to shows such as "NYPD Blue" and "Law & Order" have entered into the lexicon of popular Jamaican culture and forced local programs into non-existence. But he feels that there is also a positive side to this. "Jamaicans are being exposed to different viewpoints and you can see it impacting the national consciousness, broadening the general outlook of the people."

Shifting Influence and Values

Outlook is another factor that dictates just how deeply American media can penetrate into a culture. In Haiti, not only is there a language barrier to the American media but also a strong

ideological one, where the American outlook does not often translate.

"Historically, Haiti comes from a different cultural influence," says native Haitian William Balan-Gaubert, a history teacher who specializes in the Caribbean, at the University of Chicago Laboratory School. "The French influence remains strong because you have easier access to French media but in addition to this, there are some clearly American values that Haitians don't have. The individualistic, I'll get mine at all costs value system that includes greediness and selfishness, is anti-ethical to Haitian culture," he says. "When you have an American film, dubbed in French, most of the story doesn't translate because the values are foreign.

"The Matrix was very popular in Haiti because the inner teachings reminded them of the spiritual message of voodoo; that if you believe strongly, anything can happen. The computer/technical aspect did not translate. To be American means to be detached from community, family and spirit."

Despite these obstacles, American media has still managed to affect Haiti in other ways. Balan-Gaubert says that African-American style and attitude has replaced French chic as an indicator of class in a highly class conscious society. The young upper classes are now dressing down (baggy jeans, gym shoes open shirts) as a result of American media. Kids from rich families are emulating hip-hop culture, breaking the rules of polite society and adopting a "I don't care what they think" attitude.

But by far the deepest impact, according to Balan-Gaubert, is the image America has sold of itself. It's a point that relates to the entire Caribbean, not just Haiti. "Haiti has been fed the image of "the great white hope" at every possible avenue. The U.S. has done a splendid job of selling a benign, friendly rescuer, a savior— America has done a huge job of bamboozling us," he says.

As the poorest country in the Caribbean, Haiti is the target for a host of economic and political aid that usually comes with strings attached by the U.S. Balan-Gaubert believes that Haitians have been unduly influenced by America's perceived benevolence but he does see hope for the future.

"The saving grace in Haiti is that their deep and strong values are beginning to resonate. They see that happiness is not in what you have, but in knowing who you are."

As the American media continues its unyielding penetration of Caribbean culture, absorbing most of the elements that make it so different from American society, one can only hope that in the end, Caribbean people will somehow remember who they are.

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