“Lost Opportunities”
CARIFESTA 2006: A Summary Report

UWI-CARICOM Project
January 2007
“Lost Opportunities”

CARIFESTA 2006: A Summary Report

“I know many people worked tirelessly to get it on the road but the criticism that Carifesta IX was a Carifiasco is not unfair. My professional judgment is that, in the end, it was a rag tag of good and bad entertainment, not enough new or exciting.

Some of it was excellent, most of it indifferent. The fringe happenings in many ways outshone the main event and the entire thing exuded both inadequate planning and the absence of one controlling hand. Having something valuable is not enough, it’s what you do with it that counts. Let’s wish our-selves well for the future.”

Marina Salandy-Brown, “Missing a Few Tricks”

Newsday - October 12, 2006

Abstract

The following report is an abstract of a larger paper on CARIFESTA IX held in Trinidad and Tobago from September 22nd to October 1st, 2006. The report has been conceived with two purposes in mind. The first is that it is intended to function as an analytical report on the event, with a view to its publication in The Integrationist or anywhere else the UWI-CARICOM Project may deem necessary.

The second function of the report was to serve as a framework guide for the production of a mini-documentary as part of the larger Regional Integration Documentary Project. The several “vs.” dichotomies used as headings in this report were created September 21st, 2006. They were meant to lightly explore the dynamic interplay between several aspects of the event, gleaned from background research and newspaper articles prior to the official launch of the Festival.
As the event progressed however, what this writer presumed would turn out as “interplay” became, in fact, strong divisions and differences. This document is based largely on personal observations, unofficial interviews, official CARICOM documents and reports in the Trinidadian press. The weight of the following is therefore more journalistic than scientific or even academic. That said, it comes from a journalist with some experience and one who has shown a sustained interest in regional culture and integration.

**Introduction to CARIFESTA**

CARIFESTA, or the Caribbean Festival of the Arts was first held in Guyana in 1972. Between the initial event and CARIFESTA IX, the subject of this report, there have been seven other Festivals.

The year 2006 saw the introduction of the model of a “New CARIFESTA”. It is based largely on a document entitled, *Reinventing CARIFESTA: A Strategic Plan* prepared by Dr. Keith Nurse, a UWI Consultant also attached to the CARICOM Regional Negotiation Machinery (CRNM), and informed primarily by input from the CARICOM Task Force on CARIFESTA.

The main thrust of the document was the reinvention of CARIFESTA into an efficiently managed “roving, multidisciplinary, mega, arts festival” which was not only financially sustainable but geared toward the generation of profit. While all of the recommendations outlined in the report were not followed, CARICOM IX to a large degree represented a significant shift towards full implementation of this model.

CARIFESTA IX was held in Trinidad, from September 22\textsuperscript{nd} to October 1\textsuperscript{st}. Most of the activities were held in and around Port-of-Spain, with a few events being held outside of the capital and in Tobago. This is the third CARIFESTA to be hosted by Trinidad and Tobago.
CARIFESTA IX

Official Effort vs. Community Ownership

“The sovereignty of a literature depends on the possession of the text by the total society over the most varied terrain of mediation. The text has to become familiar and an ordinary part of daily conversation.”

George Lamming,

The question of the “possession” of any artefact or event of culture by the society from which it emerges or in which it takes place is perhaps an eternal one. What Caribbean writer Lamming referred to in the above excerpt as the “sovereignty of a literature”, can well be attributable to music, the visual arts and dance.

To a great extent, CARIFESTA – as a celebration of indigenous artistic endeavour - is about cultural sovereignty. This is strongly reflected in the theme for CARIFESTA IX “Celebrating our people, contesting the world stage.” And there is, of course, the fact that the organisers chose a slightly more extended version of that excerpt from Lamming on the original preparatory documents sent to local CARIFESTA committees, as well as on the official event website. Undoubtedly, a great deal of effort went into the planning of CARIFESTA IX. In addition to the strategic report on “The New CARIFESTA”, the model on which the event was largely based, the Festival was fortunately held in one of the few countries in CARICOM which could have afforded the recommended US$2 million set out in the Strategic Plan.
The government of Trinidad and Tobago spent an estimated US$5 million, in fact, on the event. In Port-of-Spain, the signs of CARIFESTA were literally everywhere. Flags festooning Charlotte Street and banners draped from buildings, proclaimed the event. During the days that this writer spent throughout the Festival however, it became clear that for all the effort put into the event, little was known about the festival within the society.

Despite the fact that the majority of hotels and guest houses were solidly booked up by members of overseas contingents, even the staff at several locations knew little or nothing about the event. One middle-aged proprietor of two small Picton Street inns - both fully occupied by members of the Surinamese contingent - opined that it was “this thing put on by CARIFTA [sic].”

The irony of CARIFESTA IX was that for an event being positioned as “world renowned” (“Celebrating our peoples, Contesting the world stage”), vested with a budget of massive proportions and the fact that it was being hosted in one of the most sophisticated marketing environments in the region, it was in essence, a public relations bomb.

How did this happen? The principal reason seems to be administrative inefficiency or slippages. An uncredited newspaper article, taken from the TrinidadMusicStore.com website states:

“Carifesta IX is a mere eleven days away and preparations for the celebration of the region’s arts and culture is moving along steadily said Chairman of the festival’s organising committee; Louis Lee Sing who took over the reins following the departure of former Chairman, Kenny De Silva who walked away in frustration when things seemed to be getting nowhere fast. Lee Sing has admitted that when he took control plans for the event were in shambles, but he has assured the nation as well as the other participating countries that all will be in place for the gala opening event at the Hasely Crawford National Stadium on Friday 22nd September.”
The article has an interesting, if typically rambling, conclusion:

“Carifesta showcases the various cultural art forms of the CARICOM nations and is supposed to take place every two years, but due to financial challenges as well as bureaucratic red tape things have not always gone as intended.”

I had the opportunity to be present in Trinidad for two weeks in July, roughly two months before the event. Little or no news on CARIFESTA was published in the daily newspapers during that period. With the “financial challenges” decidedly not a factor, considering Trinidad’s massive investment in the hosting of the event, it is presumed that the public relations department of the bureaucratic machinery had somehow malfunctioned. Decidedly poor also was the organizing committee’s use of the only medium through which it could provide updates and other information to as wide a cross-section of people as possible at relatively low cost: its website. The handling of Carifesta.net was one of the more negative aspects of the operation.

It is true that there may have been very little positive news on the administrative front with which to update the website. However, information on participating countries constituted simply basic information, quite possibly taken wholesale from either the Caricom.org or the CIA.gov websites. At the final revision of this report, some three months after the event, the only pictures posted in the online gallery are three sets taken at the Grand Market on September 24th, and one set taken at a concert on the 15th - one week before the event.

The only information on the site giving some background to CARIFESTA came via a page with two links: one to the CARICOM’s main website, and the other to the CARIFESTA page on that website. Perhaps most telling of the inefficiency of this CARIFESTA online presence is the information on the Festival’s artists posted on the site. The side ‘link’ on the homepage labelled “Artists” stands out
from the others, not so much because of the sad black and white in which it is rendered, contrasting with the vibrant colour of the rest of the site, but to the fact that it is the only one which does not function.

Another element which would have contributed to lack of a sense of ownership of CARIFESTA by Trinidadians in particular, was the poor media coverage of this major event. Local cable channel, Gayelle, provided extensive coverage of several events particularly the “Country Night” cultural presentations performed by the various contingents. However, considering the fact that Gayelle’s viewership is limited to cable subscribers and that there are dozens of other channels available to these subscribers, the availability of such programming to the general public in Trinidad was severely curtailed. All three dailies - Express, Guardian and Newsday - featured infrequent items on CARIFESTA IX limited mostly to a few hundred words. Much of this coverage was negative, focusing on issues such as attendant transportation problems. There was no significant feature article published on any aspect of CARIFESTA during the hosting of the event or immediately after. As a topic of public interest, CARIFESTA was admittedly overshadowed by the ongoing legal troubles of former PM Basdeo
Panday, by an occasionally bloody dispute between rival gangs in Laventille, and the government’s controversial decision to establish an aluminium smelting plant. Additionally, halfway through the event, the island was rocked by two earth tremors which caused little damage but engendered a great deal of coverage and commentary.

That said however, it is my opinion that, given the large number of pages available in all three dailies, the staff resources at their disposal and the presence of less substantial local stories and foreign news items in these publications, the dearth of CARIFESTA coverage was a result of editorial disinterest in the event. The official effort behind CARIFESTA was, its overall inefficiency aside, a tremendous one employing the talents of a great many skilled people and involving a vast sum of money. What it did not translate into was an ownership of the Festival, partially reflected by administrative bungling but arguably more largely due to the fact that CARICOM has systematically failed to imbue with the commitment and interest given to the initial CARIFESTA in 1972.

Derek Walcott opined, in a 1989 interview with Al Creighton - a Jamaica-born academic and columnist living in Guyana - that CARIFESTA was an incredible waste of money. He questioned the profligate spending of such vast sums on what was essentially a big fete put on by countries whose governments do nothing for the arts or the starving artists in the intervening years. No voice has come out yet to effectively counter this claim.

**Inclusion vs. Alienation**

“I have a sneaky suspicion that in the planning for Carifesta and subsequent execution of the entertainment, participants and venues were handpicked according to the biases of the organising committee.”

Cheryl Khan, “Letter to the Editor”

*Trinidad Express* - September 23rd, 2006
While the issue of ownership of the Festival of the Caribbean people as a whole was a factor in the degree to which CARIFESTA IX succeeded or failed, a sense of ownership or legitimacy of participation was also a prevalent theme of the event. The most vibrant manifestation of this concerned what was implicitly considered the over-representation of Afro-Trinidadians on the CARIFESTA Management Committee, with its presumably necessary adjunct of the over-representation of Afro-Trinidadian/Caribbean art forms and hence artistes; and the explicit claim of under-representation of Indo-Trinidadian/Caribbean and other ethnic groups at CARIFESTA.

Ethnic Inclusion vs. Alienation is an issue which has been visited upon various CARICOM Caribbean institutions - from the West Indies Cricket Team to the Caribbean Court of Justice to the Cultural Canon - ever since the early 1990s, coinciding roughly with the ascension to power of the Indo-centric political regimes of Cheddi Jagan in Guyana, and the Basdeo Panday in the host country of Trinidad. Despite, or perhaps because of, the toppling of Indo-Trinidadian Panday as political-ethnic icon by Afro-Trinidadian Manning, cultural activists have retained an engagement with, and an antagonism against, what they perceive as African/Creole domination of most State and Regional Institutions. This engagement/antagonism which is prevalent within the context of Trinidad which has a small Indian majority, echoes more intensely within context of the larger CARICOM which has an overwhelming African majority.

The irony in this is evident when it is considered that the main themes of last year’s CARIFESTA were resistance to imposition, celebration of own, and
contestation [on the world stage]. The development of an Indo-Caribbean cultural identity within recent years, has been marked by a resistance to the imposition of the majority Afro-Caribbean cultural ethos, a legitimisation cum celebration of Indian-ness within the cultural context of the Caribbean geopolitical space, and a contestation of culture on the regional stage.

The hosting of CARIFESTA - as a CARICOM Institution - thus necessarily was not free from this issue. Consider the following excerpt from an article written by one Trinidadian Indian cultural activist, shortly before the hosting of the event:

“Carifesta for me has always been an important landmark to measure the positioning of Indian culture in the Caribbean space. For me it reveals how few are there to articulate Indian Culture, how little its ethos is understood and how under prepared Carifesta is to accommodate the nature of the Caribbean diversity. The launch of Carifesta recently was an opportunity to sound out this issue... Many people think discrimination is preventing Indian culture from taking its rightful place in Carifesta.”

“Journey through the landscape: Reviewing Indian Aesthetics”
Ravi Ji, July 19th 2006 - Trinidad Guardian

A letter, by someone name Mark Chin, appeared in the September 1st issue of the Guardian, with a warning:

“Let us hope the upcoming Carifesta festival will also pay tribute to the Chinese, East Indians, Syrians and Amerindians. The time, space and money spent should be proportionate to the size of the respective communities. The Indian presence should not be reduced to a mere dance and tassa show. In short, the $80 million-budget Carifesta should not turn into another Carnival. From all reports, it seems to be leading that way with the names of Leroi Clarke, Earl Lovelace and Joy Caesar as festival directors.”

Another published on the 23rd, by Cheryl Khan, says the following:
“I would also like to highlight the shameful lack of Indo ethnic participation in the roster for yesterday’s opening ceremony. I realise there is a chutney extravaganza at some point. However, is it really necessary to have it in the south? Any reason a north, northeast or central locale wasn’t considered? Let me guess, only Indian people would want to attend, hence the location…”

The letter ends with the excerpt quoted and included at the beginning of this section.

In an article, published three days later in the *Trinidad Express*, the Chutney Foundation, the legal oversight body for the popular Indo-Caribbean musical genre in Trinidad, claimed to have been slighted by Minister of Culture and the person with overall responsibility for CARIFESTA IX, Joan Yuille-Williams. The article claims that the Foundation participated in all CARIFESTA meetings and submitted all requested documentation in its bid to have a chutney booth at the Grand Market. Not only was the booth not granted, but the group’s requests to produce a chutney super concert, junior chutney exposition and chutney workshops were either denied or ignored. It should be mentioned at this point that sub-contracting to local cultural organisations for such activities was one of the central recommendations of the Nurse document. “Our view,” quoted the Foundation in a statement, “is that the Minister decided to make the entire project a personal event and left out major parts of the national community. She prefers that the culture suffer rather than be open minded and fair across the board.”

To be fair, non-African cultural elements formed some of the more vibrant elements of CARIFESTA IX; however they remained a minority within the flood of other shows, and overall audience attendance to these would have been adversely affected by either the choice of location or the conflict with other shows.

The Indigenous Peoples’ cultural performances and other shows for example,
were held largely outside of Port-of-Spain, the locus of most of the activities. Much of this may be attributed to the poor logistical planning shown throughout much of the Festival - the Book Fair for example, consisted of tables at various points of an older building located near Queens Park West, more than a mile from the Stadium and difficult to reach with public transportation. While this fact, among others, may detract from a charge of intent of alienation or marginalisation on the part of the organisers, it does not necessarily detract from the perception of such intent. Though the Bahamas may be considered a more ethnically homogenous hosting venue than was Trinidad and Tobago, the central question of cultural inclusiveness as part of CARIFESTA itself is going to undoubtedly remain.

A notable sub-theme within the alienation vs. inclusion issue would be that of the selection process of individual member countries. While the Nurse document acknowledges the problem of potentially unfair selection processes carried by host countries …

“One of the contentious issues has been the selection criterion for artists coming from the various sending countries.”

Dr. Keith Nurse, *Reinventing CARIFESTA*, pg. 17

…nothing was apparently done this year to counter this problem. Indeed, the document itself only uses this issue in its general argument for the remodelling of the Festival and offers no identifiable solutions.

Noticeably missing from Jamaica’s contingent was respected young Jamaican writer, Kei Miller. It is the opinion of this writer that the lack of an established and transparent system for the selection for members of the state delegations has conceivably led no small degree of cronyism or favouritism within the process, as well as a concurrent capacity for ad hoc alienation based on a host of prejudices - personal, political, or ethnic.

*Establishment vs. Avant-garde*
“Significantly, younger regional artists have been forcefully staking their claim. The organisational structure of Carifesta IX is dominated by known and established elders, but the younger generation of Caribbean artists wants to know when their turn will come to shine, to dream a festival of their own imagination into being. Perhaps a major lesson hidden in the theme of Carifesta IX is what this new generation will create to resist an older notion of Caribbean identity that does not find room for the newness of their voice.”


Arguably, the central conflict evident in the 2003 CARIFESTA, and an extension of the Inclusion vs. Alienation Factor, was that between the artistic establishment and the avant-garde. With a crop of veteran Trinidadian cultural icons at the helm of CARIFESTA, as well as being celebrated at the event itself, the event represented the generational disconnect which is characteristic of much of Caribbean society. If there were any question about the existence of this generational gap within the arts in the Caribbean, one initiative held during CARIFESTA - indeed exceeding it in duration – “Project Galvanise”, would have dispensed with that. Held under the theme, “Visibly Absent”, “Galvanize” constituted a sort of fringe festival. And “visibly absent” they were.

As Chairman of the Bahamian National Cultural Development Commission, and
the man in charge of that country’s hosting of the event in 2008, Winston Saunders had cause to comment after the Festival:

“I hope we can bring back intimacy in Carifesta, where artistes meet artists. I know Leroy Clarke and Earl Lovelace. I have known them for years. But I did not meet any new artisans at this year’s event.”

“Galvanise” featured several symposia, installation work, film shows and musical performances by a group of talented young artists, all in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties. In their mission statement, the group notes:

“The presence of several hundred artists and arts administrators in Trinidad in September 2006 for Carifesta IX is the stimulus for starting this project - you could say we’ve been galvanised into action by the resurrection of Carifesta - but this project is best thought of as an independent effort aimed at addressing precisely those questions that Carifesta, with its "Independence moment" origins, seems blind to.”

Whereas the average, individual CARICOM event, thematically similar to those hosted by Galvanise, had a median attendance of around thirteen people, the fringe group activities - particularly those held at the CCA7 - consistently had between forty and fifty people in attendance. Examples of the generational gap within Caribbean art found concrete expression in at least one family. One of the artists presenting at Galvanize, in her capacity as a newspaper columnist, was Attillah Springer. Springer’s article on CARIFESTA, which raised the question of the lack of generational continuity within the context of Festival, was the cover article for Caribbean Beat’s September-October, 2006 issue. Ms. Springer is the daughter of former Poet Laureate of Trinidad - and one of the key organisers of last year’s event - Pearl Eintou Springer. Eintou Springer was one of the key personnel in this year’s CARIFESTA Administration, working along with UWI Professor Funso Aiyejinna in organising the Symposia. And an even younger generation of artists represented another shift away from the centre. While young people like Ivory Haynes, 24 and Muhammad Muwakil, 20, attended
some of the events - Muwakil taking part in at least one of the Symposia - it was within their own element that they were given a chance to really perform. Both Haynes and Muwakil are contributors to a monthly open mike poetry and music event called Writers Block.

Unlike “Galvanize”, the only Writers Block session which occurred during CARIFESTA IX did so incidentally; since each event is held on the third Thursday in every month at a high school in Port-of-Spain. It should be noted however that it did appear on the official CARIFESTA list of events. Here again, the attendance was higher than the average individual CARIFESTA event. Whereas Writers Block did not carry the same intellectual weight as “Galvanize” - or any attempt at intellectual discussion per se - it more than made up for it in its display of raw talent. In an overall impressive group, three acts emerged as particularly impressive. These were: a rhapsdo group headed by Muwakil; Haynes, whose fiery poetry recital provided a sharp contrast with her otherwise reserved demeanour; and a gospel jazz band headed by Marcus Hippolyte.

One official CARIFESTA reading was headlined by literary heavyweights of the ilk of Austin Clarke and Earl Lovelace, and chaired by legendary comedian Paul Keens-Douglas. Originally slated as an outdoor event at the National Library, the small attendance - peaking at roughly fifteen persons halfway through - resulted in the moving of the reading indoors into a small screening room within the main building. Earl Lovelace gave a well-received reading from an upcoming novel about a movie being made in Trinidad and the main character’s auditioning for the part of an extra. Clarke read from his book, Pigtrails n’ Breadfruit. Also present was veteran Caribbean writer Michael Anthony who read an excerpt from a historical fiction novel still in progress. The other significant contributor was a female Jamaican publisher who
read “Colonisation in reverse” and other selected poems of Louise Bennet. While no one would be able to dispute the artistic value of any of the readings, what all lacked (arguably with the exception perhaps of Lovelace) was a connection to the contemporary life of the country or region.

Contrast this with some of the themes featured at “Galvanize”. One artist dealt heavily with Trinidad’s corporate culture, specifically how much the cellular service war between B-Mobile and Digicel dominated public life on the island. In one piece by artist Nicholai Noel, Prime Minister Patrick Manning is presented in a diagrammatic graphic art format with a blimp serving as a monocle. While a play by Surinamese playwright, Sharda Ganga, was aborted because it featured an expletive, there were no such limitations on the Galvanize event. Writers Block also had no clear restriction on language. And like Galvanize, the work dealt directly with problems facing contemporary Trinidad. A rhapsos piece entitled “4 am”, performed by Muwakil’s group, details living in the troubled area of Morvant with its early morning chorus of killers and cocaine addicts. In the Caribbean Beat article, Springer notes:

“He [CARIFESTA IX Artistic Director Earl Lovelace] says artists must be sensible and understand there are political interests wanting to be manifest.”

The manifestation of political interests has always had a detrimental influence on the development of the arts in the Caribbean. According to Lovelace, as quoted by Springer in the CB article, resistance would have been a central theme of CARIFESTA IX. The irony is that this concept of resistance seemingly applies only to opposition to the long-departed colonial establishment, and opposition to the current neo-colonialism with its economic and cultural imperialism; hence the focus on celebration of self as both prerequisite and analogous to contestation with the global environment. What typified the events at the fringe of CARIFESTA IX – “Galvanize” and “Writers Block” - was indeed a celebration of self, though a largely critical celebration; and the resistance therein was directed not only at the
outside but at the internal establishment as well.

Avant-garde or modern art always contains some element which questions the pre-established order, something within it which rages against the machine. At the first CARIFESTA in 1972, that machine was the British Imperial machinery. The artistic and political impetus were therefore similar, even complementary. A generation later, the same political parties opposed to the colonial powers are now in power themselves and the artists deeply involved in that opposition are mostly either dead, silent, or co-opted into the new regimes. The ability of art to hold up an often unflattering mirror to the society and its leadership, means that the Arts (once useful in exposing the faults of imperialism) have no clear official purpose, if not strictly utilitarian, within the region today. There does not exist in the post-colonial Caribbean a tradition of tolerance for artistic dissent or even criticism of the established order. The question posed in light of this is whether CARIFESTA can regain any credibility when the most progressive artists are altogether excluded from the event.

Art vs. Commercialism

“What do we celebrate when what sells is not necessarily what uplifts or questions or challenges? ... And how do we make Carifesta financially viable without turning it into the superficial bacchanal of so many once meaningful national festivals?”

Attillah Springer, “Celebrating Ourselves”

CB

The other central conflict factor which dominated CARIFESTA IX was that which pitted the artistic against the commercial. If avant-garde art existed outside of the periphery of the Festival, the approved art of CARIFESTA itself

The sale of craft items, like these leather sandals from a Guyanese booth, was a central focus of CARIFESTA IX.
was just on it. One iconographic image of CARIFESTA IX, supposing that it was recorded, was that of a trained and talented Guyanese artist - part of the official contingent - who was seen outside of a booth in the Grand Market. After several days of complaining about his placement at the rear of a craft booth and the lack of interest shown in purchasing his paintings, he had decided to earn some income from the event by selling his art.

A startling central trend appeared. The Grand Market which formed a several hundred metre arc around the main stadium building, constituted - with its craft booths, food stalls, Rum Shop, and onstage entertainment - the core of CARIFESTA, a grand fete marked by the occasional Carnival style parade. Herein the Festival aspect of the event was arguably strong although the attendance throughout was generally low. What was missing from all this however, was the crucial element of the event: that is ‘The Arts’. They were not so much missing, in fact, but hidden - tucked away in various locations in and out of the Stadium compound.

The Film Festival could not be found unless you were looking directly for it or came across it accidentally, located away as it was on the ground floor of the secondary building (a smaller stadium it seems) in the compound. The entrance was located through a gate in a security fence, itself obscured by some Carnival costumes; down a short corridor; through an anteroom the organizers were using as a command centre/refreshment area. The screening area held a maximum of approximately fifty people including those standing.

The effective Art Gallery of CARIFESTA, located within the main stadium building, was nevertheless slightly more difficult to find, since there were no clear markers indicating an entrance. The display area constituted more hastily constructed booths, complete with plywood walls and metal piping. A good contrast would be the display area of Galvanise, located in the CCA7 building. Whereas the Art and Film elements were located within the grounds of the
Hasely Crawford Stadium, the Literary element of the event fared much worse. The central literary space - the Book Fair - was anything but. In an older building located in an area of Queen’s Park West, a few tables were hastily put together in a large ground floor room on which books were displayed.

The “intellectual heart” of CARIFESTA IX, The Symposia, fared no better. Located in the VIP room at the top of the main stadium building, attendance varied between fifty people and twelve. While all or most of the sessions were recorded on audio, the main video coverage on at least one occasion was provided by CARICOM staff, as opposed to private media. The usefulness of Symposia lies in the ability for the key themes, findings or resolutions to be filtered (or given whole if necessary) to the general public. In this case, the relative anonymity of audio recording of a sizeable group of people, added to the tedium and difficulty of sifting through the minutiae to get at substantial information makes it highly unlikely that whatever useful was said at the Symposia will ever find its way into the public domain.
Island vs. Island

“Carifesta au revoir for French Guiana French Caribbean representatives gone, second contingent cancelled”

Title of article by Stephanie Serac

Trinidad Guardian - September 28, 2006

As the region’s biggest, perhaps only, cultural event one of the key aims of CARIFESTA is to create a regional identity, one forged through each territory learning about the culture of the other. One of the key aims of CARIFESTA, according to the CARICOM website is to “show the similarities and differences of the people of the Caribbean generally.”

Much has been said about the provincialism which seems endemic within the region, even as we are ostensibly moving forward with the integration process. This division was not missing from CARIFESTA IX, and found expression in various little incidents. A good example would be the sale of food. With some of the contingents from various countries depending on food prepared by culinary arts, members of their respective delegations, persons from Trinidad and other countries were often rejected when requesting to purchase samples of food. Language, however, seemed the biggest single dividing factor within the CARIFESTA community: Anglophone on one hand and everyone else on the next.

A group of Cuban musicians - a single band - seemed to comprise the Cuban contingent in its entirety. A Trinidadian friend of the band seemed to act as an unofficial translator at the booth. Their CDs were on sale, but at TT $100 (US $16), they proved a bit too much for most buyers. It should be noted that the CARIFESTA III was held in Cuba. The French Guianese contingent seemed to
have the most difficult time however, and were planning to leave four days after the event started; another delegation scheduled to arrive later was also cancelled. Among their complaints was the fact that they were only invited one month before the actual event. When Surinamese playwright Sharda Ganga's play was abruptly halted because of the use of three expletives in the dialogue, she made the comment that "This is censorship, I don't accept it in my country and I would not accept here."

While such differences, of culture and context as it were, ran as undercurrents throughout the event, the atmosphere of commercial competition played no small part in this as well. One report in the press stated that Guyanese had occupied one booth of the not yet departed French Guianese contingent. On checking with a senior member of the Guyanese contingent, I was told that it was a private Guyanese business person, who had no connection to the official contingent who was guilty of the invasion. Here you have an interesting nexus which highlights the degree to which CARIFESTA - and, by extension, CARICOM - is successful at forging a sense of unity or common identity. The story of the Guyanese contingent illegally taking over a French Guiana booth is published without comment in a Trinidadian paper.

In essence, what pervaded CARIFESTA IX - exacerbated by the administrative failures at networking the contingents and the sidelining of the Arts in general - was a sense, not of intra-regional bonding, but of separate stallholders vying for the attention of a small and unpredictable customer base in a temporary marketplace.
Conclusion

“One of the primary aims of the new festival business model is to enhance the returns to key stakeholders like the host country, sending countries, artists and the regional cultural sector through shifting the focus to include profit-oriented and media appeal events.”

Dr. Keith Nurse, Reinventing CARIFESTA

In his speech at the closing ceremony of CARIFESTA IX, Secretary-General of CARICOM Edwin Carrington stated: “An element of economic benefit is the new element to CARIFESTA. CARIFESTA should fill, rather than drain the public purse.” The question of the financial viability of the Festival is one that cannot be dismissed, particularly in a regional body wherein the bulk of the membership can be classified as vulnerable economies.

Beginning in the mid-1990s and reaching its zenith in the Reinventing CARIFESTA, the call for the development of cultural industries, to aid overall economic development in the region, has increasingly been gaining the ear of the regional leadership. Indeed, the only clear aim of CARIFESTA IX seems to be that is was used as a dry run for some future profit making enterprise. “The Bahamas is hopeful that CARIFESTA X will deposit an estimated US$100 million in revenue into its national coffers, when the event takes place in that country in two years’ time,” begins an article by journalist Sean Nero. Reinventing CARIFESTA, the document on which the New CARIFESTA is based, states:

“The key objectives of the festival are:
To establish and celebrate the arts…
To maximize people participation in the arts…
To deepen the awareness and knowledge of the diverse aspirations within the Caribbean community…
To positively advance our culture at home, throughout the diaspora, and the world…
To foster a vision of Caribbean unity…
To expose children and Caribbean youth to the arts…
To encourage excellence…
To promote the development of cultural industries and merchandising…”

That last objective is footnoted in the document with the note “The following is a summary taken from “The Future of CARIFESTA,” October 1996, pages 8 and 9”. Profitability, or even breaking even in financial terms, is an addendum and one which goes against the very spirit of the original CARIFESTA. And in aiming for this addendum, the seven key objectives preceding have been wantonly sacrificed.

CARIFESTA, intended as a public institution designed to enhance the socio-cultural development of the region, cannot conceivably be administrated as one would a private enterprise company providing a public service for a profit. Examples abound wherein private, or private model enterprise, in public service almost invariably results in the diminishing of that service. I am of the view that the Cost-Recovery or Profitability direction of the new CARIFESTA will have the overall effect on the development of regional arts in the Caribbean that the privatization of Medicare has had in the United States. The failure of CARIFESTA is not its inability to make money, but to make money count. An editorial in one local paper summed this up, some four days into the event:

"The final tally of Carifesta’s cost will not be made in dollars spent, but in lost opportunities, which so far include scrappy management of some of the regional contingents, a Book Fest launched with much ado and almost no practical support for publishers, and performances played with gusto to free but empty seats."

**Trinidad Guardian**, 26th September, 2006

The question of the financial viability of CARIFESTA therefore is not whether financial investment in the event will be profitable or break even. The financial
viability of CARIFESTA - supposing that the intention is to retain the essential spirit of the festival - should be ensuring that maximum returns are achieved in terms of creating an environment in which artists can work comfortably, network and produce work that is beneficial to the Caribbean Society. ‘Beneficial’ in this case, necessarily has more to do with the ‘relevance’ proposed by Lamming, than it has to do with the profitability as proposed by Dr. Nurse’s document.