Identity Politics: Struggles over Symbols, Culture and History

The cultural and symbolic architecture of colonial hegemony

Following the conquest of Trinidad, the British Administration had the opportunity to impose its own cultural forms and symbols on the small community of resident Amerindians, Spanish settlers and their African slaves. Over the following decades, as a more heterogeneous population mosaic was implanted through successive waves of African, Indian, Chinese, Portuguese, Spanish and Syrian immigration, slowly English values, language, aesthetics and institutions became dominant and emerged as the measure of social status and preferences in practically all spheres of colonial life. To be sure, a totally integrated society was not forged from the disparate diversity of cultures that were imported in the creation of an essentially plural immigrant society. Rather, British norms and practices were superimposed as a veneer to be imitated or absorbed by the non-western immigrant groups. The different communities adapted differently to the new order of British imperial control. Even the proud and more numerous French planters who resisted absorption by the English, keeping their cultural boundaries in language and religion initially preserved, in the long run succumbed and all the Europeans of British, French and Spanish extraction became assimilated into what became known as the ‘French Creoles’, constituting the new cultural elite and the carriers of the hegemonic European colonial way of life. English and Christian symbols superseded all others and were elevated to a vaunted acceptable civilizational status.

British cultural colonial dominance offered no concession to the competing multicultural forms. The religious and cultural symbols and
practices of the non-European groups were neither recognized nor respected. The Amerindian way of life, with its animistic beliefs, was suppressed through Christian missionary proselytization. The choice that they were given as a condition for their survival was between conversion and enslavement. Neither the languages nor religious beliefs of the Arawaks, Siboney and Caribs were allowed much room to flourish. The Amerindians dwindled to virtual extinction, leaving a few place names and artifacts in their wake, a far cry from the vibrancy of their old pre-colonial past. African religious symbols and languages suffered a similar fate. Africans, uprooted from their primeval homes in Africa, and characterized by a wide range of languages and cultures, succumbed to the dominant colonial values and practices of the rulers. Such remnants and memories of their past as were preserved were not enough for the re-establishment of autonomous African societies.

Indians from India also brought a diversity of languages and customs, but partly because of their indentured status and geographical rural isolation, they retained and reinvented a few key Indian cultural practices to create new societies in some ways different from their own ancestral heritage but clearly distinct from the dominant English mode (Misra 1995: 222). But, like the Amerindians and Africans, they saw their symbols of faith and identity subordinated, depreciated, and even banned by deliberate acts of colonial policy. The Chinese, Portuguese and Syrians were comparatively small groups, and they were assimilated into the emergent hybrid colonial way of life. Thus, a pluralized cultural order was created with a dominant hegemonic Anglophone European stratum superimposed on the non-white subordinate communities. While cultural remnants of the Asian and African continent survived to various degrees, there was no gainsaying the fact of the dominance of English ways in the official definition of the identity of the state. At this level of control, colonialism was manifested as cultural imperialism and could be conceived as both a civilizational and religious imposition in which one symbolic order became ascendant at the expense of all others. Iris Marion Young describes well the fundamental features of this aspect of rule:

Cultural imperialism involves the universalisation of a dominant group’s experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm. Some groups have exclusive and primary access to ... the means of interpretation and communication in a society. As a consequence, the dominant cultural products of the society, that is, those most widely disseminated, express the experience, values, goals, and achievements