



Trinidad and Tobago Organisation for People of African Descent



People of African Descent and Cultural Rights, by Rita Pemberton *WGPAD 12th Session, Geneva, 22-26 April 2013*

Salutations

I am honoured to have the opportunity to address this forum. On behalf of the Trinidad and Tobago Organization of People for African Descent (TTOPAD) which I represent this morning, and on my own behalf, I wish to applaud the United Nations on the declaration of the year 2011 as the International year for People of African Descent and also commend the initiatives of the United Nations' Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, particularly its successful drive towards the declaration of the International Decade for the People of African Descent and, more immediately, for the present forum on Recognition: through Education, Cultural Rights and Data Collection. These provide the beacon of hope for those African descended people who still seek a recognized cultural space.

The UN Durban Declaration and Programme of Action

The UN Durban Declaration and Programme of Action spoke to the fact that people of African descent, marginalized on the basis of the colour of their skin are among those most affected by racism. The Declaration also asserts that, the discrimination against them has a long and terrible history rooted above all, in the very negation of their humanity. It recognized the urgent necessity for governments and people everywhere to strengthen "national actions...for the benefit of people of African descent in relation to their full enjoyment of economic, cultural, social, civil and political rights." In consequence the international year was declared to organize events that will lead to meaningful discussion regarding discrimination and racism, to identify discrimination where and how it existed and to identify and strengthen tools for its elimination and reduction wherever and however it existed.

TTOPAD

Our organization, TTOPAD, was formed in response to this call of the United Nations Declaration. Since its establishment, our organization has hosted a series of events, held wide ranging discussions with various organizations, groups and institutions in keeping with the declaration. We have developed a grassroots and community outreach through radio and village community programs, public seminars, lectures and consultations, inviting participation at the highest levels, from representatives of other national African-based institutions and well known international scholars representing various fields of academia. Our participation at this august forum underscores our commitment to grassroots and community outreach. Recognising the inextricable link between culture and social development, we have pioneered the establishment of the Sankofa Eco-Resort and African Heritage Park, as a Co-operative Socio-economic Developmental enterprise. In this venture, Sankofa, the mystical West African bird that exhorts peoples of African descent as they face the difficulties and challenges of past experiences, to move into the future with appropriate cognizance of the greatness and legacy of our ancestors, is used as an empowering and motivating force. Despite negative circumstances, we rely heavily on the very history that has shaped our institutions and cast our people to the lowest rungs of the social, political and economic ladders, to provide the elevating elements as we seek to attain a more positive future.

Having regard to this, TTOPAD emerged as an umbrella body representative of a number of individuals, groups and organizations concerned with issues and challenges facing people of African descent in Trinidad and Tobago and who are engaged in charting the way forward for improvement in the quality of life for all in our multi-religious, multiethnic, multi-cultural nation. We work in collaboration with all African-based civil society organizations in Trinidad and Tobago and we have also been forging links with organizations across the English-speaking and wider Caribbean, as well the wider African diaspora.

Our first challenge is to deal with prevailing myths especially the perception that (1) discrimination against people of African descent essentially disappeared with the abolition of slavery and (2) that the African descended people of the Caribbean are no longer victims of

discrimination. The reality, as even a cursory examination of the historical record will show, is that the trajectory of discrimination against people of African descent in the Caribbean reflects a striking continuum albeit with some deviation from its earliest manifestations. The end of colonialism and the institution of self rule did not mean the end of discrimination against people of African descent. The roots of this discrimination run deep but in some instances it has become more subtle, remained institutionalized and is now most manifest in the area of culture. It is deeply ensconced in our education system which has taught us to frown on, discount and even to distance ourselves from, things African. While African culture permeates our very being, many have been schooled not to acknowledge its existence and influence whether with respect to food, dance, music, traditional medicine, folklore, proverbs and sayings, religion and beliefs, art and craft, economics, theatre or any other sphere of human activity.

Hardly anywhere in the Caribbean are popular dishes described as African for there is more comfort in regarding them as “creole.” Even where we display some appreciation we are woefully short of knowledge of Africa, its history and traditions and the African contribution to life in the Caribbean. Regional governments, composed of some of the best products of the colonial education, have remained mired in the colonial mindset, have not been able to take advantage of the developmental potential of African cultural resources and of the tremendous opportunities offered by the African diaspora for networking, markets, trade, cultural exchanges, access to an exciting new world of products, ideas, investments, human development, all which can make the entire world, a better place for us all. Rather than take innovative approaches, Caribbean governments continue to compete with each other for the crumbs from the imperial tables, begging the traditional approaches to development to yield results they will not produce. Hence, it is no surprise that cycles of poverty and underdevelopment perpetuate themselves in the region.

Few were the voices of concern when some governments in the Caribbean obstinately refused to institute meaningful programmes that reflect the significance of the International Year for the People of African Descent and give attention to related long neglected issues. While some governments opted to have one or two social charades, some resorted to token gestures while others did nothing at all.

This brings us to the question of cultural rights and the legitimate expectations of People of African descent in Trinidad and Tobago where the African descended population is one of

the major population groups. Against this background, the story of our experience in respect of the International Year for People of African Descent is instructive. In keeping with the policy guidelines laid down by the United Nations, African descended groups sought to collaborate with the government of Trinidad and Tobago in the hope of realizing the vision of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action. Well into 2011, the government set up a Unit at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ostensibly, to address the implementation of a program of action under the guidelines set down by the United Nations.

In retrospect, the Unit seemed to have been set up to frustrate the efforts of African civil society organizations to collaborate with the government towards the realization of the goals of the International Year for People of African-descent. TTOPAD held several meetings with officials of the Unit at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which issued invitations to African civil society organizations to make submissions to commemorate the International Year. These organizations were also invited to submit their respective project proposals and budgets. Having been informed that some TT\$8m were allocated for the national program of action, expectations soared and the groups submitted projects which involved various aspects of African culture: art and craft, language, history and education, agriculture, youth development, exchange programmes and collaboration with African states.

It soon became clear that the government was not serious. Groups were directed to individual government ministries in order to access support for their projects. Stating that they had received no budgetary allocations for such purposes, the Individual ministries then redirected the groups back to the Unit at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. After months of shuffling, the groups were advised to proceed with their projects, with the assurance that their programs will be eventually funded. Some groups began the implementation of their projects in expectation of support which never materialized while others, as has been the tradition of Africans in the Caribbean diaspora, implemented their programmes by self help.

The International Year for People of African Descent came and went and not a single submitted program, not even in a modified form, was adopted or supported by the government of Trinidad and Tobago. The only activity of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago to commemorate this Year was the strategic positioning of a well designed banner displayed at the Piarco International Airport, advertising to the entire world that the Government and People of Trinidad and Tobago commemorates the International Year for People of African descent. The banner seemed to symbolize a commitment of the

government to the stated ideals of the UN declaration but alas this was but a promise destined to be unfulfilled! The government of Trinidad and Tobago refused thereafter to honor its commitment showing disrespect to African organizations and their membership and to the national and international community. Once again in the history of Trinidad and Tobago another episode of African cultural rights denied has been recorded.

The denial of cultural rights in Trinidad and Tobago is nothing new. Of the many examples that can be identified, the steel pan is perhaps the most classic example. The most important musical invention of the twentieth century, the steel pan emerged from the grassroots African-descended people of Laventille and the potential it offers for development has been most severely underutilized. This remarkable instrument has unlimited range in terms of pitches, unfathomable capacity regarding harmony, the harmonics and enharmonic potential and the tones between the standardized register of notes are phenomenal and it is percussive and overwhelmingly rhythmic. It is remarkably versatile, being suited to any kind of music: classical, jazz, Latin American styles, rock music, calypso, soca, tassa, country and western, or religious music. It can be regarded as very sociable: it works as well solo playing of any of its many instruments as for a musical ensemble and large, small and medium-size orchestras. It can be combined with other musical instruments in ways as yet seemingly unthinkable and of course the steel pan has become a globalized instrument.

Uniqueness and versatility notwithstanding, the potential offered by the steel band for national development has been severely overlooked. Because it is seen as an African thing, it was not accepted by some sections of the national community and there was a long painful period of skewed debate and counter debate before the political will could be mustered to declare it a national instrument. Yet, its potential for national economic investment remains largely untapped. While national focus was placed on oil and natural gas in the energy sector, the steel pan was never envisioned as one of its downstream industries which could provide a tremendous comparative advantage in a globalizing world. There was never a vision of huge factories manufacturing steel pans, reducing unemployment and strengthening our balance of payments and dominating its sale on the international market. The one factory that was established has been brought under the auspices of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago where it has remained asphyxiated

Also significant is its potential for education. The steel pan requires discipline, concentration, and memory which are important planks for education and can be harnessed for youth development. It offers possibilities for the development of cognitive, affective and psychomotor skills. There are also positive implications for higher research and invention. It is essentially a chemical product, ripe for research in chemistry and chemical engineering. The mechanics of sound and the importance of locomotion invite research into the world of physics and physical engineering. With the manufacturing of the "G Pan", it can now be said that we have come some way in electrification and digitalization of the steel pan which moves this instrument into modern technological times. The sad reality is that in the land of the steel band, the national instrument is neither on the national curriculum nor on the national agenda for development. A programme developed to put the steel band on the national curriculum has been scuttled by the present government. As the instrument is taken for granted and its true potential overlooked because of its African roots.

The situation is similar in other spheres of the cultural life of Trinidad and Tobago where there is no clearly articulated cultural policy. Funds are allocated to groups for cultural activities on an ad hoc basis each year and for years the situation regarding one of the main commemorative activities of the African community, Emancipation Day, has been plagued by uncertainty and insufficiency of financial support.

There has been no attempt by governments to spread information to the population of their African roots and the African contribution to every sphere of life in Trinidad and Tobago. For example, the relationship between the rhythm of the steel pan and the calypso and the Yoruba God of Iron is largely unknown. There is minimal input about the history of Africa in our school curriculum and there are no national mechanisms for the study of the African elements of our culture. Where do our more popular foods come from? The average person in Trinidad and Tobago does not know of the African origins of watermelon, ochro, and tamarind to name a few. What is the national knowledge of the African elements in the cultural expression of Tobago? What attempts are being made to preserve existing relics of our African past that are domiciled in some of our oldest communities? In a large part the answer to all these questions is simply- none. African cultural groups in Trinidad and Tobago continue to be marginalized. They receive little or no support from government and their potential offering to national development remains largely discounted.

Despite requests from several African groups in this country for more direct airline contact with West Africa to facilitate wider interaction between Africa and the Trinidad diaspora, the response of government outside of the oil sector, has been less than enthusiastic. Many African traditions upon which post emancipation Trinidad society was honed have been left to wither and die. The sou sou has not been embraced as an alternative mechanism for financial development in communities. African traditional medicine is not given consideration as part of the alternative medicine thrust and neither the African historical heritage nor the African origins of the Trinidad population has been explored for tourism possibilities. As a result there are a number of important African historical sites in the country that have been left to degenerate.

Like you at the United Nations, we in TTOPAD believe that religion, spirituality and beliefs play a central role in the lives and relationships of millions of women and men. Further, that the pursuit and establishment of cultural rights can contribute to the promotion of the inherent dignity and worth of the human person and to the eradication of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. This message is yet to become accepted fodder in the practices of Trinidad and Tobago today.

We also believe that the process of globalization constitutes a powerful and dynamic force which should be harnessed for the development and prosperity of all countries, without exclusion. Similarly, we recognize that developing countries face special difficulties in responding to this central challenge. While globalization offers great opportunities, exploitation continues to be widely distributed, while benefits are sparingly shared. The nurturing of cultural rights and cultural development, approached properly, can improve opportunities for international cooperation, increasing the equality of opportunities for trade, economic growth and sustainable development.

Increased intercultural exchange, through the preservation and promotion of cultural diversity, can and will contribute to the eradication of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. In recognition of the foregoing and with a view to developing a programme for the Decade, TTOPAD wishes to make the following recommendations

1. That specific and achievable goals for the International Decade for people of African Descent should be identified.

2. That a systematic mechanism for the promotion of the culture of people of African descent should be established in each country.
3. That a research programme examining the nature and evolution of the culture of the people of African descent and its potential for development be established.
4. That a network to facilitate trade and cultural exchange, promote interaction and collaboration among African Diaspora communities, and between these communities and Africa be established.
5. That provision be made to support the study, recognition and preservation of African tangible and intangible heritage.
6. That assistance be provided for the promotion of the patenting of African heritage products and services.
7. That research be conducted into the ways in which education, law and the jurisprudential systems facilitate cultural racism and cultural discrimination.
8. That in this Decade of Development for People of African Descent, WGPAD and civil society organizations collaborate with the International Cooperative Alliance and other African Development Organizations in fostering the development of viable Cultural Co-operatives to deepen intercultural exchange through the preservation and promotion of cultural diversity and continuous education in our inalienable cultural rights as people of African descent

It is the hope of TTOPAD and its members that the Decade of Development for People of African Descent will be used as the opportunity for governments to make amends for their omissions during the International Year for People of African descent. Rather than the unfulfilled promises and disappointments that characterized 2011, it is hoped that governments everywhere will provide greater respect and support for the cultural rights of the African descended segments of their populations and facilitate the full realization of the objectives of the Decade for the Development for People of African descent.

Once again please accept our thanks for affording our organization the privilege of addressing this gathering on this very important subject.