

Out of Many, One People: The Anomaly That Is the Jamaican Identity

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This capstone project is dedicated to defining the Jamaican identity, its development, and how its characteristics differ from other cultures. English is certainly a Jamaican's first language in the sense that we grow up reading it and writing it. But, in essence, we speak patois. We acknowledge people in it, converse using this "slang" with friends, acquaintances, and even teachers. It is our language. People refer to it as several different things, and those ignorant of the facts, understandably call it *Jamaican*. Patois is a Jamaican creole dialect that has formed over generations of multiple cultures intermingling on the island of Jamaica, speaking different pidgins, and ultimately creating our Jamaican identity. In essence the very hybridity of patois is an excellent corollary to Jamaican identity because the interactions of different cultures, as well as the collection of languages being used throughout the island's history have helped mold the unique characteristics seen emanating from Jamaica and its people today. To truly grasp the intricate multiplicity of

Senghor of Senegal, essentially refers to one's quality of "blackness," the shared cultural strength and beauty of people of African descent throughout the African diaspora. Jamaican identity undoubtedly has remnants of Negritude. However, I want to take the question of Jamaican identity beyond a single origin and argue that it is more like a patois, a hybrid entity. The Jamaican identity that is intricately and blatantly prevalent in Orlando Patterson's *The Children of Sisyphus* (1965) is a beautifully arrogant combination of combative perspectives and conflicting notions that relentlessly pull at the strings of the heart and the mind simultaneously. Our identity is a manifestation of cultural syncretism that ultimately grew out of a need for self-preservation without remaining stuck in a primitive era. The repression of other cultures swallowing our own whole during the times of slavery and western



Figure 5 Map and Flag of Jamaica by Darwinek, CC BY-SA 3.0. Image available at Wikimedia Commons.

the development of patois and Jamaican identity, one must understand patois as well as the complexity of the Jamaican culture.

If you paid attention in history class, like I did, then you already know that the ancestors of most Jamaicans, were Africans, who were brought over via the slave trade. This is why scholars often apply concepts of Negritude to Jamaica. Negritude refers to the qualities that resonate within descendents of Africa, and their ideological movement in the rejection of colonial powers and the racism that came with it. This literary term, coined by francophone black Caribbean intellectuals, Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon of Martinique, and their African counterparts such as Léopold Sédar

colonization manifests the tenacity of our cultural identity. We will not become a part of a previously existing movement inflicted upon us; rather we take the elements of that movement that are deemed beneficial and mold them into a part of our growing identity.

Negritude is undoubtedly evident within the Jamaican identity. However, Negritude is acutely Afro-centric and tries to eradicate the essence and evidence of other cultures that have previously dominated by way of colonization. The sense of innate pride is a major characteristic of Negritude, and this carries on within Caribbean culture. Saint Lucian author Derek Walcott advocates Caribbean Negritude and its individuality by trying to depict

something new as opposed to exposing some sort of conflict between previous colonizers and people of African descent. Walcott was castigated for not purely being against western influences and staying true to Negritude, like contemporary Caribbean islanders. To summarize his belief on the issue, Walcott bravely states, "There is too much emphasis on the African culture in the Caribbean, and there should be much more respect paid to the Indian and Chinese cultures in terms of color and origin. We should mix the African philosophy and culture with the Indian. It is the mixture of cultures that is the essence of the Caribbean" (Cabrera).

This blended concoction of cultures and struggle for Jamaica's own sense of identity is evident in *The Children of Sisyphus* first published in 1965. This is mainly the story of a poverty stricken prostitute, Dinah, who lives in the Dungle, a trash riddled ghetto in depths of Kingston, Jamaica. She momentarily settles there with a man whom she reluctantly loves despite the fact that he has forced her to sell her body as a means of providing income for them and their young son. She leaves this "uncivilized" lifestyle with a middle class man in search of a more stable state of being where she doesn't have to scrap with her peers for uncontaminated food and a warm place to sleep.

One way that the conflict between colonial and African cultural influence plays out in the novel is in terms of religion. Patterson conveys his perception of the lives of the urban destitutes by exploring two routes of survival in Pentecostalism and Rastafarianism. The author of "Vision in Orlando Patterson's *The Children of Sisyphus*" Julia Udofia, elaborates on this by stating that "Rastafarianism is a messianic/millenarian cult based on selective religious beliefs that are of Afro-Christian fusion" (80-81). Rastafarians derive their beliefs from Marcus Garvey's prediction of black redemption through the crowned Ethiopian ruler in Africa, Haile Selassie I or Rastafari. They also rely heavily on Garvey's belief that all blacks in the diaspora should regroup back in Africa. Their theory and religion advocates an absolute belief in Haile Selassie I as the embodiment of the living cult. As Udofia explains, "The adherents also believe in peace and love to all men, especially, black men and disapprove of hate, jealousy, envy and deceit. However, Rastas generally have a public image of violence, criminality and other anti-social acts. They constitute a separatist group and are often also characterized as lazy, dirty and lawless people who

use religion to mask their aversion to work and bad habits" (81).

Within Patterson's novel, Dinah's perspective leads us down a different path, yet just as stubborn a conviction. Also belonging to the impoverished base of this societal pecking order, Dinah expresses her state of ambition. It drives her. She thrives on it, and thus uses her self-motivation and discernment as a catalyst to move out of the Dungle in search for a more privileged lifestyle, one that she believes she deserves, despite what society has told her. This attitude undoubtedly represents the undying search for something better, something more, and it certainly symbolizes the segment of the Jamaican identity that invokes a sense of middle-class conformity, yet struggles with futile attempts to repress its roots. Though a part of our identity wants to be preserved, the tempting appeal of something more is hard to resist as the consequences are blurred, and the rewards appear more blatantly in our perspective. In our identity's progress we concluded that we would strive for knowledge with the hope and intent of not forgetting our past. As Patterson intricately weaves biblical references throughout the text, he subtly alludes to the image of Eve and the forbidden fruit, putting a politically anti-imperialist spin on the religious allusion. The representation of forbidden knowledge coupled with the colonial era resonates through the innate subservience of the contemporary black person in the novel, despite blatantly seeking independence and equality. This is apparent when Dinah takes up a job in an upper-class household for, the narrator states, "She not only hated Mrs. Watkins, she was afraid of her. And because she was afraid of her, she had to obey her. It was incredible, this paradox that perplexed her soul" (130).

The focal point of my argument, regarding the Negritude movement, opposes exclusively embodying Afro-centric dispositions. This is due to the fact that the foundation and catalytic premise behind the Negritude crusade is essentially based on eradicating the effects that the colonizers' rule had on a culture, and then completely reverting back to pre-colonial ideals. Via the Rastafarian religion, Patterson expresses evidence of this utter rejection of every utmost conceptual idea, be it cultural or industrial, which was carried over from the west. In the novel he refers to a civil disagreement between two men of the Rastafarian faith, Brother Emmanuel and Brother Brisco. The former represents the more tenable opinion that, though the "white-man" is

wicked and deceitful, every belief and notion they had could not be “wrong” or incorrect. Brother Brisco swiftly disagrees, saying “Ahh, me god-brother, yu mek de oppressors dem still foolin’ yu...when I use to go to school, teacher use to tell me de same lies dat yu repeatin’ now” (Patterson 82). He elaborates on this by exclaiming that the people of the west only retain and represent a basic level of knowledge, and with that they cannot be deemed superior to the people of African descent. Expanding even more on his belief, he insinuates that the black people (mainly those of his Rastafarian faith) have a higher, more rewarding, and ultimately more valuable form of spiritual knowledge. He says in patois, “De white man is full up of certain kind of knowledge. What yu call trash knowledge. (H)’im know how to mek moto-car an’ plane an’ skyscraper. ‘Im know how fe mek big gun an’ big bomb so dat ‘im can blowup ‘imself. But dat is jus’ de knowledge of de t’ings of de earth. Ras tell I dat them is there only there ‘cause them appear to be there...when my flesh dead an’ gone, same time them (things) dead an’ gone too” (83). Despite Brother Brisco being fairly convincing, Emmanuel retorts rationally, saying, “Of a truth, me Brother, but yu cant say dat de white man don’t teach truth sometime; remember Brother Solomon say dat if dem never did ‘ave sense dem wouldn’t be as successful as dem is in certain t’ings” (Patterson 83). The theories and images illustrated within their argument are analogous to the ongoing conflict of interests within the Jamaican identity. Patterson offers a literary depiction of the constant battle between the innate urge to regress back to purely Afro-Centric rituals and ideals, and the desire to expand spiritually and physically through a form of cultural gentrification.

Exemplifying this moral sense of Jamaican identity is our nation’s motto, “Out of Many, One People.” This motto depicts that though several cultures are evident in our country and that we have different ethnicities flowing through our veins, collectively, we are one. We are not Africans, though we might have their skin. We are not Englishmen, though we might speak their language. We are Jamaican. Though a complex compilation of different cultures, languages, ethnicities, and ways of life, as the motto states, we are “one people.” Some critics, like Rastafarians, argue that we Jamaicans should mainly pay homage to our African roots through the foreign identity in Negritude. This should not be the case. Though we are of African

descent, we have our own identity. The Jamaican character is built upon innate desire and ambition to strive for excellence without conforming to the nations that previously colonized us or remaining content with an ancient conception of the culture of the African motherland. This identity searches without merely accepting what is given because for far too many centuries our people have been oppressed and brainwashed: therefore, in a steadfast and somewhat stubborn manner, we now seek the answer ourselves.

It’s like middle school or high school. There are several enticing and convincing cliques, wanting, urging you to adapt and comply with their way of life, they feed you lies about other sects while preaching the benefits of theirs, all in a subliminal yet blatant attempt to rid you of your own identity and what makes you, you. In this proverbial school setting, Jamaicans would represent the individuals who keep in mind where they are from; yet know where they want to go. They would embody the non-conformists and praise the so-called “hipsters” who remain “different” despite the persistent pleas and attempts by those fraternal organizations.

At the same time, the Negritude or Black Nationalist impulse is understandable, but only as a temporary response to the seemingly irreparable trauma of white supremacy and colonialism. It’s essential to have this type of mentality, for it is imperative that this sense of Black Nationalism seals the cracks that appeared as a result of oppression and western colonial rule constantly jamming the air of inferiority into our “feeble” minds. However, despite the need for this, it is best that it just be a temporary act, a means to an end, rather than the end goal itself. Completely reverting back to purely Afro-centric ways is essentially reversing the problem and flipping white supremacy beliefs into black supremacist beliefs. This act would also exhibit a blatant disregard for the Chinese, Indian, and several other cultures/ethnicities that have integrated into, and ultimately influenced, our identity. For us to say that our island’s sense of identity would be benefit from exclusively Africanized ideals would be a mistake, for it is almost analogous to stating that we should strive to be just like the westerners who colonized us, or only emulate the indigenous people who first inhabited the island. The Jamaican identity is nearly a perfect equilibrium of all the cultures we have come into significant contact with, and we are in essence a multi-colored vase with the appropriate amount of “white glue” at the foundation.

Despite having a stubborn sense of pride instilled within our identity, due to the colonial regime and its consequential effects, our people of that time fought inherent obligations with futile strikes. This history of futility also shapes Jamaican identity. As Patterson depicts it, Dinah ponders in bittersweet frustration:

Work...get money...spend it...and work again for more money. Something nice about that. Sound good. Sound secure. Sound like what nice, decent people do. . . .

But blast it, though, It was this that revolted her. Work and get your pay and come back again for more and that's a good girl. There was something about this which made her sick and want to vomit in as much as it attracted her...It was such a nasty, bitchy world, but she would lick it yet. . . .

Her soul raged with humiliation and bitterness, but in the humiliation and bitterness there was the sheer pleasure of pain. (126, 134)

It is apparent that in these passages, although Dinah despises the system in which she lives, it is paradoxically enticing. This, now intrinsic anomaly stems from colonizers and their persistent attempts to “civilize” Jamaicans, as well as the people of our motherland. Their argument was essentially that they were helping these uncivilized and savage nations by bringing their definition of “civil traits” and government to Africa, and Jamaica, alluding to their inherent sense of superiority and belief that we were stray dogs to domesticate.

This claim of civilization was essentially a façade and is more analogous to one of animal domestication, i.e. house pets. The result of the extended oppression has ultimately lead to blacks suffering from self-loathing, and has had such an intoxicating effect upon their mindset, that its ramifications have lead them to be convinced that the Black race is “in fact” inferior. In some instances this belief is prevalent in black communities today. For instance, many black males today believe that white girls are more attractive than their black counterparts, and thus don't even date dark-skinned girls. This has a detrimental effect throughout contemporary society, and generations to come. Patterson alludes to this issue throughout his novel, but the most tangible example of such indoctrination is evident when a proud mother, Mary, who is also a prostitute, is overzealous about her brown-skinned bastard daughter, Rossetta, and the possibility of her

gaining a scholarship ahead of the other students in the shantytown Dungle. During the back and forth Rachael, another resident of the Dungle, exclaims, “Education no mek fo' neager people, yu know” (88). Mary sharply defends her daughter, but not herself, in her retort, “Yu see me pickney look like dem other little dry-head, black pickney dem 'bout de place. Yu no' see she 'ave backra blood in her. Is her father she get de brains from. Me black an' stupid, but her sailor father give her all de brains she need” (88). After she receives the news of her daughter's scholarship, Mary immediately promises Rachael a job as her nanny and a pension when her daughter marries a rich white man. This illustrates the proud aspirations of the contemporary black people in the island, portraying that the primary objective of her intelligent daughter shouldn't be to seek financial security as a result of her higher education, but rather that she should seek out a “rich white man” to end their impoverished struggle. This undoubtedly reveals that no matter what opportunity presents itself, the poverty-stricken people believe that the only way out is via the superior white train.

With this said, it is irrefutable that the incessant brainwashing has worked its way into the depths of black person's consciousness that one of them has the audacity to say, and believe, “Education! Is education an' too much ambition cause it. Black people mus' learn fe know dem place. Is right here we belong. Right down a' dutty-ground ya” (89). White imperialism has had such a critical effect on blacks' mental reasoning that it has put it into a fragile state of being and driven them to concede that they are subordinate to the white man, leading blacks to believe that whatever the colonizers say is factual. These instances referenced above depict an inherent sense of internal racism within the black community against their own ethnicity. They grow up in an era in which they are forced into despising themselves, hating the color of their skin, regurgitating at their “subordinate” vernacular, and scorning the mirror more than anything because their reflection was revolting. Jamaicans have battled to eradicate this self-loathing from their identity, and have succeeded for the most part, but it was driven so far into the crevasses of our very existence that it has become an irremovable stain left upon our being.

Patterson's title, *The Children of Sisyphus* is exceedingly relevant due to the basis of the Greek myth. Sisyphus was punished for his actions and was forced to repeatedly roll a massive boulder to the top

of a hill only to watch to roll back down again. This is reminiscent of the Jamaican identity, a tenacious attempt to repress white conformity. Despite the persistent attempts, literal and figurative lashes and downfalls, we prevail. In the Jamaican individuality we have an exquisite arrogance, an unwavering sense of pride after conquering subservience, as well as conformity to foreign ideals. Our personality can be evident anywhere, but not duplicated. Where you see a poster depicting a series of flags, Jamaica is there. When you go anywhere in the Caribbean and hear the dialects, Jamaica is there. No matter what country you visit, when you turn on the radio, at one point or another, some deep-rooted Jamaican tune resonates through the speakers. We are there. In the beautiful idiosyncrasies of our people's individuality, instead of muting the evidence of the paradoxical entities crying out, striving, fighting for their own place, for their own personality. We have melded them into what I know is the quintessential equilibrium of distinctive ideals, thus forming one ironically harmonious identity. Moreover, the Jamaican identity is more than the mere melting pot of cultures; it is the unflinching embodiment of a

well-refined character that repressed the abusive hands of imperialism, without neglecting the need to adopt and adapt throughout history, despite facing ominous circumstances.

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