

Mighty presents Caribbean Nite address

One of the speakers at Caribbean Nite, which was held Saturday, March 20, was Dr. Joy Mighty. Originally from Guyana, Dr Mighty reflected on the nature of the Caribbean identity.

Here are some excerpts from her address. "The peoples of the Caribbean region have always struggled with issues of identity. For us, asking fundamental questions about who we are has been, and still is, critical to our national and regional psyche, because of our particularly painful history of exploitation and degradation - from the dispossession and decimation of our indigenous peoples, to the enslavement and captive journey through the middle passage of our African ancestors, the harsh indenturedship of our East Indian and Chinese forebearers and, in more recent times, a newer type of dependence and enslavement of our economies and cultures.

Yet, from this dehumanizing history of oppression and persecution has emerged a unique Caribbean personality, formed in a mould of colonial socialization, yet retaining that pre-captive free spirit and joie-de-vivre so evident in our music, dance, poetry, languages, rituals and ceremonies. Who among us can truly understand and enjoy the calypso, one of the most popular and world-famous Caribbean literary forms, and not grasp its significance as a unifying force that embraces the diverse nationalities and cultures comprising the Caribbean region? With its predominant African rhythm, overlaid by Spanish, French and English influences (and more recently Indian and Chinese as well), the calypso includes, appeals to and

speaks for diverse ethnic and national groups in the region, uniting us in a way that no politician or political ideology has ever been able to do. Perhaps only "cricket, lovely cricket" has exerted an equally unifying influence, but cricket is not really indigenous to the region, although we have mastered and enhanced it with our unique style of play and audience participation. Where our several attempts at political and economic unity have failed, our distinctive forms of popular musical expression have succeeded. The reggae may have originated in the concrete jungles, the shanty towns and the Trench Towns of Kingston in Jamaica, but there is hardly a country in the world today where reggae sounds do not reverberate, and many internationally famous musicians and singers have "borrowed" (perhaps much too freely) its distinctive rhythm to incorporate into their own productions as they have climbed the ladder of success and fame. As Caribbean people, wherever we go (yes, even here in the unfamiliar and unforgiving arctic climes of New Brunswick), when we hear the strains of calypso, steelband and reggae music we experience the thrill of ownership and pride in the knowledge that these are *our* creations, *our* artistic expressions that have evolved from the communion and merging of diverse cultures into a new, vibrant entity that is uniquely and unmistakably Caribbean".

Dr Mighty also acknowledged other artists' rich and varied contributions to the development of the Caribbean personality. "Thanks to the creative genius of our own

literary artists, there exists today a body of literature that describes, captures and epitomizes our lives and our people, thereby ensuring that, despite our history, we will never be peripheral or marginal in the universal scheme of things, but that, like every other people, we will always *BELONG*." At this point, Dr Mighty identified and thanked several Caribbean literary artists who have defined and eloquently articulated the Caribbean identity, including the 1992 Nobel Prize winner in literature, Derek Walcott. She also expressed gratitude to Caribbean historians, critics, scholars, political, social and intellectual leaders "for awakening our consciousness, and helping us to analyze our history and our present condition critically. They have made us question the conventional, stereotypical and limited perspectives of who we are, perspectives reflected in the historical amnesia, incomplete histories and analyses of our region written by the explorers, the enslavers, and past and present exploiters. They have helped us and the rest of the world to re-interpret our harsh history from the perspectives of the dispossessed, the persecuted and the exploited. Out of their endeavours have emerged discoveries of self and society, recognition of and pride in the merging and cross-fertilisation of diverse cultural groups into a whole new being - the Caribbean person, who, in Rex Nettleford's words, "may be part-European, part-African, part-Asian, but totally *CARIBBEAN*."

Dr Mighty cautioned against limiting definitions of the Caribbean to "Rhythm, Reason and Rhyme",

however characteristic they may be. Pointing out that, although the Caribbean may lack many economic and technical resources that would otherwise define it as a highly developed, industrialized region, it is an exceptionally rich region, Dr Mighty said: "I am not speaking here of our natural resources such as forestry, mineral wealth, rich soils, and relatively unpolluted air and water. Instead, I am referring to our human resources. Despite our history of cultural and economic deprivation at the hands of other people, our peoples have demonstrated a moral and psychological resilience and an invincibility of spirit that we must now exploit for the preservation and strengthening of our regional culture and identity and the promotion among our people of attitudes conducive to regional harmony and development. We are especially well equipped to do this, for as Rex Nettleford explains: "The people of the Caribbean might not have created what have become the Great Wonders of the World, but what they have done is to have built tremendous structures in terms of how people interact." Hence, a defining characteristic of the Caribbean people is our ability to put people first. We must put this characteristic to good use. When we acquire the monetary advances and the technological skills and equipment from our friendly neighbours in metropolitan centres all over the world, we must not make the same mistakes that many of them have made. We must perceive and use appropriate technology appropriately, as a servant of human values, always subservient to the interest and value of the human being. I am not for one moment suggesting that technological, economic and material progress is undesirable. What I am suggesting is

that our economic, social and political institutions must be controlled by our own human will, our own mental efforts and conscious activity rather than by the blind forces of materialism, technological progress or imitation of the North or the West. That same resilience that helped us survive the physical, economic, psychological and spiritual ravages and violations of explorers, slave-masters, colonizers and exploitive imperialists, must be maximized and used as a unifying force with which we must resist mental, cultural and economic enslavement in the name of development.

Dr Mighty appealed to those students who aspire to assume leadership roles in the Caribbean to exercise their authority in the interest of the betterment of the human condition.

"Moreover, our concern for each other as human beings must extend beyond the shores of the Caribbean. As residents and citizens of other nations of the world, including Canada, we must utilize our defining Caribbean characteristic of putting people first not only to look out for our sisters and brothers of Caribbean origin, but also to strive to create a new and better society wherever we are. This means that, wherever we go, we must uphold the ideals of service, commitment and excellence. Without these, our people could not have survived our long and bitter history. With centuries of experience taking care of the human spirit, ensuring its survival and putting people first, our Caribbean identity indeed encompasses much more than rhythm, reason and rhyme."

Finally, Dr Mighty urged the audience to remember the theme of "unity in diversity" so common among the mottos of several Caribbean nations.

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