

Afro-Latinos in American

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INTRODUCTION

Afro-Latinos are defined as people of African descent in Mexico, Central and South America, the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and by extension those of African descent in the United States, whose origins are in the Latin America and the Caribbean, (Román & Flores, 2010). Afro Latinos, Afro-Latinx, Afro-Hispanics or Black-Hispanics are a few terms that are used to identify the Afro-Latino Americans in the United States according to the U.S Census Bureau. These terms will be used interchangeably throughout this paper. This exploration paper which consists of three parts, will explore the Afro-Latinos in America.

Part 1 of this paper will highlight the Afro-Latinos living in the United States, with a look into their historical background in America, their beliefs, worldview, and social justice issues that have risen within their community. Part 2 will take the form of an interview with Charise Smith, a Black woman who identifies as an Afro-Latina, and Part 3 of this paper will close with a deeper look into the writer's ethnic heritage, which will shed light on her culture, family history and other aspect of the writer's heritage.

Upon conducting this research on Afro-Latinos, I have come to realization that the Afro-Latino community is appreciative of their roots in which their culture was built on, and although they encounter adversities as a minority in the American society, they continue to stay true to who they are and their culture. Colossians 2:7 is a testament to this people group's character. "Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him. Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness" (Colossians 2:7 NIV).

Part 1

AFRO-LATINOS(AS) HISTORICAL BACKGROUND IN THE U.S.

In the year 1502 and 1866, 11.2 million African slaves came ashore from a slave ship in the New World during the Middle Passage. Of the 11.2 million Africans that survived the journey on the ship, these survivors were taken to the Caribbean, Latin America and South America (NPR, 2011). As a result of this, the Afro-Latino/a population was birthed in Latin America. According to Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores in their book entitled, “*The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States*”, they explain that the Afro-Latinos/as presence in the United States preexisted before the founding of America and the first English settlements, (Román & Flores, 2010). They also stated that the earliest Africans in North America were Afro-Latinos/as who were instrumental in the exploration, conquest and settlement of United States South West (Román & Flores, 2010). The Afro- Latinos also settled in sparsely populated areas of Arizona, California, New Mexico and Texas as a result of their desirous need to escape the class restrictions that limited social and economic possibilities for them in their home countries, (Román & Flores, 2010).

In the 1930s, Afro-Latinos from Cuba arrived in the United States and were described as diverse in their occupations. Many of them were musicians, cigar makers and baseball players who made their departure to the “Big Apple”, New York City (Opie, 2014, p.7). Still prominent today, the majority of the black immigrants or Afro-Latinos from Puerto Rico, Cuba and Panama encountered racist housing treatment that caused them to move into African American neighborhoods that were already established. The population of Cubans in New York at the time consisted of two groups. There were the Afro-Cuban immigrants who resided in Harlem and the

White Cubans who settled in areas of Brooklyn, the Bronx, Staten Island and Queens in small groups, (Opie, 2014, p.8). The number of Cuban immigrants living in New York was unknown, however, about 18,000 Cubans had settled in the United States in the 1940s, and believed to be living mostly in Florida, (Opie, 2014, p.8). In 1910, Puerto Ricans were more noticeable in the United States, mainly in New York on the Lower West Side of Manhattan. These Puerto Ricans that settled in the Lower West side communities began to relocate to East Harlem where they opened barbershops. The Harlem Puerto Rican population then began to increase around 1917 after a bill was passed by the U.S. Congress that awarded all native-born Puerto Ricans the ability to have U.S. citizenship (Opie, 2014). This led to another increased in the Puerto Rican population, however, this time the Puerto Rican population in the United States increased from 1,513 Puerto Rican in 1910 to almost 53,000 Puerto Ricans in 1930, (Opie, 2014). Interestingly, with this increase of Puerto Ricans in the United States, there was no data to show what percentage of these Puerto Rican immigrants were of African descent. However, historian Winston James wrote that black and brown Puerto Ricans were a significant and conspicuous presence in Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s, (Opie, 2014). In summary of the Afro-Hispanics' historical background in the United States, it can only be assumed that Afro-Latinos/as were present in the United States since the 1930s and that they settled in small groups that were either in with Puerto Ricans or Cubans. They possibly contributed to some of the establishment of Puerto Rican and Cuban communities, in particular, "Spanish Harlem and El barrio", even though there is a lack of evidential support to determine exactly what percentage of the Puerto Ricans in the 1930's were black.

AFRO-LATINO(A) POPULATION STATISTICS IN THE UNITED STATES

In 2014, Pew Research Center conducted a National Survey by telephone on Latinos which reports that about a quarter or 24% of U.S. Hispanics identify as Afro-Latino/a, while in their 2020 online survey, it was reported that about 6 million Afro-Latino/a are in the United States, making up 2% of the U.S. adult population and 12% of the adult Latino/a population, (López & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2022). In an attempt to record the racial identity of Afro-Latinos, Pew Research Center asked Afro-Latinos/as about their race, the results showed that three-in-ten Afro-Latinos/as selected White as their race, while 25% selected Black and 23% selected “some other race” (Pew Research Center, 2022). Interestingly, according to the authors; Idelisse Malavé, Esti Giordani of the book: “Latino Stats: American Hispanics by the Numbers”, they shared that in a 2010 Census, 53% of Latinos identified their race as White, 2% as Black, and 0.7% as indigenous, (Malavé & Giordani, 2015). They also inserted that most of the 2 to 3 percent Black Latinos identify with the growing and evolving “Afro-Latino” racial and ethnic category, (Malavé & Giordani, 2015).

According to the Demographic and Socio-Economic Snapshot fact sheet in February 2019, UNIDOS US states that Afro-Latinos in 2017 make up a significant amount of the Latino community and is considered a vital part of the rich Latino culture, which we will discuss later on. They also stated that the majority (73%) of Afro-Latinos were born in the United States (UNIDOS US, 2019). Based on the data that was presented in UNIDOS US fact sheet, most Afro-Latinos reside in New York (23%), while in California 15%, and Florida a population of 12%. Unidos US fact sheet also found that the 23% of Afro-Latinos/as were living in poverty and that Afro-Latinos/as experienced a higher rate of poverty than the 18.3% of all Latinos/as

who lived in poverty in 2017 (Unidos Us, 2019). Statistics also showed that close to 27% of Afro-Latinos/as did not complete their high school education in 2017, also, 24% of Afro-Latino/as had completed some form of college education and nearly 18% of Afro-Latinos/as has a bachelor's degree or higher (Unidos US, 2019). Where workforce and income are concerned in the Afro-Latinos/as community, 28.3% of Afro-Latinos/as were reported to be likely to work in service occupations which tend to pay lower-wages, and in 2016, Afro-Latino median household income was \$58,616 according to Unidos US February 2019 Fact Sheet.

CULTURAL COMPONENTS, RELIGION, SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES AND

STRENGTHS IN THE AFRO-LATINO/A COMMUNITY

CULTURE AND STRENGTHS

Culture is a big part of the Afro Latinos/as and Latino community in America. The combination of their rich African heritage and Latin American history blends perfectly creating a unique, diverse and vibrant culture that has made significant contribution to the American culture and society. Today we see Afro-Latinos/as culture reflected on television in cartoons such as “Dora the Explorer”, “Diego” and Alma’s Way”, and also on the big screen in popular movies like “Encanto” and “Luca”. Music instrumentalism is also found in the Afro-Latino culture. Enslaved Africans, during colonization, brought the rhythms and music to the Caribbean which has contributed to the innovative forms of music within the Afro-Latino diaspora shaping new cultural identities, (Rodriguez-Duarte and Torres,1994). Rhythms such as bachata, bomba, plena and salsa are musical staples that the Afro-Latino community enjoy. Celia Cruz, is a well-known musician in the Afro-Latino diaspora. She is the Queen of Salsa and is known for her iconic and flamboyant style, which pays homage to her African and Caribbean roots.

Found within Afro-Latino/as culture is Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, a Puerto Rican historian who was an instrumental figure in the Harlem Renaissance movement in the 1920s. He is also known for his collection of books, documents and artifacts collected from Black history around the world. He also assisted with the establishment of the Schomburg Center for Research in Culture in Harlem in 1926 within the New York Library, (Tucker, 2021). Religion is also a big part of the Afro-Latinx culture. During my interview with Charise, (see full interview in Part 2 of this paper), she explained that religion is a big part of the Afro-Latinx community, particularly, Christianity and Roman Catholicism.

STRENGTHS IN THE AFRO-LATINO COMMUNITY

The Afro-Latinx community is built on resilience, unity and determination, despite the racism, discrimination and the hardships they have endured. We see the evidence of Afro-Latinx resilience in their zeal to spread awareness about their uniqueness and culture, through literature, movies and other storytelling outlets. Their determination can be seen in their contribution to the Civil Rights movement in America. For example, there is Felipe Luciano who is an Afro-Puerto Rican activist and founder of the Young Lords New York Branch. Through the rich legacy of activism in the Latino community, Latino/a activists today can be seen protesting against harsh immigration laws or other social injustice issues. During my interview with Charise, she shared about the strength of numbers in the Afro-Latino community, where no one is left behind. This is a prime example of unity in the Afro-Latino community. According to Latino Stats by Idelisse Malavé, Esti Giordani, Latino family households are larger than the average American family.

SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES

The number one social justice issue in America is racism, this is not new to people of African descent in America. In the United States, on October, 28, 2022, the social media platform “Twitter” erupted with racist slurred comments and posts directed towards the Afro-Latino/a community, after billionaire Elon Musk officially became the new owner of the social media platform. One user tweeted, “I hate n**gers, thank you for freedom of speech Elon”. This is the world that we are living in, where freedom of speech is the greenlight for hate speeches, violence, discrimination and racism towards a particular group of people. Sadly, this hate, discrimination and racism has seeped through the walls of the Afro-Latinos/as and Hispanic community, along with invisibility, issues of identity and inequitable access to education, healthcare and good paying jobs to name a few.

Being Black and Latino is a racial issue that has been plaguing the Afro-Latin American groups here in America. This has caused Black Latinos to feel displaced in the Black population due to questions about their racial identity. Many individuals who identify as Afro-Latinos/as from various Latin American backgrounds, including Charise, have spoken out against the discrimination surrounding their racial identity. L.G. Murillo-Urrutia, Director of Programs and Research of Afro-Latinos at the Washington D.C, is a Black man born and raised in Latin America. In his article entitled “A Contemporary Diversity Challenge: The Afro-Latino Experience”, he shared that in his own Latino neighborhoods, people assumed that he was either from the Africa continent or African-American. Particularly when he had not spoken, and even when he did speak plain Spanish, people still assumed that he learned Spanish as a second language (Murrillo-Urritia, 2008).

In an article written by Ti 'Anna Davis, light was shed on the stereotype and misconception surrounding how Afro-Latinos/as are supposed to look. She explained that Afro-Latinos have been stereotyped by their outside appearance within their own community and by others, and how there has been a large controversy about how a "proper" Latino should look. She also highlights that Latin community is known to glorify the white, light-skinned appearance of a Latino and discourage those who have darker complexions, (Davis, 2018).

Similarly, in the Hollywood arena, Afro-Latina singer Amara La Negra has come under public scrutiny and has been bullied due to her diverse blackness. The Afro-Latina singer, reality show star, and rapper expressed in an interview with ABC News that she feels like she always has to explain herself to other Latinos/as when they question her Blackness or racial identity, (Moll-Ramirez et al., 2020). She also shares about an experience she had with the Latino/as community on the internet when she participated in a Black Lives Matter march in support of the late George Floyd. She told ABC News that Latinos were expressing a lot of negative things towards her, such as, "why are you out there protesting? You're not Black. You have to pick. Are you Latina? You Dominican? Are you Black? You kind of have to pick," (Moll-Ramirez et al., 2020). Like Negra, there are other Afro-Latinos/as in Hollywood that go through the constant questioning and discrimination, much like those who are not famous and identified as Afro-Latinos/as. In addition to the racial identity issues that the Afro-Latino community suffer through, Afro- Latino/as invisibility is a concern. Scholar and author, Miriam Jimenez Román, in her book entitled "The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States", states that for the most part, Afro-Latinos/as are invisible, (Román & Flores, 2010). An interesting article written by Michelle Bueno Vásquez from the Washington Post entitled "How the U.S. census ignores Afro-Latinos", also calls out the U.S Census for the role they play in Afro-Latino

invisibility. Vasquez highlighted in her article that the modern census uses five racial and ethnic categories: White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and Hispanic origin, of which the category “Hispanic origin” reflects a 1970s reversal by Latino organizations, which began pressing for an umbrella “Hispanic/Latino” ethnic category to secure federal funding and protections (Vasquez, 2022). This she said created a Latino identity code as White or mestizo, and Non-Black, which as we can see, neglects Black/ Afro Latinos/as identity.

Inequity access to education, healthcare and good paying jobs are also another social justice issue that plaques the Afro-Latinx population, and yet again, race and color is the number one contributing factor. In a Pew Research Center survey of Latinos conducted in March 2021, 62% Latinos/as said that having a darker skin color hurts their ability to get ahead in the United States, while 57% said that skin colors shape their daily life experiences and 48% shared that discrimination based on race or skin color is a very big problem in the United States (Greenwood, 2022). In the June 2021, Commonwealth Fund chartbook, it was reported that many Black and Latinx/Hispanic patients received inadequate care once they are in the doctor’s office which stems from the generations of unequal treatment and medical racism (Baumgartner, et al., 2021). The chartbook also shares that Latinx/Hispanic patients are commonly mistreated and disregarded by providers and suffer the effects of racial bias within hospital treatment algorithms (Baumgartner, et al., 2021).

HOW AFRO-LATINX ARE REPRESENTED IN THE MEDIA

The media plays a very important role when it comes to representation of a specific group of people and its culture. So far, the Afro-Latino community has been misrepresented in the mainstream media, especially in the film industry. We have seen Afro Latina women such as Christiana Milan and Zoe Saldana rarely appear as Afro-Latina in movies, instead, they are cast into Black American roles due to their blackness which marginalizes their true ethnicity and culture (Goin, n.d)

There are also stereotypes that the media often creates surrounding Afro-Latinx which puts them in a box physically, racially and culturally, which does not match reality. For example, L.G. Murillo-Urrutia in his article entitled, “A Contemporary Diversity Challenge: The Afro-Latino Experience” expresses that in Hispanic television, such as Univision and Telemundo, dark-skinned Black individuals are rarely seen playing decent roles, which he believes creates a huge misunderstanding of the Latino societies in the media, (Murrillo-Urritia, 2008). According to the authors of “The Latino Media Gap”, they believe stereotyping results in the restriction of opportunity and perception of the Latino community. In their report they expressed that within television and movies, Latinos continue to be represented primarily as criminals, law enforcers, and cheap labor” (Negrón-Muntaner, et al., n.d). Based on “The Latino Media Gap Report”, from 2000 to 2013, there were few Afro-Latino/a stars, and from 2010 to 2013 on television, no Afro-Latin/a actors were cast into leading roles.

PART 2

THE INTERVIEW

This interview report will be presented in a Q & A (question and answer) style format. The interviewee is Charise Smith, a young woman in her mid-thirties, from the Bronx New York, who identifies as an Afro-Latina. This interview will cover a series of questions that will be answered by the participant. The interview was documented in its original state.

Interview Date: October, 22nd, 2022

Interviewer: *How have you come to identify yourself with this community?*

Charise Smith: *I identify as an Afro-Latina woman because my father is from Honduras. His side of the family were Africans who were taken to Central America, so because of my family's origin and culture, I identify as an Afro-Latina.*

Interviewer: *What does it mean for you to identify with this community?*

Charise: *I love being black, I love the culture, I love that the Afro-Latinos and Hispanics are welcoming, at least from what I experienced growing up, but you do have Hispanic racist who don't believe that even though their skin is dark, they're black, which is ridiculous, but I love the pain that we share, I love that we can laugh about the things that we grew up doing. We know what is like to spank our kids, there is a social connection that's deep. There is a cultural understanding and cultural norms that I understand and love being apart of more so than any other culture. Identifying with this community also means situating myself in a culture that wasn't originally mine, it means that I can chill with the Latinos in different places whether Puerto Rico, Cuba, Mexico, Nicaragua. It also means being a part of a bigger community while*

also having a history of being African. Identifying with the Afro-Latino community means a lot to me because I do not know everything about my origin, because my dad was not always around, but from what I do know, I can say that I belong in something unique and diverse.

Interviewer: *What are some cultural components and strengths that you are aware of in this community?*

Charise: *The strengths and cultural components is that Afro-Latinos are always sticking together, no one is left behind, they make sure that everybody is good. The strength of the community is coming together, it's like when one mom needs to work, all the rest of the moms who can't get a job will work to watch your kids especially in this New York environment, it's kind of like a thing where the village raised the child, it wasn't just my mom who raised me or my dad, it was a cousin, a friend, you know, everybody was an auntie or uncle and it just came together. There was strength in numbers. Afro-Latinos are very family-oriented, having a kid is a big thing, and there is a sense of understanding that everyone shares a similar struggle and can come together, especially when it comes to church, it pulls it together. There is also a sense of security in familiarity, whenever I was upset about something I could go to my Abuelita's house, Abuelita being grandmother, and I knew I would come home to a good home cook meal and have conversations around the table. Also, life lessons and traditions in the Hispanic culture, for Hondurans, there is a dialect called Garifuna, I do not speak it, I was never taught it, but the fact that it could set you apart like that made you special. In terms of other cultural components, Afro-Latinos and most Hispanics are Christians or Catholics, it's a big part of our culture, some Latinos though, they practice Santa Maria that's really a cult devil worshipping, kind of like voodoo.*

Interviewer: *What are some justice issues you identify with this community?*

Charise: *Definitely Black Lives Matter, and the fact that, especially going into healthcare the injustice of females or black people going to healthcare always you know seen as drug seekers and still taking care of less, or the lies that we can't feel pain as much as everybody else, that's a lie, or the fact that the birth rate of a Black woman is like almost 175 times higher than that of a white woman, the mortality rate of the mother and the baby are like 10 times higher. I can't stand that jails are filled with black people and petty crimes, but white people can get away with killing people, like all of those things. You also see injustice in the school systems, you see it in the fact that there are more army recruits in poorer areas because they know that the people need the money to go to college because sometimes that's their only hope. You have these false schools that are opening up that say that they're accredited and they're not. You spend thousands of dollars hoping to get this validation that you just you can't get. It's the discrepancy of pay, it's the discrepancy of having to be 10 times better than your white counterpart just to get the job. It's being a black-Latino woman in an office where I used to work and just being like anytime I had an attitude, they are like, "look like oh she's just an angry black woman", you know instead of it being that I am upset about something that anybody would be upset about. It's this Trump era, it's the racism, it's all of that. I mean growing up one thing my mom did tell me is that when you're born you already have two strikes against you, one, you're Black, two, you're female, you know, what you do next is how you're gonna live through this life, like it's not gonna be easy, you already got two balls off chains hanging around your legs, but you can do it it's just going to be harder. Not having a green card also cause injustice against Afro-Latinos, they treat them very poorly in the workplace because they know they can't be reported to the*

police. Also, I hate when they deport the immigrant parents and separate the parents from the kids.

Interviewer: *What is something that you want people to know about or understand about this community?*

Charise: *I know that people look at Afro-Latinos sometimes as being just loud and you know parties, the party is a reason for us to come together, but I want people to understand that our tenacity and our resilience is amazing we're intelligent, smart beautiful people, we've endured more just to make it in this world, and nothing is really handed to us. Some of us we do fall by the wayside, because life just takes its toll, but for the rest of us, we work hard and for what we want, and like when I say no one left behind, I really mean that. Like, they'll put you on, like, "hey I got this job, my cousin got this barbershop, let's do this, hey you know something opened up in my shop, let's do this, oh you're having a hard time? come live with me,". Like we will stuff everybody in the house if we have to, just to make sure people have a roof over their heads, yeah.*

PART 3

FAMILY HISTORY

I was born and raised on the beautiful Caribbean Island of Jamaica in the West Indies, which is an archipelago of islands between the southeastern United States and northern South America. My family's origin dates all the way back to Syria, as my grandfather's parents were Syrians/ Lebanese who immigrated to Jamaica in the 1890s (Jamaica Gleaner, 2003). During the 1860s and 1870s, a vast amount of Lebanese and Syrian Christian immigrants left the Middle East due to the religious persecution that was taking place by Muslim Turks from the Ottoman Empire (Al-Najar, 2021). At the time of the Syrian's exodus, America was undergoing the civil war which deterred the Syrians from seeking settlement in the country. As the Syrian and Lebanese people were seeking a new home, they fled to Jamaica who was under the ruling of the British at the time (Al-Najar, 2021). With the Syrians settling in Jamaica, they were able to establish businesses and resume their Christian life on the island, mingling and building relationships with the rest of the immigrants.

Though my great grandparents were Syrians, and my grandfather was mixed with Syrian and Jamaican, the rest of my family and I identify as Jamaicans. We identified as Jamaicans because we were born and raised in Jamaica, as well as, every child born on the island were registered as citizens of Jamaica at birth, and received a vaccination after several months that left a specific mark on our right arm that many Jamaicans labeled as trademark as an inside joke.

CULTURAL HISTORY & CULTURAL COMPONENTS OF JAMAICA

The Jamaican culture is one of the richest and most diverse cultures around the world. From the authentic Caribbean flavored cuisine, to the timeless music and warm-spirited people, Jamaica has earned its spot on Trip Advisor as the Number One Caribbean destination, and the Number 14 Best Destination in the World in 2019, (Kickham, 2019). The culture of Jamaica has been built on the backs of ancestors who infused their culture and influenced most of the traditions that exist today.

Music

Often times when Jamaican music is mentioned to non-Jamaicans or tourists, their immediate response is usually “Bob Marley” or “Reggae”. However, while Jamaicans salute and respect Bob Marley for catapulting the Jamaican music onto the international stage and charts worldwide, and fighting for world peace through his prolific songs, there are other aspects and genres of Jamaican music that have been a pivotal part of Jamaica’s culture and historical eras.

Mento is one of Jamaica’s original popular music forms that was formed in Jamaica, and was cultivated around the plantation period in the 1950s. This genre was birthed out of the fusion of African and British influences, and were sometimes banned from the Jamaican airwaves due to its sexually explicit content. “Run Mongoose”, “Rukumbine” and “Peel Head John Crow” are some of the popular Mento songs (Jamaica Information Service, JIS). The Jamaican carnival parades back in the 80s was fueled by Calypso music. Equivalent to Mento, Calypso was a phenomenon of the Eastern Caribbean which had a rhythm that was irresistible and caused women and men to break out in gyration. After the 1950s, Calypso music was modernized and popularized by the late Honorable Byron Lee and others (JIS). More popularly

known and is now considered a forerunner of the other genres highlighted, is Dancehall music. This genre began in the 70s and started to take off in the Jamaican culture in the 80s, drawing massive crowds out to dance “session’ that birthed Deejaying, which intertwined and form Dancehall music that led to the rising of artists such as; Bounty Killer, Beenie Man and Yellow Man to name a few. Similar to the 80s, Dancehall music continues to stay true to its raunchy, vulgar and disrespectful language towards women, while promoting and idolizing sex and gun culture in Jamaica (JIS).

Food

The Jamaican cuisine and dishes are one of a kind and received a lot of high commendation at home and abroad. Inspired by the different ethnic groups that settled on the island the Jamaican cuisine encompasses a wide variety of dishes such as; ackee and saltfish, Jamaica’s national dish, rice and peas and chicken, that is made religious on Sundays and dumplings that is kneaded and served alongside meals. Most of the beloved fruits and trees that are on the island of Jamaica came to the island by various groups. For example, the Spaniards in 1494 brought with them sweet oranges, coconut, and sugarcane to name a few. They also inspired one of Jamaica’s famous dishes; escovitched fish and bammies, which is a combination of Spaniards and Tainos culture (National Library of Jamaica). The coming of the British to Jamaica in 1655 introduced new fruits and pastries to the island. The British brought with them Easter bun, which is a must have in every Jamaica household during Easter, they also brought ackee, mangoes, breadfruit and otaheiti apples that are unique and sweet (National Library of Jamaica). African cuisine is the backbone of Jamaican food. When the Africans came to Jamaica in 1514, they brought along meal ideas that are still prepared today in Jamaica, the famous jerk chicken is one such meal.

Traditions

Jamaican traditions are many, as a people, we take great pride in maintaining traditions that were passed down by our ancestors. Through the celebration of certain traditions annually, Jamaicans from all fourteen parishes on the island make special preparations in order to commemorate the events. Like most country, Jamaica celebrates New Year's Day, Labor Day and Independence Day. The celebratory holidays and festivals that are more unique to us are; Accompong Maroon Festival, held in September to celebrate the Maroon's victory over British Colonists in 1731, Boxing Day that is celebrated after Christmas day, in honor of the British tradition of giving servants a "Christmas box" and a day of to spend with their families and Grand market Night that is celebrated on Christmas Eve, this celebration takes the form of a street party island wide that begins from sun down to sunrise. Games, vendors selling toys, jerk chicken, alcohol, marijuana and other items can be found in every corner on the street during this festival (Lee, 2019). The more ritualistic traditions in Jamaica today are "Nine Nights" and other funerary traditions that Jamaican are accustomed to when a family member dies. The ninth night tradition is rooted in African culture where family and friends gather for food, music and enjoyment at the home of the deceased (Global Aware). This celebration lasts for nine nights, hence the name.

Dance and Sports

Sports has been instrumental in the unification of Jamaican people. During Olympic seasons, the country is run on excitement and joy. Remarkably, Jamaica has managed to maintain and establish an outstanding sporting record over the past half-century. Jamaican's have won many Olympic gold, silver and bronze medals since 1948 (Earle, n.d). The Jamaica Track and Field athletes are known worldwide and are considered to be among the best in the world. Olympians like Usain Bolt, Merlene Ottey and Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce have raised the bar high athletically

on the international stage. Additionally, Jamaica has several world records and produced many great athletes in other sporting areas such as, cricket, football, and bobsled to name a few. On the international stage, Jamaican athletes love to “buss” a dance move as a celebratory gesture. Jamaicans are a set of creative, artistic and innovative people, and dancing is near and dear to their hearts. Dances in Jamaica derived from European and African culture. Kumina, Pocomania, Bruckins, among others were African inspired dances that were an integral part in religious ceremonies, as well as other social events back in the days. Today, Jamaican dance moves has evolved and are accompanied by songs that dictate and illustrates the dance moves.

Language

Jamaican Patois, more widely known as “Patwa or Patwah” is an English-Creole language influenced by West Africans. This language is widely spoken on the Island and is considered the first language for many, however, the official first language of Jamaica is English which was adapted from the British English rulers and is now used in all aspects of public life, particularly in the government, the media and education system. Within the Jamaican society, the Jamaican patois is often stigmatized as a low-prestige language, individuals who speak patios in some public settings are stereotype as uneducated and ignorant (African American Registry).

Government

The government system in Jamaica is a constitutional monarchy where by the King of England, represented by a Governor-General who is the head of state (JIS). The role of the Governor-General is to appoint the Prime Minister and other members of Parliament, as well as, granting the Prerogative of Mercy to convicted offenders based on the advice of the Privy Council (JIS). The head of state is the sovereign monarch of Jamaica. Under the constitutional monarchy are

three arms of government; the Executive that comprises of the Prime Minister and Cabinet Members, the Legislature; who is responsible for enacting and amending laws for peace, order and development in Jamaica, and lastly, the Judiciary whose legal system is based on the British common-law (JIS).

Religious Beliefs

Religion is a big part of the Jamaican culture, in every community or corner there is a church. Jamaicans see the Church as a place of authority and refuge especially in times of needs, and they to hold members of the Christian community in high regards. The main religious practice in Jamaica is Christianity. Jamaica's first encounter with Christianity came after the Spaniards introduced them to Roman Catholic in 1504. However, after the British captured the island in 1655, the Church of England became the state church. Since then, many other religious practices and denominations were formed, such as; Rastafarianism, Pentecostalism, Anglicans and Roman Catholics to name a few. According to the Jamaica 2018 International Religious Freedom Report, 26% of the Jamaican population belongs to various branches of Church of God, 12% is Seventh-day Adventist, 11% Pentecostal, 7% Baptist, 3% Anglican, 2% Roman Catholic, 2% Jehovah's Witness etc. The census 2011 census also highlights that 2% of the population maintains other form of religious practice. The belief system of Christians in Jamaica is very similar to that of other Christians across the world, they believe in Baptism, Communion among other things. However, sometimes the denominations tend to be very rule base and have a specific expectation that pulls Christians away from the church. For example, some denomination is against jewelry, pants and makeup and prefers the women to wear head covering.

STRENGTHS OF JAMAICAN PEOPLE

Over the years, Jamaicans have been faced with many hardships, trials, misfortunes, and devastation that has riddled their homes, finances, family and emotional and physical wellbeing, particularly gun violence, natural disasters and limited access to basic human rights. However, despite the many hardships, Jamaicans, like the Afro-Latino community, have a resilient spirit that has contributed to their ability to overcome obstacles and break through social and racial barriers leaving a mark in the world through their music, arts and sports etc. A popular phrase that is used to describe Jamaicans is “wi likkle but wi Tallawah”, which translates in standard English as: “we may be small, but we are strong” (Stewart, 2021). Jamaicans have proven this phrase to be true as they have a way of coming together when necessary to pool resources and lend strength to stand against injustice, and dominate in areas where they are underestimated. Jamaicans are also very creative, they have a unique gift of “making something out of nothing”, which has resulted in many small entrepreneurial businesses that have been putting food on their tables for decades. Though crime is terrorizing the island, Jamaicans are warm welcoming people, they are protective of strangers and their own, which is a blessing and a curse at the same time. Speaking from personal experience, there is a tendency for the citizens to take matters in their own hands which sometimes results in “jungle justice”, where by citizens carry out the tasks of the Jamaica Constabulary force, especially towards criminals, which in most cases leads to death by the hands of the citizens.

POPULATION STATISTICS

According to the Statistical Institution of Jamaica, as of 2019, Jamaica’s population total is 2.7 million, with a total of 1.35 million females and 1.35 million males.

SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES

From the outside looking, one would see the beautiful scenery, the artistic landscapes, the beaches and tall coconut tree blowing in the wind, as the sweet aroma of jerk chicken filled the atmosphere catching up with the sounds of Reggae music blasting from a distance. However, while this is so, there is another side to the island of Jamaica that the tourist does not see. There are murders surpassing 18 people every 48-hour, poverty, with a rate that increased by 23% in 2020 (UNAIDS, 2022) and poor healthcare service to the citizens of Jamaica among other issues.

Crime Rate and Failed Justice System

In year 2021, Jamaica recorded close to 1000 murders, according to the police statistical report.

Crime and violence in the island have become a norm for many decades resulting in broken house, community and emotional and mentally trauma, and to add to that, the justice system have failed the Jamaican citizens time after, time, until recently when they implemented the CCTV systems. My family have been a victim of the deadly crimes in Jamaica, as are many other Jamaican citizens. My half sister and her common-law-husband was gunned down in cold blood in their home in front of their 9-month-old child. To this date, justice has not been served, there was no arrest or leads to connect a murderer to the crime. This is the story of 90% percent of the Jamaican population. So far, the total amount of murder for 2022 in Jamaica is 1294, which the of the 1,294, 1,001 deaths are due to shooting (Jamaica Constabulary Force). The injustice within the justice system stems from the corruption. In a Jamaican newspaper article; by the Jamaica Gleaner entitled “Light on Corruption | Perception of corruption in the judiciary erodes public trust”, a United Nations Development Programme 2012 study indicated that over 57 per cent of Jamaicans surveyed believe the entire justice system is corrupt, with a further 36 per cent of

Jamaicans believing judges are corrupt, as well as 1 in 10 respondents in a Global Corruption Report who had been in contact with the judiciary system confessed that they paid a bribe (Jamaica Gleaner, 2017).

Health Care System Inadequacy

Access to health care has been difficult for many Jamaicans, including my family to this date. The Minister of Health, Dr Christopher Tufton, in an interview with the Jamaica Gleaner disclosed that more than half of the population cannot afford healthcare outside of the public-health system because they have no insurance (Jamaica Gleaner, 2018). According to Tufton's statistical report, 20 % of the Jamaican population has health insurance. 11% of that are government workers, and 9% of the 20% are private-sector workers, leaving 80 % of the population without health insurance. This statistic not only shows that majority of Jamaican's can afford healthcare outside of the public system, which also lack many resources to accommodate the public, but it also shows that employment in government institutions is lacking, and poverty is also at work in the lives of the 80% uninsured Jamaican's. Working with the Financial Services Commission of Jamaica (FSC) for a year and a half, I was fortunate enough to work with various stakeholders who sell insurance policies, as the Financial Services Commission was the overseer of Pension, Insurance and Security in Jamaica. Majority of the individuals that I have personally spoken to during townhall meetings that were geared towards public education about financial education and services, were either too impoverished to purchase insurance, or they were unemployed. The healthcare system in Jamaica is in a deplorable condition, the public hospitals constantly faced bed shortage crisis, causing patients to sit in wheelchairs and on bench for long hours, lack of oxygen, that as led to several deaths including a

nurse (Jamaica Gleaner, 2021), lack of operating equipment and most severe, the lack of burn unit, that cost the life of Kerry-Ann Collins, who suffered third-degree burns (Richardson, 2020).

Poverty

In addition to the poor healthcare system in Jamaica, is poverty. Many Jamaicans are living in poverty with limited access to clean drinking and running water, utility and employment.

According to the Borgen Project, in 2015, 14,000 Jamaican citizens were living in extreme poverty, with an unemployment rate at 13.5 (Saiesha et al., 2022). Jamaica relies heavily on the Tourism and Agriculture sector as its sources of revenue, however during the COVID-19 pandemic, Jamaica has requested emergency financing from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the amount of \$520 million (IMF), which has put the country in more debt.

THE MISREPRESENTATION OF JAMAICANS IN THE MEDIA & LITERATURE

When Jamaica decided opened up itself to tourism in the 1890s, people from around the world came and immersed themselves into the Jamaican culture, experiencing the beaches, cuisine and cool island breeze. However, the invitation to the outside world came with stereotypes, misrepresentations and assumptions about the Jamaica people, despite positive vibration on the island. Around the world Jamaica is known for its rich music and eccentric people, specifically the Rastafarians, which led to the number one stereotype that every Jamaican's smoke marijuana, more popularly known as 'ganja' or weed. According to Borgen Project, the TNI Drugs and Democracy Programme reported that in a survey taken by the National Council on Drug Abuse (NCDA) only 60% of the Jamaican population smokes marijuana (Saiesha et al., 2022). The idea that every Jamaica smoke weed often times surfaces when Jamaica goes to another foreign country and meet people of different race that knows very

little about the Jamaican culture. When I worked as an exchanged student in Wisconsin Dells, almost every American that heard my accent, asked me if I smoke weed or if I listen to Bob Marley. I am also greeted with “Wa Gwan” which means hello in Jamaica. Overtime, the question starts to becoming draining, to the point where the answers that were usually “No” becomes “Yes”.

Another misrepresentation that follows Jamaica is that Jamaicans, mostly men, are scammers. Over the years, some Jamaicans have been extradited to the United States to face trials and serve their time for defrauding U.S citizens via lottery scams. In July of 2022, the department of Justice in Pennsylvania released a press release that a citizen of Jamaica was extradited to the U.S on a 16-count indictment with mail and wire fraud. As a result of an instance like this, international news media outlets like News 13, have since warned U.S citizens about accepting calls from the 876-area code, which has stereotyped Jamaicans calling the U.S. Since this lottery scamming phenomenon has peaked, money transfer services such as MoneyGram and Western Union that allows senders from the U.S to send money to the Caribbean, have heightened its security measures. This comes with a sending limit and questionnaire, among other security precautions. One downside of this scamming stereotype that Jamaica face is that when family or relatives back home in Jamaica try to collect a large sum of money through Western Union or MoneyGram, their account is flagged as suspicious, which sometimes hinders the person to collect money, especially in times of need.

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