Carnival: When Culture Attracts Tourism

Carnival: The Regional Genesis and Contemporary Status

The promotion and advancement of culture is integral to the work of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS). Efforts in this regard are focused on promoting the cultural diversity of the region and facilitating exchanges for language learning and cultural immersion to enhance co-operation among the countries and strengthen the process of regional integration.

One of the most unifying events and cultural and creative extravaganza, which is celebrated in the region is Carnival. Carnival finds its social and historic origin in the region and is an expression of culture that encapsulates music, dance, costumes, pageantry and performance. While Carnival is celebrated in various styles and with slightly different names throughout the Greater Caribbean, there is one common interest: the manifestation of a cultural pluralism amongst its participants.

For many of the countries, particularly Trinidad and Tobago, which boasts the Region's largest Carnival celebration, Carnival or 'Mas,' as this festival is commonly referred to, is intertwined into the very fabric of the society and is considered one of the most important cultural exports. However, much needs to be done to recognize Carnival not just as a social event but as an important economic activity.

Industry reports indicate that within the past decades, the Trinidad and Tobago masquerade industry has become one of the flagships of the Carnival business landscape of Trinidad and Tobago. Carnival's visitor arrivals have grown by 60 per cent since the late 1990s and continue to grow annually. Similarly, Government reports indicate that revenue from Trinidad and Tobago's Carnival exceeds on average US$100 million. The Mas industry also generates significant economic activity in

a range of sectors in the local economy such as entertainment, media, hospitality and retail sectors. Additionally, overseas diaspora carnivals generate millions in revenue. Carnival therefore, has grown over the years into a viable and sustainable global economic industry supported by talent, expertise, skills and knowledge that are almost exclusively Caribbean.

On the socio-economic level, Carnival generates business opportunities for singers, song writers, choreographers, costume builders and designers, make up artists and musicians, to name a few. Even more importantly Carnival has driven the growth and development of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), many of which are skills-based services. These range from entertainment services related to cultural art forms such as dance, to the production of local crafts, cuisine, and the display of folk arts such as Lapeau Cabrit (playing of drums lined with goats skins), the orchestration of steel pans (pan playing) and portrayal of 'traditional carnival characters'.

It is without doubt that Carnival is an important social and cultural event which continues to gain regional and indeed international significance. What is often overlooked by policy makers is the economic significance of Carnival to local economies and businesses. This recognition is needed in order that this valuable and unique facet of the region's culture can reach its full potential.

A Niche within Tourism

Tourism and culture enjoys a highly symbiotic and mutually beneficial relationship.

Culture in its many forms and expressions functions as tourist sites and attractions, which can be both educational as well as entertaining to visitors. Tourism in turn has proven to add value by serving as one of the main driving forces to preserve and strengthen indigenous cultural identity, while at the same time making a positive contribution to social and economic development.

From the perspective of destination competitiveness, culture is an important element of a destination's uniqueness and appeal. This differentiation is even more important given the increase in competition globally, as well as the changing consumer patterns impacting tourism supply and demand. Among the most direct and tangible expressions of culture are the local patrimonies which are often specific to a particular country, community or social grouping. For sites and attractions of historical and cultural significance, as well as cultural performers and producers of handcrafts, specialty foods and other 'local and indigenous' products, the tourist market offers unlimited opportunities. This potential is even more, given that the tourism industry offers a diverse range of sales venues coupled with patrons who are eager for locally-created, culturally-linked products.

Culturism - Exploring the linkages between Culture and Tourism

Research indicates that in the Greater Caribbean region there is need to strengthen the linkages between tourism and culture. This can be achieved by countries placing greater emphasis on developing cultural products and activities while simultaneously showcasing more of the cultural aspects in its tourism promotion efforts.

The strength and appeal of cultural events and festivals as an essential component of the tourism product of a country should not be overlooked. In this regard, the multi-dimensional nature of 'Carnival' provides one of the most direct and tangible opportunities for travellers to see and also engage in various aspects of the local culture. For many countries such as Brazil and increasingly Trinidad and Tobago, Carnival has become the 'main attraction' (the primary reason enticing a visit to the destination). With this understanding, it is clear that there is need to further explore the potentialities and cross-sectoral linkages generated by Carnivals and other such events, so as to maximise the contribution of the activity to the national economy, while also ensuring that visitors can gain the most from 'the Experience'.

The following are recommended as possible strategies:

§ At the Local/Community level promote Public-Private Partnerships: Facilitate and promote meaningful opportunities for dialogue and networking to increase collaboration between tourism executives and carnival coordinating committees with interested private sector stakeholders servicing the industry.

§ At the National/Regional level Inform and Engage: Run Public awareness campaigns to inform of the broad benefits of Carnival and develop strategies to increase the benefits of this activity to local communities as a means for employment generation and poverty reduction. Also offer incentives particularly targeted to diaspora communities as well as to enhance intra-regional travel.

§ At the International level Focus on Promotion and Marketing: Raise the international profile and public knowledge of the Region's Carnivals utilising well-known Local Artists as Cultural Ambassadors. Also, promote the different elements of Carnival and other major festivals to the international travel market to generate interest and awareness amongst the various intermediaries, showcasing the Country/Region as a cultural destination.

The ACS Responds

At the Fifth Summit of the Heads of States and/or Government of the ACS which took place in Pétion Ville, Republic of Haiti on April 26, 2013, the ACS highlighted in the Plan of Action of Pétion Ville, that the historic and cultural patrimony shared by the States and Territories provide a solid basis to develop cooperation efforts. In this regard, the Association expressed its commitment to enhance cultural co-operation among countries by facilitating technical meetings between cultural cooperation units with the objective of strengthening cultural policies in the region; and establishing programs in cultural exchange in the Greater Caribbean.

One of the first initiatives has been the topic of promoting Carnivals as one of the unifying vehicles of cultural expressions across the region, an initiative for which the Association has been outreached by several interested stakeholders in the Member States of Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada and Colombia.

In this regard, there are ongoing consultations with interested parties to explore the possibility to host a Caribbean Carnival Conference which would provide an opportunity for the exchange of knowledge and best practises among the national carnival committees and related stakeholders. Additionally, discussions are ongoing in relation to establishing a Network of Caribbean Carnivals envisioned as a public-private partnership forum comprised of the relevant public sector representatives and private-sector stakeholders to include professionals in areas of dress and costume making and design, singers, musicians, instrument craftsmen, choreographers, event promoters and band leaders etc.

The ACS believes that Carnival is an activity which can be used to drive tourism by promoting the Greater Caribbean brand of Carnival and showcasing the Carnival related activities of the countries of the Region. In so doing the benefits to be derived will be the preservation and strengthening of the region’s culture while also contributing more-effectively to the socio-economic development of the Region.