The Role of Africa in the Construction of Identities in the Caribbean

I say identity and really I mean, I suppose, identities. There is no all-embracing Caribbean identity. There is some degree of common consciousness among Caricom countries of having been British colonies and there are a few common institutions which support this consciousness in this group, the most significant of which are the West Indies cricket team and the UWI. The concept of a Caribbean identity (or a West Indian identity) may also be strong in the imaginings of some Caribbean ideologues.

The Caribbean is perhaps more diverse than it is integrated, and it is also this diversity in such small geographical space that I find intellectually interesting at this time. At one point in the intellectual history of the Caribbean, quite apart from the ideological history, the idea of a common history and common destiny may have been dominant. But there is a growing interest in diversity. Paradoxically, the most common feature, the one that unites the Caribbean, is its diversity; diversity among units, and diversity within a unit.

The continuum of variation, which has been most studied for language, exists in macro-form across territorial units, and in micro-form within a unit. To take one example in language, at one end of the macro-continuum, there are instances of African languages (in Jamaica, Trinidad, Cuba, Suriname)
which are tonal; this tonality also supports communication by drums and conch shells, which replicate the tones of the language; then there is the creole language Saramaccan of Suriname, based on English, in which every major word has its distinctive tone pattern. The continuum then goes through other creole languages like Jamaican, Guyanese, Haitian, etc. with tone playing an ever-diminishing role, until it ends up with Bajan, in which tone is merely vestigial. It distinguishes only very few pairs of words, such as [Baker] the personal name and [baker] the artisan. This continuum of variation also exists microcosmically and macrocosmically for religion, music and, of course, phenotype. There is no region on earth with such diversity in types of language, religion and music, and of phenotype, in such a small geographical space. However, the fascinating thing about the Caribbean is also that, in spite of the existence of linguistic, religious, phenotypical and other continua, there are elements of bipolarity still existing. The role of Africa is another aspect of Caribbean diversity. This role is different in different places, in different individuals within the same place. But its presence is everywhere — denied, avoided, or embraced. Africa has been savaged in history. First of all, if Europe was the centre of the world (as witness the key role of the Mediterranean), the norm against which all the other cultures were to be evaluated, then Africa south of the Sahara was on the distant periphery, the abode of monstrous peoples, grossly misunderstood, misvalued or undervalued. Africa was represented by the colour-term ‘black’, and the whole range of pejoration which, in European symbolization going back to Graeco-Roman Antiquity, was associated with black fell upon Africa.

Once brought to the New World, Africans lost their ethnic individuality as Yoruba or Ewe or Kikongo, etc., and lost their regional cultural identity as Africans, and became simply blacks, negros, Negroes, nègres or neger. At the next stage of evolution, black or negro or Negro or nègre became synonymous with slave. And later, designations such as ‘negro’ and ‘coloured’ were employed as euphemisms to avoid ‘black’ and ‘African’.

‘Black’ has been revived in anglophone Afro-America; and so has ‘African’, particularly in the USA, where the term ‘African-American’ is the latest in the history of such representations. But why is there still a preference for ‘black’ over ‘African”? There may be simple psycholinguistic reasons. Identity entails popular definitions of “Who am I?” “What am I?” In some political circumstances (such as existed or exist in the Caribbean), self/Other definitions become specified by colonial classifiers. Europe has seized the prerogative of naming and of symbol creation with their meanings and values. Perhaps the major achievement by Europe in this regard has been to seize the positive connotations of the colour white (whether these connotations are