

The Culture of Puerto Rico

The island of Puerto Rico is presently experiencing a time of tremendous cultural change and growth through what is known as "Operation Serenity." The term "Operation Serenity" (or "Serenidad") is applied to a program designed to teach the people of Puerto Rico that "the production of wealth is a technique, the use of wealth is an art" (Popular Democratic Party platform of 1960). Our past governor, Luis Muñoz Marín, in referring to "Operation Serenity," explained that it was "an attempt to create an understanding that material goods, new jobs, and new homes are not the ultimate goals of human life." Muñoz went on to say: "A people cannot be fully civilized until the economy is the servant of the peoples' culture and not the master." Serenidad, thus, is an interesting proposal since it attempts to provide a spiritual ingredient in a democratic society.

"Operation Serenity" is actually an ambitious and fascinating proposal by a strong people who are, themselves, the product of several cultures which, over the years, have both subdued and molded their character. Culture, in this sense, implies the way of thinking and feeling which determines the way people within a society will act. This is a process which begins at birth and continues through life, a learning process guided by the older generation. This is particularly true of Puerto Ricans even though they have not always been concerned with an appreciation of their culture.

In terms of history, the culture of this island can be described as the greatest consolidation of world-wide traits that can be imagined. First, it expresses the two dominant cultures of the Americas. Secondly, it contains elements of both Indian and Negro heritage. The result is a culture which is a composite of other cultures so codified and merged that the Puertorican shows forth as an individual, culturally different from his neighbors.

The Indian name "Borinquen" is still widely used by the Puertorican in reference both to his homeland and himself. The Puertorican anthem is called

"La Borinqueña." The blending of cultural elements is to be noted throughout the island. In the interior of the island, for instance, are to be found the descendants of Irish immigrants from Philadelphia - - blond, fair people who are characterized by the high cheekbones and narrow faces of the Indians. Definite Indian characteristics and trends are still to be found in the mountains of the interior. "La Plena," a popular form of music, conveys the insistent rhythms of the Negro people brought from Africa by the Spanish settlers. Not far from San Juan, the capital of Puerto Rico, known for its "old world" charm, hamburger stands spread themselves along the avenues - - yet it must be said that a modern Puerto Rican will still prefer his traditional meal of "arroz y habiuelas" (rice and beans).

In the Hato Rey section of San Juan, a part of the city which resembles a suburb of Los Angeles or Miami, young people will collect the records of Elvis Presley or The Beatles and yet will thrill to the lyrics and rhythm of a bolero - - a form of music that has come to be a part of their lives. Musicians will move with the trends, but return again and again to the ageless music of Rafael Hernández whose words and music warm the hearts of all Puerto Ricans.

It can be said that the cultural traditions of both the United States and Spain do not really clash in Puerto Rico. They blend together, enriched by the elements of Indian and Negro culture which, through the years, have found their way into the total picture. While the favorite sport of the Islander may be baseball, the poetry he loves to hear and sing is best expressed in the lyrics of the "Danza," and descriptions of the rugged green mountains and the smell of the cool, cool air after the rain, and passages dealing with Indian lore.

William C. Baggs in his book, Puerto Rico: Showcase of Development, STRESSES the fact that many of the present features of Puerto Rico are indications of this little island's ability to absorb invading cultures and put its own particular

stamp on them. To understand the islander, Baggs continues, it is first of all necessary to know that he is not by instinct wither a Spaniard or a North American, although the cultures of both have left their fingerprints on his island. He is by instinct a Puerto Rican, and so is his culture.

There are many stories that show how the various cultures have affected the island of Puerto Rico. The coming of the Spaniards in 1493, for example, was greeted with favor by the Arawaks, a pacific Indian race which swiftly took on Spanish ways and became Roman Catholics. Even the appropriation of the Roman Catholic faith, however, was given its own character through the infiltration of Indian beliefs which resulted in a belief that was both Roman Catholic and Indian - - as congenial as love and marriage!

The Arawak Indians were the first known inhabitants of the island, a people gifted in the quiet arts of weaving and working with gold and stone. It is believed that these people formed a part of the great Indian civilization which at one time extended from Brazil to Bolivia. With the coming of the Spaniards, however, these Indians were forced to carry out all manner of degrading tasks which led them to rebellion and finally extinction as a race. It was then that the Negro slaves were brought from Africa in order to carry out laboring tasks of the Spaniards.

When the American forces landed in 1898, the island experienced a great cultural change. At that time illiteracy was widespread. More than 80% of the population could neither read nor write. Within 60 years the population of Puerto Rico doubled and the number of children attending school increased 1000% with the literacy rate increasing to 85%. With the Americans came new forms of democratic government as well as other forms of the American culture. During the last fourteen years, under the American flag, Puerto Rico has become self-governing.

Within this same fourteen year period, more than 100,000 jobs have been

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created by a remarkable program of industrial development known by the name "Operation Bootstrap." No Latin American nation builds houses at a per capita rate rivaling Puerto Rico. The United States government has, indeed, played a great part in this development. The people of Puerto Rico have conceived and are carrying out tremendous development with the aid of the Federal Government in Washington as the result of a better understanding between the people of the United States and the people of Puerto Rico.

More formal manifestations of culture, art and literature appeared late in Puerto Rico. The first books came from Spain and it wasn't until the late 19th century that the first printing press arrived. The 19th century also saw the development of literature through the writings of Eugenio Maria de Hostos. Francisco Oller became a painter of international reputation. Rafael Hernandez brought fame to Puerto Rico through his music: El Cumbachero, Mani, and Campanitas de Cristal among others.

As late as 1938 Puerto Rico was described by sociologists and tourists as "The Poorhouse of the Caribbean," but this can hardly be said today. Operation Bootstrap, begun in the 1940's as a means toward economic development, has promoted all sectors of the economy. "Eight public corporations participate in Bootstrap by attracting new industries, providing financial assistance for them, producing electric power, constructing public housing, operating airports, running the water supply and sewage disposal systems, administering telegraph and telephone systems, and managing farming operations on a limited co-operative basis."

While it is true that Puerto Rico is not yet a fully developed country, it is also true that Puerto Rico has risen from misery to a point where Operation Serenity is leaving its mark. And it is to the credit of the United States, Spain and all the other people who have, both directly and indirectly, left their mark on a culture that is a combination of many traditions and yet is seen as a culture that is distinctly Puerto Rican.