

Two-faced Jamaicans: Why are we better when overseas?

Every day we are regaled by evidence which makes us brim with pride over the remarkable achievements of Jamaicans abroad, often in contrast with the demoralising behaviour of Jamaicans here at home.

It is well known that we behave differently when we live and work abroad. Our legendary capacity for work and our productivity abroad hardly show up in Jamaica. While a few Jamaicans achieve notoriety in crime overseas, the vast majority are lauded for good citizenship. They get in line for a bus in London but would trample underfoot children and the elderly in Kingston. No Jamaican squats on government land in Toronto or captures a piece of farmland in Virginia. They would not steal an apple in Connecticut but would pick a mango from any tree in Jamaica as if it were a right. This strange bifurcation of conduct begs the question why this difference in behaviour, productivity and civility. If the more productive and law-abiding Jamaicans are in foreign countries, it could be because the more productive and peaceful Jamaicans chose to migrate. It is undoubtedly true that the people who migrate show a level of initiative and industry than many who want to migrate but do not bestir themselves. We have heard various explanations, including that of our former Ambassador to the United States, Dr Richard Bernal, who attributes this to the "audacity that Jamaicans have in unique abundance". But Jamaicans at home have this quality so even if those who migrate are the most audacious, this alone cannot be the answer. It is our belief that the difference in conduct is directly related to the differences in circumstances between home and abroad, such as culture, remuneration, law enforcement and mind set. The same Jamaicans who are violent and unruly at home are peaceful and productive abroad, so it could be cultural schizophrenia. Jamaicans share an indelible culture which does not succumb to assimilation by other cultures. The higher level of remuneration is certainly a reality but again, this cannot explain why the majority of Jamaicans abroad conform to rules and regulations. By any standard, law enforcement in foreign countries is superior to that in Jamaica. Of course, this is only a factor for lawbreakers and not a consideration for the average overseas Jamaican. We suggest that while not compromising their identity, Jamaicans in foreign countries imbibe a code of conduct from their social milieu. They develop a different mindset and a civic comportment that they do not exhibit in Jamaica which is not a strong rules-based society. They understand the value of rules and regulations as just, fair to all and helpful whereas in Jamaica rules are regarded as impediments and amenable only to those who have the resources and skills to navigate them. Breaking rules is hailed in Jamaica as initiative and a justifiable means of survival but this attitude and behaviour is a prescription for chaos. Rules do not only come with development, they are a prerequisite for development. The experience of Jamaicans abroad is incontrovertible evidence Jamaicans in conducive circumstances are among the most creative, law abiding and productive people in the world. We contend that our dilemma is not that the most industrious Jamaicans live in 'foreign' but that we have not created the circumstances in which Jamaicans at home can be at their most productive and at their most constructive.