

African viewpoint: Mugabe and the Jamaicans

An interesting news story this month was the diplomatic tiff between Zimbabwe and Jamaica, two countries thousands of miles apart and yet somehow forever linked by cultural bonds.

For those of us of a certain age, in fact anyone 20 years or so younger than the president of Zimbabwe - Robert Mugabe is now 88 - and below, would be acutely aware of the strong cultural ties that exist between that Caribbean island and much of Africa. It is impossible to visit Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Namibia or any country south of the Sahara, stay off the beaten track of game parks and sunbathing, and not discover some of Africa's young who are imbued with a kind of Jamaican subculture in their music and even their speech patterns. For patois, after reggae music is a major Jamaican cultural export to Africa. Caribbean citizens, since the great crime of slavery, have been settling on the continent and are a part of Africa in their professions, while there are many links through marriage and other personal connections. Jamaican musicians played their part in no small measure in raising the consciousness of African youths throughout the last decades of colonialism and apartheid; indeed the great icon himself - Bob Marley - was a guest of the new Zimbabwean government as independence was achieved on that sultry April night in 1980. While the Lancaster House independence negotiations credited with bringing about that night were chaired by late Jamaican Prime Minister Michael Manley. That is why it came as a great surprise when President Mugabe, in an address to University of Zimbabwe students at the Research and Intellectual Expo 2012, declared in that kind of off-the-cuff way your granny may use when she wants to tell you to settle down or avoid bad boyfriends - that Jamaican men are drunks and have dreadlocks, that Jamaican colleges are filled with women because the men prefer to sing and local students shouldn't emulate them. Order of Jamaica But why paraphrase the president? These were his exact words as was widely reported: "In Jamaica, they have freedom to smoke marijuana, the men are always drunk." He continued: "Men want to sing and do not go to colleges, some then dreadlock their hair. Let's not go there." Offended Jamaicans filled their radio phone-ins and newspaper letter pages with indignation and soul searching. What could have prompted such an outburst from a brother leader on whom they inferred the Order of Jamaica honour not so long ago? Was he right? Was he a man in a glass house busy lobbying stones? Jamaica's Foreign Affairs Minister A J Nicholson told the island press: "I prefer to regard what he said as misguided statements, expressed by a wayward brother in the winter of his years." "The Jamaica government and the people of Jamaica know that those negative comments by Mugabe do not represent the feelings of the people of Zimbabwe nor those of the other nations of Africa." The Harare-Kingston bout prompted questions about the influence of Jamaica on Harare's youth, for every Usain Bolt wannabe there were 30 "dancehall slackers" high on weed and low on ambition and wasn't the old man right? Yet what do people expect from a man who was 18 in 1942? It is impossible to imagine the dear leader without his suit and tie in the heat of October. His dances are from another age, and should you chance upon his iPod, there would be very little music familiar to today's 18 year olds on it, unlike, it is fair to assume, his young son's music collection. And anyone who has listened to the elder statesman's meandering moral lessons could easily make a tally of the number of times he has spoken against drug taking, the modern custom of young girls bearing their belly buttons in public and all manner of topics that would make Africans of a certain age uncomfortable. The president has reached that stage in life when, despite all the headlines over this particular faux pas, he ought to be listened to like we listen to the old, knowing that the wisdom of their words is heavily tainted by their own out-of-date tastes. Bob Marley arrived at the invitation of the late Edgar Tekere, then the Zanu-PF secretary-general, who died in opposition - a completely different type of politician, visceral in his passions, and a beloved opponent of the cult of personality. Such a cult seems far more dangerous than some dreadlocked island musicians long schooled to inspire, despite their very human faults. BBC news