

Ethnography study of coffee house assignment



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From Mc World and cow boy capitalism to cultural ecumene and glocalisation, theorists are continually inventing polychromatic phrases to explain their differing points of view on cultural shifts caused by globalisation. " Globalization has been associated with a range of cultural consequences. These can be analysed in terms of three major theses, namely, homogenization, polarization, and hybridization," (Holton 2000). This essay seeks to lend credence to the hybridization thesis, by observing a coffee house located in the developing country of Trinidad and Tobago (T&T). Focusing on the aesthetics of the cafe and the purchase behaviour of its customers, this essay intends to evaluate the attempt of this organisation to create a coffee culture in T&T. This evaluation will then inform the argument of hybridization by demonstrating how cultures exchange elements with each other thereby creating new, hybrid identities. An ethnography study was conducted at Rituals Coffee House (Rituals) located in the city of San Fernando in T&T. The study was conducted between 12: 00-1: 30pm.

Interviews were conducted on five customers to gauge how often they drank coffee and whether they believed that T&T owns a coffee culture or is in the process of creating one. The results of this are provided later in the essay. Rituals coffee house is a high end cafe with franchises in nine Caribbean islands. The outlet chosen for the study is a small, quaint cafe located on a corner and enclosed by glass automatic doors to the front and large glass windows to the side.

While walking in, the atmosphere noticeably transformed the congestion and hectic life of the city to a pleasant, relaxing overtone filled with the scent of

freshly brewed coffee and the soft sounds of steel pan in the back ground. The cafe was explicitly designed to imitate international coffee chains such as Starbucks. The coffee bar and cash counter was located straight ahead from the door. Round wooden chairs and circular tables were placed to the right and pastel coloured couches to the left. There was also one long table spanning the width of the glass window with chairs for individual patrons.

The cafe offered wireless internet presumably to attract students and business workers. The decor combined North American modernity with Caribbean details. Walls which were plastered red bore strips of gold wall paper and paintings depicting different types of coffee. Artificial plants were placed strategically on the floor space and a multitude of low hanging lights cast only a glimmer on the tables beneath them. The coffee bar offered a plethora of coffee drinks and pastries. Their drinks ranged from coffee to tea drinks. The regionally influenced flavours included banana, mango and coconut.

The pastries offered were donuts, cakes, muffins and paninis. This Rituals branch was not frequented by many people during the study. On entering there were five people sitting. During the observation six more people entered to patronize making it eleven customers observed in total. Seven were afro-Trinidadian (African descent), three were indo-Trinidadian (Indian descent) and one was mixed (both African and Indian). Five observed seemed to be between the ages of 20 ??? 30. Three were dressed casually, that is jeans and shorts and carried book bags.

One can make the assumption that they were students. Four seemed middle aged that is between 35-50 years. They all wore working outfits and it was assumed that they came from nearby offices. The remaining two looked over the age of 50 and were also dressed casually. Seven of the eleven were female. Out of the eleven customers, only two did not purchase any type of beverage but something to eat. From my own personal observation, ice blended coffee drinks called Chillers was clearly the most popular drink. There were four employees present. They comprised three coffee bar workers and one supervisor.

The workers seemed to be between 20-35 years of age while the supervisor appeared middle aged. They wore Ritual's work uniforms and provided excellent customer service. They were polite, smiled often and added to the professionalism of a high end coffee bar. The six customers who entered were repeat purchasers, meaning they purchased from this cafe before. This assumption was made because these customers knew what they wanted before they ordered and they knew where they wanted to sit. Two of the customers brought reading material and one student had a lap top.

All customers appeared comfortable in this social setting and changed their behaviours to suit the calm, relaxing environment. My observation has led me to group the customers as follows: 1) Exuberant Students ??? young, fashionable and energetic students who perhaps think of coffee as a fashion statement or who enjoy sugar rushes, 2) Working Class Drinkers ??? employees who drink coffee to escape the world of work and 3) Indulgers ??? individuals who drink coffee because of the pleasure derived or those who

seek caffeine fixes. Evidently this cafe exemplifies globalisation and its influence on developing nations.

The results of this ethnography will be analysed to determine whether a first world coffee culture habit can be ingrained in a developing society where coffee bars are not popular. Before this analysis, the various cultural tangents imposed by the globalisation process will be discussed. Coclanis and Doshi (2000: 52) quoted Friedman (1999) who stated, " Globalization comes into existence when everyone feels the pressures, constraints and opportunities attending the relative increase in importance of world trade, and the democratizations of technology, finance, and information associated with the same. Friedman expounded that countries jumped on the globalisation bandwagon when the benefits of economic interdependence materialised. However, even though globalisation undoubtedly propelled the worldwide merging of economic and social structures, the process brought not only great benefits but dire consequences. This was emphasised by Greenspan (2000) who related, " While recognizing the efficacy of capitalism to produce wealth, there remains considerable unease among some segments about the way markets distribute that wealth and about the effects of raw competition on the civility of society. The impact of globalisation on a nation's cultural diversity is a two sided coin. On one side " the proponents of globalization believe that the rapid recent increases experienced in international trade, travel, and communication have the clear potential of enhancing local cultures, thereby expanding cultural diversity. Critics, on the other hand, fear that local ultures will be swept away by the powerful forces of globalization, resulting in rich cultural diversity being

replaced with cultural homogenization, dominated by western values and symbols," (Human Development Report 2004) as cited by Preble (2010: 344). These differing paradigms illustrate the workings of the homogenisation and hybridization mechanisms. In the homogenization thesis, globalization leads to cultural convergence and in the hybridization or syncretism thesis, globalization encourages a blending of the diverse set of cultural repertoires made available through cross-border exchange, Holton (2000).

Cultural homogeneity is further explained by Asgary and Walle (2002: 61), " Today this cultural homogeneity version of global theory has often been dubbed ' McDonaldisation': a term that implies that the popular consumer culture of the economically dominant West is relentlessly and inevitably transforming other, regions, cultures, nations, and societies. Scholte (2008: 1477) provided a more extreme version when she noted that, " Globalisation is regarded as a particular type of universalization, one in which social structures of Western modernity (capitalism, industrialism, rationalism, urbanism, etc. are spread across all of humanity, in the process destroying pre-existent cultures and local self-determination. " Indeed many examples embodying the Americanisation of cultures especially in the growth of consumption can be identified. Trentmann (2004: 377) believed, " Consumerism appears as mentality, behavioural motivation and individual action as well as commercial institutions and a defining feature of society at large. Asgare and Walle (2002) ascertained the creation of consumer societies when they quoted Watson (2000) who said, " Mass marketing, on an international level, displaces strategies that revolve around national,

regional, and cultural differences. Distinctiveness fades to the point where young Japanese tourists in America have marvelled, upon visiting a McDonalds, that America also has Japanese food. " This supposed invasion of new ideals is a main causal factor for the paradigm shifts facing many cultures. It is therefore of no surprise that the efficacy of cow boy capitalism has encountered resistance from on-westernized populations. " In parallel with the growth of globalisation of production, globalisation of consumption has accelerated and it is this perhaps which has excited most opposition," Buckley and Ghauri (2004: 83). Asgary and Walle (2002) highlighted this resistance when they ascertained, " While technological and economic convergence can encourage a more global and homogeneous world, on the one hand, distinctive segments of the population with their own heritage, values, and habits seek to preserve their unique character. This vivid resistance has been termed polarisation and is represented by the flagrant displays of opposition by various groups such as Muslim activists. Friedman (1994: 37) also contended, " One of the striking characteristics of the current decline in Western hegemony and decentralisation of the world system is the concomitant rise of cultural movements of new identities and national entities that have clearly reversed what appeared to be an increasing cultural homogenization on a world scale. "

Cultural hegemony imposed by one economic powerhouse is disregarded by a myriad of authors who identify the generation of new cultural forms by creolization, hybridization and emerging cultural syncretisms, (Wimmer 2001: 436). These authors reinforced the glocalisation anecdote which subscribed to the interpenetration of the global and the local resulting in

unique outcomes in different geographical areas, (Ritzer 2003: 193). Thurow (2000) cited (Calabrese 1998) who envisaged that, " The traditional American system is not being exported to the rest of the world. Thurow (2000) continued, " A new global knowledge-based economy is being built, much of it in America, but what is emerging is not a global copy of traditional American practices. " Hybridization is further elaborated by Parisi et al. (2003) who investigated cultural change in spatial environments. Their findings indicated that cultural assimilation does not lead to a single homogenous culture thereby displaying the need to preserve a certain degree of cultural heterogeneity. Hybridization therefore absorbs the complexities of global culture that homogenization and polarisation fail to pick up.

It culminates into an epitome of cultural ecumene which can be defined as persistent cultural interaction and exchange which proliferates cultural diversity. This will now be demonstrated by the imposition of a first world habit into a developing society. The Caribbean diaspora, apart from experiencing solely warm weather conditions, is mostly relaxed and laid back. The point being drawn here is that coffee and its effects of creating warmth and caffeine rushes are unnecessary. Also, T&T is distinguished from other Caribbean islands by its fervent bar/pub culture.

Author Harris (2002) pointed out that contemporary globalisation has not propelled the Latin American and Caribbean region into a new era of post modernity. Therefore how can a coffee culture be nurtured in an environment where coffee bars are irrelevant and the effects of globalisation have an unstable grasp? Scott (2006) reasoned that, " Post-modern work and

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lifestyles demand convenience, comfort and the mass consumption of popular culture and the branded coffee house perfectly facilitates the perpetuation of all three aspects. By providing a unique product offering which include what Scott emphasized, Rituals is hinging on a change in T&T's consumer lifestyle. Outlets are physically designed to evoke the feeling of a North American or even European cafe experience. With locations throughout T, the organisation through price, place, product and promotion seems driven to satisfy a niche need in the T population. Scott (2006) proposed that, " This USA style domination of the standardisation process can allow companies to thrive under new market conditions. Even though its physical approach and aesthetics seemed to resonate the homogenization theory, Rituals' actual product offering comprises American beverages and pastries married with Caribbean flavours. By intertwining the best of both worlds, Rituals is attempting to weave a coffee culture into T&T's social fabric but how successful has the company been? Customer interviews have revealed that while they all enjoy coffee, only one out of five drank coffee every day.

Two out of five purchased from Rituals several times a week while others purchased several times a month. When asked what Rituals can do to increase their patronage, four out of five indicated they should lower their prices. Only one out of the five customers believed that T&T had a coffee culture and only one other believed T&T had the potential of developing a coffee culture. Coffee Bars in North America are denoted as a place for leisure meaning the inviting atmosphere of coffee houses makes it ideal for socialisation.

Therefore what defines a coffee culture is not the mass consumption of coffee but also the social activity within these environments. Rituals has succeeded in enticing individuals of different ages, races and income levels however observations noted that patrons did not stay longer than one hour in Rituals. The majority of customers were repeat purchasers meaning Rituals may have only a core loyal following. Customers interviewed seemed to indicate a preference for the coffee especially the Chillers as opposed to the social setting.

The conclusion that Rituals has fashioned simply a plurality of coffee bars rather than an actual cafe experience, can be drawn. When one customer was asked why they did not think T&T inhabited a coffee culture, she replied " Because people prefer to go to bars or the movies rather than hang out at a coffee shop. " For the eight years that Rituals has been in operation, it can be stipulated that its goal of changing consumer lifestyle and creating a coffee culture has been met with limited success.

Rituals is still invariably unique from other coffee bars including Starbucks because it offers an idyllic solution to coffee cravings in a tropical milieu. It may not have implanted an innate appetite for coffee bars in the T&T population but it serves as an oasis for students requiring a study break, office workers who want a lunch time refresher and coffee fanatics desiring to placate their cravings. By offering a foreign service in a Caribbean setting, Rituals ties two cultural experiences in one package thereby breeding a hybrid form of coffee houses found only in the Caribbean.

According to Cowen (2002), “ Cross-cultural exchange creates a plethora of innovative and high-quality creations in many different genres, styles, and media,” and this exchange “ expands the menu of choice, at least provided that trade and markets are allowed to flourish. ” The Rituals example can thus be used in tandem with the hybridization theory as it clearly exhibits the result of cultural borrowing. In conclusion, globalisation may impact on culture through homogenisation, polarisation and hybridization.

Even though cultures and nations are increasingly drawn into the Western sphere of economic and cultural influence, this does not inevitably imply that they will be completely transformed, (Holton 2000). The hybridization thesis can be applied to Rituals coffee house which was observed through an ethnography study. Even though the T&T population is resisting the coffee culture being imposed, the company represents an ideal form of coffee house through its mix of North American and Caribbean elements.