



ST. ANDREW'S THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE P R E S S

RE-INTRODUCING DOM BASIL MATTHEWS

Burton Sankeralli

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By: Burton Sankeralli

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St. Andrew's Theological College
P.O. Box #92, Paradise Hill
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Trinidad and Tobago.

www.satc.edu.tt

1.868.657.7554 | 1.868.653.0449

SATC@satc.edu.tt

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Preface

“... to find Ogun in the heart of Christ.”
(Pearl Eintou Springer, *At the Crossroads*).

Kasala Kamara offers us a key and critical publication on a towering Caribbean giant who had been forgotten by history. Dom Basil Matthews (1911-1999). The name of the book *Remembering the Life and Times of the Dom*.⁽¹⁾ But I think he would be the first to emphasize that the book is a team effort. A compilation of writings concerning the “Dom” as well as his the Dom’s own writings. This in the absence of ready access to his work offers us a much needed introduction to his thought. But it is of course much more than this. It is a celebration of his life and legacy.

Moreover the format of the book is not that of a long complex linear narrative but one of thematic chapters. Making it ready reading for students and for use in the classroom (and for commentators like myself).

This is done in collaboration with St Benedict’s College Past Student’s Association. In so struggling to keep his memory alive they are performing key and critical service to his people.

Here we affirm the legacy of our Caribbean intellectual tradition with such pioneering figures as Jose Marti of Cuba and Jean Price-Mars of Haiti. And we can mention our great Caribbean Pan-Africanist and revolutionary thinkers and actors Henry Sylvester Williams, Marcus Garvey, Leonard Howell, George Padmore, CLR James, Franz Fanon, Aime Cesaire, Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael), Walter Rodney, Bob Marley.

The book presents the towering figure of Dom Basil Matthews.

Monk, social scientist, community builder, educator, sports administrator, vocalist. And with the possible exception of the last of these areas a founding father.

It presents a key thesis. That here is a great thinker activist who in the celebrated terminology of Marx sought not merely to interpret the world but to change it. This indeed as the very essence of his life. Here is a great Pan-Caribbeanist and Pan-Americanist who sought to live this reality out as a social praxis. A radical praxis of profound cultural vision and Caribbean philosophy.

The Dom made a contribution to the progressive scene in North America there pursuing academic and social work as well as working out a frame for Black education this in the midst of the Civil Rights and Black Power struggle in the United States. However the main focus of the book relates to his work in the Trinidadian landscape.

Here we are presented with the pioneering figure of a Caribbean philosopher, social theorist and activist. In commencing our discussion of the book and the vision of the Dom we look at the general cultural framework of his vision and life. We give extensive quotations from his work as found in the book.

So let us meet the Dom.

Introducing the Dom

Trinidad has its own distinctive way of life. The people have their own ways of doing things. They have a sense of time of their own. They have evolved their own peculiar mode of domestic economy and of family organization. Their outlook and attitudes towards Church and religion are pronounced and characteristic. Marriage forms and the attitudes towards them are different from those of other peoples. The content and meaning of marriage customs are altogether unique. Trinidadians have their own proper style of speech and song, their own code of social conventions.

(Dom Basil Matthews) (Pg. 44.)

So here is a man. An African-Trinidadian West Indian Pan-American Caribbean man who is a Catholic priest this at a time when all such were white yet he is completely grounded in his Self and space. No trace of self-contempt here.

The quotations are from chapter three that engages the lecture *Our Cultural Heritage* delivered in Port-of-Spain on December 11, 1944.

“We expect a Trinidadian or West Indian to do certain things, we do not expect him to do others. In a motley gathering of people in New York City you can tell a West Indian a mile off. His colour or racial origin makes no difference. The cut of his features, his gait, his gesture all declare him. I have often observed New Yorkers spotting West Indians on the streets, buses, subways and public spaces. Often they could not guess the island of his origin. The West Indian has his ways.” (Pg. 44).

So the Dom has this profound sense and understanding of our culture where he is himself ontologically grounded. And we say “ontological” because in his writing and work his entire life commitment this shows itself.

Kamara says that... “The Dom went on to add that even though certain aspects of the native culture are unsatisfactory even undesirable”...

“Nevertheless, it is absolutely necessary for us to have a working knowledge of our culture system such as it is. Despite its avowed short comings it possesses rich and wonderful and unique resources. Some of these resources are very far in advance of what the Western world of today has to offer. I refer to the value of family life and village solidarity in particular, and to the unrivalled skill and capacity for rhythm, rhythmic invention and variety in the field of music. There are other great values. Social technique, welfare work, to be specific, calls for sure knowledge of cause and effect in the social order. ” (Dom Basil Matthews pg.47).

No priestly reticence and squeamishness here. The Dom calls for total engagement.

... “only with such knowledge does it become at all possible to control social process. The knowledge is yielded by the careful study of the cultural system. The stability and progress, spiritual as well as temporal, of Trinidad as of any other human group, cannot be achieved unless built into the content and underlying foundation of its cultural heritage.” (Pg. 47-48).

So his agenda is that of study, analysis, articulation this as praxis, stability and progress temporal and spiritual. And this involves a grounding in our culture.

Kamara says that nine years before Lloyd Brathwaite's work on social stratification "the Dom had envisioned a distinct Trinidadian and Caribbean culture". Moreover he is here grappling with a theoretical understanding of this culture. He speaks of a native "culture pattern"... "It is the common existence and experience of any population group on common soil through many generations..." (Dom, pg.45). So the Dom is seeking such sociological insight into the nature and workings of such "culture pattern" one that is dynamic.

"The culture pattern is never at a standstill. Like certain native words it is always "working". It is a living and growing thing. It is subject to change. It changes but it remains itself." (pg. 45)

So the culture pattern is living and working and grounded in community in the soil. And Dom draws on inspiration from the native insight. We shall see that is inherent in his very methodology. There are common cultural forces of people on the soil.

It is also clear that the Dom has a deep insight into the profoundly "ethnic" (pg.45) nature of culture constituting an identifiable group dynamic. Moreover this living culture pattern does not yield to assimilation and uniformity it is constituted in rich cultural diversity.

Thus while he may anticipate theories of an identifiable creole culture he was most definitely not a creole theorist in the assimilationist and nationalist sense. Indeed his vision of such a definable identifiable Caribbean "culture pattern" this seen in terms of diversity also anticipates the "plural model" in our region associated with MG Smith this while giving us a vision, framework and insight of unity. Our plurality is rich but by no means one yielding irreducible conflict. Thus within a sociological framework Dom articulates a basic theoretical vision of Trinidadian/Caribbean cultural pattern one shared and identifiable and also grounded in our diversity.

"The national character is exotic, alien and more or less artificial. We are concerned here with the folk culture native to Trinidad and, in general, to the West Indies." (Pg. 44).

So the Dom effectively offers us a "take down" of nationalism some years before Fanon's classic and devastating critique in the *Wretched of the Earth*. He says –

"In the culture system of Trinidad there is a main stream and there are tributary streams. The main stream takes its rise in the cultural admixture of Negroes, Spanish peons and French Creoles. The other population groups are the tributaries. The tributary cultural offerings are of the first importance in the resulting culture scheme. Without them, Trinidad would not be the Trinidad we know and love and want to die for. (Pg. 42-43).

He speaks of a mainstream culture born of what we may now describe as the encounter of Africa and Europe together with "tributary streams". Yet in a way evocative of Glissant he sees the tributaries as of "first importance" essential and key in making the whole culture pattern what it is ... a land to die for. And the Dom takes this last line seriously.

It is clear that for the Dom this total folk is constituted in diversity and it in this grounded diversity the culture system the culture pattern is authentic.

For the Dom authentic culture is driven from below and that insofar as it is detached from this vital organic grounding the dominant mainstream is effectively an extension of the colonial "national culture".

Of course the question that does not fully arise in the forties but does the next decade is that of a home grown supposedly post-colonial nationalism. It is this that is subject to Fanon's brutal critique and the Dom is soon to be drawn into this problematic.

We can say however following from his line of reasoning proposed "national culture" has to be grounded in our folk, failing that it continues the colonial imposition.

We need access to the entire essay but the Dom is grappling with unitary theoretical model for dealing with issues of creolization and pluralism. But he clearly sees diversity and the unitary culture pattern as defining each other. He is thus grappling with if not proposing an understanding of West Indian culture that is way ahead of its time.

So we are witness to a pioneer at work. To see how he moves effortlessly around such terms as diversity, ethnic group, culture pattern and system, mainstream and tributaries, in an exploration free of later theoretical constraints.

"The greatest danger in colonial regionalism may be an inclination to conceive programs of development in terms of modern, Western standards and to impose them uniformly upon peoples of endless diversity." (Pg. 48)

It is amazing that all this was said by a Black Trinidadian Catholic priest in 1944. Here we did not get to grappling with diversity until the "Indian government" of 1995 and it is still woefully inadequate. And to this day we have a nationalism that looks to such alien imperialist modern Western sources and standards. Yet note that the Dom understands our culture pattern of "endless diversity" as the grounding of our own Self affirmation.

Here is a critique of Eurocentric development planning. Notice he pointed out above that in key ways we "are very far in advance of what the Western world of today has to offer". Dom was aware of imperialism, alien cultural forces and indeed the bankruptcy of the West.

Kamara says... "The Dom was diametrically opposed to any programs of development which reflected an arrogant colonial and imperialist tendency. He fully understood that such an approach totally demolished the cultural independence and integrity of the people of the Caribbean region." (Pg. 48).

Dom notes our own lack of faith, and grounding and knowledge of our own selves our heritage this in the face of an imposed Western domination.

"Trinidad tends to go with every wind precisely because it lacks faith in its social heritage. What lies back of the charge of Trinidadian instability, inconsistency, and lack of perseverance is the absence of a steadying faith in our social heritage. Our apparent instability and quickly dying enthusiasm express the mental and spiritual conflict between an unrecognized cultural heritage and the competing challenge of western ways and institutions." (Pg. 46-47).

Moreover the Dom has insight into the turbulence of our history as matrix that has so defined us. Indeed he even anticipates the plantation theoretical model later articulated by Lloyd Best and Kari Levitt.

"West Indian slavery and plantation economy, Trinidad style, have left their mark on us all regardless of social status, colour, or racial origins." (Pg.45).

Of course what is here emerging is that the Dom is a truly grounded organic intellectual. He is not merely engaged in a theoretical enterprise but is radically grounded in the space. Indeed the goodly priest is seriously engaging calypso this revealed in a 1942 article.

“...calypso is not only a song it is an action song and the songs themselves, the calypsos, are to a far greater extent the story of the people. Historians show us the face of the people these ballads take us into their hearts and soul”. (Pg.33)

... “hearts and soul”... this as we engage the ontological question. The Dom was an organically rooted scholar and activists who touches and seeks to articulate the people’s ontology. This as the Dom is aware is fully intersectional. Yet he is also aware of and at home in his own Africaness and it is here he focusses his ontological quest.

It is in such ontological grounding he engages the family...extended family...village... Here is the embodiment of our culture pattern as living spiritual community. And he affirms its depth, strength and power. And its radical ontological spiritual base.

He points out “the great occasions in the family are all religious in character”. Moreover this vital communal reality embraces “continued relationships with family members in the hereafter through divers religious beliefs and practices” (pg.49). He says “these institutions effect the moral, spiritual, social, psychological and cultural unity of the Trinidad Folk family” (pg.49).

Kamara points out – “He also mentions that religious patterns reveal a tendency to syncretize Christian and Catholic patterns with certain ancestral or traditional beliefs and practices that experienced retention.” (Pg. 49)

The Dom is thus aware of an African ontological presence in grounding family and community. And the family is centre, focus and ground. Here disclosed a reality that is profoundly spiritual.

“Extraordinary emphasis is placed upon the necessity of blessing a home before settling down in it. Many people still under the shadow of ancient tribal traditions have an “Ogun” buried at the entrance to protect the home from harm. All of this stresses that the home is the sanctuary and focal point of the creole family. The jealous retention in homes of holy water, holy pictures, chaplet and other sacred objects even by Non-Catholics points in the same direction” (Pg.51).

That “Non-Catholics” do it suggests that this is not about Catholicism. Please note that he says the openly African spiritual character involving the archetypal warrior Orisha “Ogun” is widespread involving “many people”. And we see above he speaks of ancestral relationships, religious syncretism and African retention. Thus the Dom is very much aware of this vital African ontology revealed in the community pattern and its grounding spirituality and religious forms.

The Dom thus reveals such vital organic involvement with people in their family and community living. And here he understands family as grounding community.

Kamara declares this as truly pioneering sociology well before its formalization in the Academy (pg.51).

So here is the Dom organically rooted ontologically involved in and engaging the depths of the People’s soul and yet a Catholic priest and Western trained scholar and soon to play a role in the birth of a modern nation state. It is thus evident that a certain tension revolves around the Dom this in his very ontological engagement.

We shall seek to explore this tension in terms of his relation to three architectural figures of Western civilization. This in his journey and yet it is not only his rather he may be seen as embodying an entire intellectual tradition's quest to disclose "Self".

We shall thus start with the pivotal issue and reality of community in coming to terms with that matter of what's buried at the entrance of the home.

Benedict

We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another – doubtless very different – St. Benedict.

(Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*).

The narrative is that when classical civilization collapsed in the West with the invading barbarian hordes plunging what we today know as Europe into the Dark Ages, it was the Benedictine monasteries that saved Western civilization. Breathing life back through community practice of the Christian virtues, learning and education Benedict emerges as a key architect of Western civilization.

As a Benedictine monk the Dom would have understood and been defined by this legacy of St. Benedict. It would have framed his vision of the salvation of a people, culture and civilization through community and learning. So we see the Pastor as member of such a Benedictine communal cell breathing life into La Romaine and its environs establishing community and centres of education especially for the poor and marginalized.

We may say that the Western figures we are engaging involve in the life of the Dom some possibility of historical repetition. And here with St. Benedict the Dom is engaging in this historical task of establishing community.

And his was indeed a vision of community this as philosophy and praxis.

As we have seen key here is the family village formation. And this is the focus of one of his major pieces of work. It is called *Crisis of the West Indian Family*. It is engaged by Kamara in chapters four and six. The Dom describes it –

“This book attacks a very great problem. It is a study in the structure and organization of the family among the descendants of the West African peoples who were introduced to the West Indies and to the New World in general as slaves.” (Pg. 52)

The Dom recognizes that even though he is working on establishing and sustaining community as a Pastor his is not the task of creating community. Such community and its ownmost living ontology has come here from Africa and its centre articulated in the ontology of the family.

The Dom’s work was published in 1952 and was based on his PhD research of 1946. This establishes him as a pioneering West Indian and Trinidadian engaging a key theme of Caribbean sociology. In 1951 he founds sociology as a discipline at what is now UWI St. Augustine. He may be considered the father of social science in Trinidad and Tobago.

So here is the Dom engaged in sociology and ethnography this through a formidable methodology. His sources include –

Field surveys in a wide range of locations, social and economic sample surveys, two hundred and fifty life histories of youth. Historical documents... 1595-1820: 900 manuscripts and notices from the Trinidad historical society, 1820-1875: personal memoirs, 1595-1912: four historical memoranda, 1912-1945 travel books, a wide range of economic studies... newspaper material “including legislative council papers, census statistics, the files of the Supreme Court Registry on Marriage and Divorce, the files of the Registrar General on Vital Statistics, the files of the Registrar

of Friendly Societies, the files of the Town Hall on title deeds of slave days... all this along with Folk Lore notices. (See pages 72-75).

And we note these two –

“Tens of thousands of interviews and case studies conducted by the writer and his colleagues of the Benedictine Abbey of Mount Saint Benedict, Trinidad, during some fifteen to twenty years...

The writer’s own analysis of one thousand (1000) West Indian folk tales, including significant versions and variants, 900 West Indian proverbs, 800 riddles, all these were analysed and classified, sometimes from several different points of view.” (Pg. 73).

Sociology, anthropology, history, economics, folklore...not only is the Dom all-embracing and breaching disciplinary boundaries but his engagement shows a truly Caribbean organic grounding. This is no mere abstract objective social analysis but an ontological grounding with people.

The Dom is in his study engaging the actual real living folk family of the people this in all its practical aspects here the agricultural life and economic activities and products is a focus. Family by the way often involving unions not officially sanctioned by Christian marriage, was for him a point of such radical communal engagement. His work on family and community was not merely theoretical but radical praxis.

And did he say ... “tens of thousands”...? He is here drawing on his earthed grounding as a Pastor and that of his community. This apparently including the Monastery itself where the people come and pour out their stories along with their souls.

Abbot John Pereira spoke of Benedictine spirituality and its vow of stability.(2) The monk is rooted in his community which is itself rooted in its geographical location. Thus were the Benedictines able to historically revive community life. And in such grounding the Dom was able to engage the task of establishing community.

The community was La Romaine.

In chapter five Kamara presents us with a document written by Clan Walters... “A historical review of the birth and development of the St Benedict’s educational complex of La Romaine...” (pg. 60).

The Dom’s community work embraced the entire area and was to deeply impact the Deep South of Trinidad. This as Pastor and pioneering educator. And here his La Romaine experiment proved decisive this at a time when it was expanding from being an “insignificant village”.

The Dom engaged the task to establish this religious and educational centre. Walters says... “the indomitable spirit of the Dom prevailed and after much, hardships, heartaches, headaches, and downright humiliation at times, the objective was achieved and the project was on stream.” (Pg. 63)

The Dom’s labours of the 1950s succeeded in establishing the La Romaine Primary school and the building of St. Benedict’s College this latter founded in 1956.

“It heralded a new awakening of true modern day education in Trinidad. Though few could have seen, during those early days, the wisdom of the opening of a college so near to the leading colleges in San Fernando, many have lived to realize that St. Benedict’s has led the way in a very great way in showing the true value of broad-based education with special emphasis on the

physical, vocational, cultural and spiritual development of our young people. For this and much more the Dom will always be remembered.” (Pg. 64).

As can be seen St Benedict’s along with the more standard subjects provided a practical technical vocational all-round education this including literal grounding in agriculture, accounting, home economics, music and the arts and sport. Here we clearly see the Dom’s own vision of education as community building. A vision that establishes the country’s first Comprehensive Secondary School.

His engagement in sport at St. Benedict’s led directly to football’s Golden Age in the 1970s in Trinidad and Tobago. He also went on to be an administrator. Here yet another area in which he is a founding father. All thus growing out of his vision of building community.

We saw that his in-depth theoretical work focussed on the African yet as is also clear his is an open vision of diversity and inclusion. His theorizing is praxis just as his praxis grounds and is articulated in his theorizing.

But as we have seen the Dom’s approach of earthed grounding confronts ontological questions of the people’s communal ancestral cultural Self, their location in a colonial power-structure and the violence of our history that defines us. The Dom as we have seen shows awareness of this. And this Benedictine stands at an intersection of understanding encountering such complex diverse cultural communal reality.

Such ontological questions will not go away and they emerge again in the Dom’s biography this time in an even more overtly philosophical engagement with the issue of education. An engagement that reveals critical issues confronting our space and so-called nationalism in Trinidad and Tobago indeed the entire “West Indies”.

Aristotle

If the people cannot be trusted there is no need for their liberation.

(Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*).

In a sense in Catholic terms Aristotle comes after Benedict. It was after the Benedictine establishing flowing into the High Middle Ages the Catholic Church through Thomas Aquinas assimilated Aristotelianism. And Pope Leo XIII who reigned mostly in the late 19th century has in a sense effectively declared this version of Aristotle the official philosophy of the Catholic Church this via Aquinas.

It is in this context that the Dom engaged Aristotle as a Catholic priest and was to have in 1954 the celebrated debates with Eric Williams on Aristotle and education.

So does repetition continue?

To say the debate is for us historically mythic is no exaggeration. Trinidad is here the Athens of the Caribbean and these two intellectual warriors clashed in this market place of ideas. This dramatically in the ambience of the University of Woodford Square our Areopagus. Speaking mythically of course.

We can note that this exchange between these two erudite Western trained and native intellectuals was to indicate fateful consequences for our future.

Dom cites Aristotle and Aristotelian scholars to the effect that the Philosopher endorses the place of religion in education. But I think we need to go further and interrogate it in terms of the core of Aristotelian philosophy itself. And the Dom indeed indicates the path.

In Aristotelian terms the word “intellect” indicates that which we term spiritual. His philosophical system is “teleological” this means that everything is meant to realize its essence by moving toward its “telos” or purpose. The human... “man”...is here understood as the “rational animal” this is to say that he inherently has such intellectual spiritual telos. Thus the intellectual is our core and ultimate human purpose. .

Regarding the state the Dom states that politics is applied ethics and he is correct. Aristotle sees ethics as the science of good living that which realizes our telos this as essentially involving praxis and no mere theoretical enquiry. For Aristotle such praxis can only be communally and this is to say politically embodied. In that the configuring, establishing and sustaining of the ethical life is essentially political. We can say that the Aristotelian word for culture is politics. Whether for Aristotle any state actually fulfils this ideal or even comes close is another question altogether. But it is in such terms that ultimately a state ought to be judged.

The state then if we are to translate Aristotle into for us familiar terminology has or ought to have an essentially spiritual essence and telos (purpose). In that it is to bring about the ethical and this means the ultimately intellectual realization of its citizens. The Dom thus argues for this the spiritual end of ethics and thus politics, giving it a Christian inflection and articulation.

Through ethical practice human beings realize themselves morally and intellectually this unfolding as political structure as community that is the “Polis”.

“The Polis or City-State comes into being for the sake of life; it remains in being for the sake of the good life. It is a community for the sake of the good life ... for the sake of the perfect and self-sufficient life.” (Dom citing Aristotle, pg. 100).

“The citizen, says Aristotle, is the only being that dwells in cities and subjects himself to law; produces science and art and religion and all the arts of civilization. These perfections can be attained only through life in the community”. (Pg. 102).

“Intelligence is, according to Aristotle, a divine principle embedded in the arrangements of nature itself. Mind or intellect links man with gods and heroes. And so the perfection of man as man, or strictly human excellence consists for Aristotle as for Plato, in man’s being elevated to share in Divine intelligence. Well, Mr. Chairman, where does the state come into all this? It is the purpose of the state to provide order, a social order in which it becomes possible for man to rise from fleeting and transitory temporal goods to realize the perfection of that permanent, specific and highest part of his being in the communion of his intellect with Divine Intelligence.” (Pg. 104).

“The state correctly conceived is the highest type of moral being; it brings blessedness to men” (Pg. 104).

We need to understand two things.

To be fair to Williams we do not have the text of his argument to assess. But he was arguing for a secular state and secular state administered education. For the Greeks not only was there no political separation of secular and religious but such a conception would have been largely unintelligible. Eric Williams then appears to be arguing from a conception of the state that is radically alien to Aristotle. This of course becomes clear in his praxis.

On the other hand we need to clarify what we mean by spiritual and religious in our modern colonial context. One can entirely agree with Williams that priests should stay out of government and with his desire to curb the influence of the Church. Now, the issue here is education. Here the Dom may be seen as representing a key aspect of the colonial order some may even want to say he is being used. It is easy especially in the heat of nationalist fervour to support Williams champion of nationalism against a priest seen to be batting for the grand old colonial institution of the Catholic Church. And this is indeed one aspect of what was taking place.

The proof is in the praxis.

We shall have more to say on the praxis of the other party in the debate. Here we will further articulate the Dom’s Aristotelian vision of education in terms of his praxis. And the Dom is essentially a thinker radically engaged in praxis.

Yet while placed in it the Dom transcends the colonial box while the nationalist champion continues the old colonial agenda. On the other hand we may see the Dom weaving Benedict into Aristotle attempting his historical repetition in his educational experiment.

In this Aristotelian context we can understand a great deal of the Dom’s education experiment. And we can articulate in terms of Aristotle’s ethical framework.

The Dom speaks of crafts of art and science ... For Aristotle the human life is art, craft and science. And this is no metaphor. Living life successfully means mastering the craft of living and thus attaining actualization. This is the art, craft, science of ethics and it is done through the virtues.

The Greek word is *arête* – excellence. And everything in moving toward its *telos* draws on and exhibits such excellences. Health is the excellence for man as biological being. This is to say like all living beings he has such a principle of life – a soul.

However man is a “rational animal” this is to say his soul has this higher spiritual dimension through which we are to attain our ultimate purpose. Such rational realization is achieved through ethics and these excellences we know as the virtues. Thus through the virtues we craft an excellent successful happy life.

Not only is the human life a craft, a life consists in a continuity of embodied crafts. And here we come to a key in the Dom’s educational theory because his comprehensive vision of education involves mastering of a range of crafts that constitute as its purpose a successful life.

“... the primary purpose of St. Benedict’s College, or indeed any secondary school, is not the pursuit of academic distinction. That is the business of a university.

Here we aim at making men, men worthy to live and living worthily. And therefore we aim to impart or aid a sound general education for all.” (Pg. 117).

Of course each particular craft has its own excellences but to master any craft, as in mastering the very craft of living, one participates in a teaching community that inculcates the virtues. Such crafts embrace one’s role in the family, profession, citizen and what in our time are called “hobbies” etc. all that constitutes the unity of community life. Thus key virtues are involved in all craft such as ... justice, courage, focus, practical wisdom... Thus one cannot master craft without mastering the virtues.

Let us look at the last mentioned what I termed “practical wisdom”. The Greek word is “*phronesis*” and it has been translated very inadequately as “prudence”. *Phronesis* is the virtue of applying virtue/excellence in each specific situation. It is thus materially embodied virtue without which there is no virtue. It applies to each and every craft in that its practice means enacting and realizing excellence in each specific situation in the “real world”. It is thus a radical key to good living and the one who so masters we consider to be a “virtuoso” or a sage.

The vision of the Dom then is not merely education as the acquiring of information and technique, not primarily about certification and being able to get a “wuk” rather it is the embodying of craft and crafts this as realized human living toward its spiritual End. Indeed he even offers us a quote disparaging of mere “technical and utilitarian training” (pg.107).

We can now appreciate the Dom’s vision of sport. Our age often thinks of sport in ultimately trivial terms. But it can be argued that for the Greek’s it was sport as craft that provided the pivotal paradigm for virtuous living. This as the Greek understanding of craft and excellence was rooted in the Olympics.

Now the Olympics were essentially spiritual and religious an act of devotion to Zeus. Indeed the Games are named after his home and that of the gods, Olympus.

Also unlike our views of the Games as being about peace the Ancient Olympics were about war. Zeus warrior, king and god like Shango hurls thunderbolts. At this time physical warfare would cease so the city-states may engage in ritual contest – *agon*.

It may seem paradoxical but for the Greeks the communal structuring of such *agon* gives the key for the articulation of the virtues. And in the Dom’s vision it is this that takes place on the

football field. Sport as ritualized war – an army defending its territory and attacking the opponent’s with the aim of achieving one’s telos/purpose the “goal”.

“We open an arena for organized and competitive sports – a necessary adjunct to a school which is fully a school, that is, school life. The sports ground is an extension in the field of our educational endeavours in the classroom. Here in the playing fields we hope that the boys will learn, in some measure, to translate into the interests of their youthful lives the lessons of thinking, acting and reacting which they are being taught in a classroom, on campus and in chapel. Did not a great man say that the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton? May these playing fields of St Benedict’s College, be the training ground for many a glorious and lasting victory.” (Pg. 120).

The connection between the playing field and the Battle of Waterloo is no mere hyperbolic expression. It reveals the educational process itself. The “field” of play and battle represents communal space for the acquiring and articulating of the virtues.

Thus ultimately for the Greeks it is the warrior tradition as revealed in the Olympics and the Homeric Epics that provide the key frame for this communal articulation of craft. And in Aristotle “philosophy” is revealed as intellectual craft at or very close to the pinnacle of our human realization. It would seem such roots explain Western philosophy’s combative nature. In the words of Nietzsche She loves only a warrior.

It may be said this defining impulse of the agon was to have fateful consequences for Western civilization moreso when the communal ethos is stripped away in the rise of the modern individual. However it may also be pointed out that like the Greeks our Caribbean intellectual tradition of which the Dom is exponent and master is similarly rooted in the warrior tradition but the historical framework is rather different as we shall see.

In establishing our first Comprehensive School the Dom truly and literally sought to be “comprehensive” in his educational vision. A vision we may engage in terms of Aristotelean ethics.

We say the acquiring of virtue. For Aristotle the virtues need to be learned and inculcated they are “habits” and this takes place in community, political community.

Here Aristotle is elitist. And the elitism is legitimate in that all participants are not equal. One’s level of mastery determines one’s place in the community and one ascends in rank with one’s mastery of the craft. This is indeed why traditional cultures acknowledge an elite of elders who it is expected are more advanced in the craft of living. But of course in the Greek Polis this becomes structured as oppressive hierarchy, in a patriarchal, slave and ethnocentric society.

Yet the process is in essence communal. For Aristotle and for the Dom the community is a school and the school a community. And the community that is the state is thus a school indeed the overarching school for such communal human realization. The Dom thus refers to it as the highest type of moral being.

The Dom here carries the Western hierarchical baggage entrenched in the modern colonial order disclosed in its own legacy of enslavement and ongoing patriarchal, race and class oppression this even as he struggles to overcome our violent torturous history in articulating authentic community. And this is at the heart of the problematic revealed in our engagement of this book.

The community so located centred in La Romaine unfolding in St. Benedict’s did have this special outreach to the disadvantaged youth. Here the family-community structure where he was

implementing his education program faced serious challenges and Dom as intellectual and Pastor was aware of this.

But the Dom as we have also seen is fully aware in theory and praxis that the people are not “tabula rasa” and they are not passive victims but the bearers of rich creative culture. So most critical is how are the people themselves to own the education process?

However following Aristotle we can affirm as surely as the Dom did that political community (in its authentic meaning the term is actually a tautology) is essential to human fulfillment. The ethical reveals humanity as rational animal and thus political animal. And as we may note in our quotation of the Dom above, the state thus represents the communal space for moral and intellectual that is to say ethical realization.

At stake here is human actualization or collapse. And collapse it was.

Marx

I for one am not a Marxist.

(Karl Marx)

This association may seem surprising as a good Catholic priest of the time the Dom may have strongly repudiated Marxism. Yet as we see not only does the book effectively demonstrate that the Dom's life and work embodies Marx's concern of not merely interpreting but changing the world it also has us confront the key Marxist issue.

Thus far despite the complexities of the story the book has a feel good quality about it in recounting the vision and achievements of the Dom. So the last chapter (14) before the conclusion comes like a slap in the face.

Here the entire story of his life is re-cast. This as it presents us with a very dark turn. The book in this last chapter opens up a counter-history.

It unfolds through a nasty and disgusting tale of what appears to be a land grab involving State, Church and the Capitalists. It is related that this rapacious dominant class is seeking to seize the lands of St. Benedict's College and its Commons La Romaine-on-sea. The College itself to be relocated and dislocated.

Here then an attack on the legacy of the Dom, on an educational institution serving the disadvantaged and on the integrity of the community of La Romaine itself. The Lands in question are for the benefit of the College and the community but they just happen to be prime real-estate targeted by the powerful accustomed to getting what they want.

Par for the course in a post-colony that remains a colony.

Thus the chapter may be seen as flipping the biography on its head in seeking to understand the Dom's life in terms of class warfare. His building of community and programme of education must here be radically seen as being carried out in the face of and against the power-structures of colonization, of race and class oppression.

So there is this little issue of nationalism.

It was pointed out that the Great Debate on education involving the Dom and the Doctor was really about nationalism. But perhaps Aristotle was correct in indicating that politics is really about education.

We are reaping the fruit of an education disaster. Our young people are radically dislocated. And here the fair and good citizens of the Republic are in a state of repressed panic before the prospect of being consumed by a young criminal black mass. So youth can now be publicly characterized as cockroaches and treated to the doctrine of "one shot one kill" by a traditionally murderous police force.

If you insist on calling him the Father of the Nation then Williams must own this.

Again Praxis is theory indeed hard core philosophy is the core nationalist project.

And so we come back to the fate-full as in fate-laden debate. As we said we do not have the text of Williams so we cannot critique his stated philosophical position. However we do have his praxis. The praxis of Williams the native scholar was that of the liberal-democratic secular state of the European Enlightenment. Top down, bureaucratic, capitalist friendly.

Winston Dookeran in remarking that the debate was really about the nation provides the very perceptive insight that Williams conceives of the state in terms of power.(3) The Dom as we have seen understands the state in terms of the virtues.

In the debate the Dom is very harsh on secularism... “not the a-moral and a-religious earthbound secularism of the modern secular state. The modern secular state is godless; the modern state is frequently anti-god. Modern secularism is practical atheism...” (pg. 103).

The modern secular state born of the Western Enlightenment wields reified power. This not a community but a subjugating and subjugated assemblage of individuals. So if the Dom’s vision is correct nationalism involves the alienation of the people.

So here the fateful confrontation. Two towering intellectuals both firmly educated in the Western intellectual tradition yet in an intersecting space caught between worlds.

As noted it would have been easy to follow the native nationalist against the Catholic priest but this particular priest turns out to be committed to liberating praxis while it was the nationalist who continues the old colonial order.

Dom’s old critique of nationalism as an essentially alien cultural imposition continues to apply regardless of the colour of the flag.

This the state of the Nation. Our present chaos something else its father must own.

Yet how does one connect? This nationalism failed to do and the failure has consequences. And Dom was aware of this fundamental question of grounding with the people.

“In 1967, at about the time when Dom Basil was poised to guide St. Benedict’s College into its great leap forward as the foremost all round secondary school of the era, disaster struck. The long deep-seated resentment and class contradictions manifested in open conflict, Dom Basil Matthews was unceremoniously deposed as leader of the college of which he was the founding father. He was deemed to be a person no longer suitable to be a man of the cloth on the strength of rather spurious allegations. Thus began the slide down the slippery slope for the college of the poor people.” (Laurence Brown, pg. 168).

So where was the Dom?

Patrick Edwards speaks of him being chased into exile (pg. 8). But we are not here seeking to speak for him, the biography shows he gave good account of himself. Rather we are asking ourselves.

Where was the Dom when the wheels came off the nationalist project... when the youth rebelled in Black Power... when as a region we faced the prospect of socialist revolution owing to ongoing class contradiction... when an oil bonanza ravaged our society... when the forces of imperialism reasserted themselves (as if they ever went away) ... as our youth grew more and more alienated and isolated... ? In terms of the Caribbean Church... where was the Dom when Vatican II called it to seriously engage the landscape... when it was beginning to question its role in

colonialism...when some were struggling to develop a Caribbean theology...? Where was the Dom?

Not only may we have benefitted from his actual presence. But we were cut off from access to his ideas and his legacy. The Dom marginalized in our space and erased from our history. We were not listening.

This is not to make of him a messiah he did not have all the answers and he had his limitations but perhaps he could have played a key alternate role as the detritus of nationalism plunged us into the abyss.

Like I said we cannot speak for him but we can and must interrogate the ongoing class-war and our permitting him to be so erased. Not even befitting a national award but I suppose that honour is reserved for beauty queens.

And so we have this repetition of colonization. Nationalism. And we are left with the other great saying of Marx that history repeats itself first as tragedy second as farce.

Dom Basil Matthews

*My course I set, I give my sail the wind
to navigate the islands of the stars
till I collect my scattered skeleton
till I collect...*

(Martin Carter, *The Hidden Man*)

It has been noted that our Caribbean intellectual tradition is rooted in the warrior tradition. This having roots in the range of our spiritual traditions. This is our tradition of resistance. The Dom's life embodies it.

So it has been said that the Dom was doing liberation theology.

To engage this description we need to understand what liberation theology is – a theology of class warfare. Depending on the theologian or exponent such warfare unfolds somewhere along the spectrum of gradual to abrupt, on a continuum of Gandhian peaceful “ahimsa” on one end to explicit violence on the other. This seen in our great tradition of struggle, we may note the revolts of the enslaved and oppressed and the great revolutionary victories of Haiti and Cuba as well as the ongoing struggle in Latin America.

As regards violence while it does appear clear that the Dom did not endorse such a path there has been and is a long Catholic theological discussion on the use of violence and liberation theology is in this tradition.

But what precisely is such “class warfare”. It is struggle by and in the name of the people to overthrow class or structural systemic domination of the oppressed. To understand this one need only read the Trinidadian liberation theologian Idris Hamid in the opening of his classic – *In Search of New Perspectives*. And the Dom is in this tradition of the searching after liberating theology.

However we are here not merely speaking of a seeking after a just society but the position that justice and such liberation can only be achieved through radical structural change through such class struggle. Was the Dom a liberation theologian so defined? I think the answer to this question would require proper study of his work.

However it can be powerfully argued that the thought and praxis of the Dom inexorably takes us in this direction. It is clear that the Dom was committed to a process of the people's liberation, to a struggle for freedom. He may thus be described as a resistance theorist and inseparably and more fundamentally a resistance activist. Moreover it is perhaps my key assertion in engaging this book that he moves in the direction of what we may term “revolutionary ontology”.

In the article where he describes the Dom as a pioneering liberation theologian prior to it becoming a movement in Latin America Winthrop R. Holder says the following –

“By fashioning a pedagogy that positioned the oppressed and downtrodden at the center of the struggle for social justice and educational equity, the Dom, as he was affectionately called,

employed the scripture and education as his weapon to engender personal, ethical and societal transformation... before entering the minefields of segregated America in 1944..." (Pg. 35).

Holder thus suggests that in certain ways the Dom's vision anticipates and intersects with that of that other great education theorist Paolo Freire. This in articulating a revolutionary transforming pedagogy of the oppressed.

Notice he begins his work on the family with the word "crisis". The Dom is aware that our inherent situation is one of crisis. His theory and praxis revealing that the crisis of the native family is a crisis of community and of political process in an ongoing colonial situation.

And he had to deal with this on the ground. St. Benedict's was criticized for poor academic performance and labelled a "football school" this because the student intake involved the disadvantaged, those defined by poverty and depravation and social disruption. Here was the location of the Dom's struggle. The violence that is our history.

Thus while the Dom understood and wrote about the strength and vitality of our family and community life he had no illusions about the actual situation of endemic sustained crisis that was and is our reality.

In his vision of education in its repudiation of oppressive hierarchy the Dom departs from Aristotle. In its pedagogical engagement of the oppressed we do see the Dom's work intersecting powerfully with Freire. Whose epoch-making methodology in Brazil apparently accesses Indigenous First People and African ontological insight. Thus Freire was able to develop an educational model based on dialogue and revolutionary struggle of and with the oppressed. A pedagogy of the radical unity of reflection and action – praxis. Such ethical and community vision rooted in practical vital earthed education that the Dom himself discloses surpasses Aristotelian structural imposition.

Thus class struggle against the dominant political religious economic we may say all-defining cosmology brings us to the ontology of the oppressed. And here is the tension inherent in the Dom's position as Western trained scholar as priest seemingly representing the colonial religious system yet totally engaged in authentic struggle of people's liberation and actualization. And this is not to deny that the Dom put the former at the service of the latter. Also the Dom shows awareness of this question over the course of his life.

So he engages the ontology of the people's culture and key here is radical African spirituality which as we saw the Dom notes and engages in his description of the African family/community.

So in his field of thought and praxis there is this African and culturally intersecting ontological grounding of community. May we glean more of the Dom's response? Again we call for greater access to his work.

The book includes – chapter twelve – his 1978 lecture to Club L'Ouverture where he engages aspects of the African philosophical vision. The Dom says –

"Without such a concentration on the aspects of his own identity, it will be impossible for the Blackman – or any species of man – to either understand or accept himself or to fulfil his mission and realize his function both to himself, to society at large and to the world to which he belongs." (Pg. 140).

A note, as an Aristotelian the Dom's use of the word "species" in relation to Blackness is very telling.

The Dom speaks of “symbolic imagery” but the image is not the cold static Cartesian object but living dynamic energy. In describing the unfolding the Dom employs such terms as ... concrete... emotionalized... life force... poeticized logic... rhythmic base... powerful enigmatic... movement and information... connection... (see pgs. 140-147).

Here he engages Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. Indeed in this discussion he engages African intellectuals from North America (he mentions W.E.B. Dubois) and the Caribbean. Here very much locating himself in our Pan-American Hemispheric African philosophical tradition.

Speaking of Paule Marshall he says “The houngan or voodoo priest of Haiti is a recognized projection of African values in the Caribbean.” (Pg. 151) And speaking of Braithwaite(4) “...the live and creative identification with the African roots.” (Pg. 149) He here explores the depths of African philosophy, Dom says –

“Litanic style forms, fragmented phonetics, tonal language, song/dance /movement language, philosophic symbolism in which poems and folk songs bring the metaphysical and the mundane into a single unity of life; the surreal images of the literature of folk religion. The Caribbean literature of African expression discloses, according to Braithwaite, the following: the power and the progressive use of imagery; African emphasis on rhythm and on the involvement of self in the imagery; the use of ‘nation-language’ or Afro-dialect; the cult of the word as sound, its sound value, as, for example, when words are concocted to make onomatopoeic sense or non-sense; the concretizing or the grounding, that is the fleshing out of ideas; imaginative visualizations; Afro puns and the calypsonic miming of words. Noted additionally are improvisations with their repetitive rhythmic phrases of introduction; and the use of adaptive literary mechanisms to re-interpret and to re-evaluate the Caribbean experience, and the coining of new words around the sound of old nation-words. Braithwaite calls this nationalizing the European language forms.” (Pg. 149).

So there is metaphysical articulation and linguistic analysis of the African worldview. The Dom is indeed seeking to engage the intellectual structure of African thinking and articulation of the world. This in all its palpable vitalism characteristic of the African worldview/ontology. And as we see from very early onwards the Dom has this Afro sense of constituting moving Music.

“In the concrete presentation of the Black concept, there is a whole lot of abstract thinking. On the other hand, it is not correct to talk about the Western thing as exclusively analytic, because it is no more analytic in method than the Black image. Further, in the black use a thought is a living thing; a whole thing; a moving, walking, talking, doing thing – rather than a mentalistic, devitalized, disembowelled figment, the so-called conceptual model of the Western convention in which we are all trained.” (Pg. 140)

“Who says that Black folks and Black scholars cannot scale the heights of abstract thought and do it in the most perspicacious, gracious and elegant of ways? Braithwaite’s piece is dominated by a passion for wholeness. The author refuses to allow the deprivations and fragmentations imposed upon African culture by the slave trade and plantation systems to alter our perception of the whole.” (Pg. 148).

“...the wholeness approach or the cosmic approach. The Black mind sees a things as a connected whole, as against the view of the things as a build of isolated particulars. It is a global vision as against the pinpoint vision. This doesn’t mean to say or to suggest that Blacks cannot pinpoint the specifics. We are talking about an approach to learning, not about a synthesis

approach, because, synthesis implies piecing together things which have been broken apart. The wholeness approach is a habit of seeing things whole before they are seen as broken apart... The cosmic approach captures human behaviour in the ecology of the total human environment. Black symbolic imagery details the human experience with flashing pointedness as well as with emotional intenseness. This may be an attempt to identify with the whole truth". (Pg. 151-152).

We gain here insight into the Dom's lifelong vision of comprehensive whole education. Dom was always involved in such African ontological articulation seen in his theoretical and practical engagement and at least later in his life this unfolds into a radical African vision of logic and rationality that goes beyond Aristotle.

The Dom is here in his thinking and praxis seeking to articulate African and indeed our cultural intersection as such ontological wholeness through the violence that is our history. Thereby grounding his mission in our people's ontology. It is "cosmic" involving "the ecology of the total human environment" involving "emotional intenseness". He contrasts this African engaging with the "whole truth" as radically alive with the dominant Western approach.

So we may say this fracture that the Dom is engaging involves the two aspects of class struggle and ontological culture engagement. This revealing a cosmological clash this in a space of diverse cultural intersection. And we may say the process he initiates in so engaging is creative and revolutionary explicitly and implicitly.

The fracture involving the African and indeed the totality of our people's authentic ontology (including what we receive from the West) remains entangled in and subject to Western imperialism this in a modernity that is both alien and oppressive but one that also discloses our creative process. This unfolding process involves resolution of the class contradiction.

I do hope that it has been established that the Dom stands tall in our Caribbean intellectual tradition. I deliberately seek to locate his work on this intellectual horizon. And I seek to point out key orientations of this pioneer that were to be developed in this tradition. His work is here very much grounded. And not only can we relate his work to the theoretical narratives of creole, plural and plantation but we can firmly locate it as a theory of resistance and affirmation this disclosed as praxis.

But we must not limit him or for that matter we ought not to limit this tradition.

He is a key Caribbean philosopher and theologian. And in the intersecting nature of the Trinidadian space he is defined by and engages all-embracing intersection – Pan-Caribbean, Pan-African and Pan-American. His Hemispheric vision may place him alongside such key figures as Bolivar, Marti and more recently Hugo Chavez.

Yet again we note the need of his work to be made accessible and seriously studied.

There is his erasure by State, Church and Academy even as we are all complicit in this marginalizing and forgetting. Overcoming this erasure does reveal that we are in a process of piecing together Self. Articulating affirming even creating wholeness out of fragmentation. And this means piecing together our own intellectual tradition so much of which has been erased, suppressed, forgotten in this dark time. The ongoing colonial process some call nationalism has here done its job well.

So the process continues. The Dom's negotiating of the tensions within him reveals these as tensions inherent in Self. Such is the nature of our intersection. His work is here key in our task of piecing together and indeed re-creating Self and space.

The Dom proclaimed – Dependency no more! In this 1983 article (pg. 131) the Dom shows full knowledge of the violence that has defined us that cripples our processes of community, education and the very affirmation of selfhood. Yet he believed in possibility. Like Freire he knew that our people can be trusted. And that we shall prevail.

Dom was an organically rooted intellectual his a radical grounding in people's community and spirituality. He is a pioneer leading the way in confronting structures of oppression with a process of revolutionary ontology.

His is broad theoretical vision and praxis of the cultural intersection. Here we may say his entire life was process and praxis of liberation. Indeed theory is praxis and praxis theory. The warrior tradition.

And yes the biography does reveal a man truly committed to changing the world. He is among the great ancestors in the struggle. We live because they live even as they continue to live through and in us.

This as we continue to seek disclosure of the buried Ogun.

Burton Sankeralli

July 10, 2023

ENDNOTES

1. *Remembering the Life and Times of the Dom*. Biography by Kasala Kamara, St. Benedict's Past Students Association, Trinidad and Tobago, 2023. Citation of page numbers refer to this text. Quotations are of Dom Basil Matthews unless otherwise specified. I am by no means a Matthews scholar this essay primarily engages material in this biography and hopes to encourage and help prepare the way for more in-depth research.
2. This at a symposium held in honour of the Dom in San Fernando on June 21, 2023.
3. At the above-mentioned symposium.
4. That's Kamau Brathwaite as distinct from Lloyd Brathwaite.