

# Professor Rex Nettleford

Jamaican academic, writer, university administrator and dance company founder who promoted his nation's cultural individuality

Professor Rex Nettleford was an academic, writer, dancer, manager, orator, mentor, cultural activist, historian and social and political critic. Sometimes described as the "quintessential Caribbean man", his contribution to the academic, cultural and political development of his native Jamaica and the Caribbean region was considerable. He was Vice-Chancellor Emeritus of the University of the West Indies (UWI) and founder and artistic director of the National Dance Theatre Company of Jamaica.

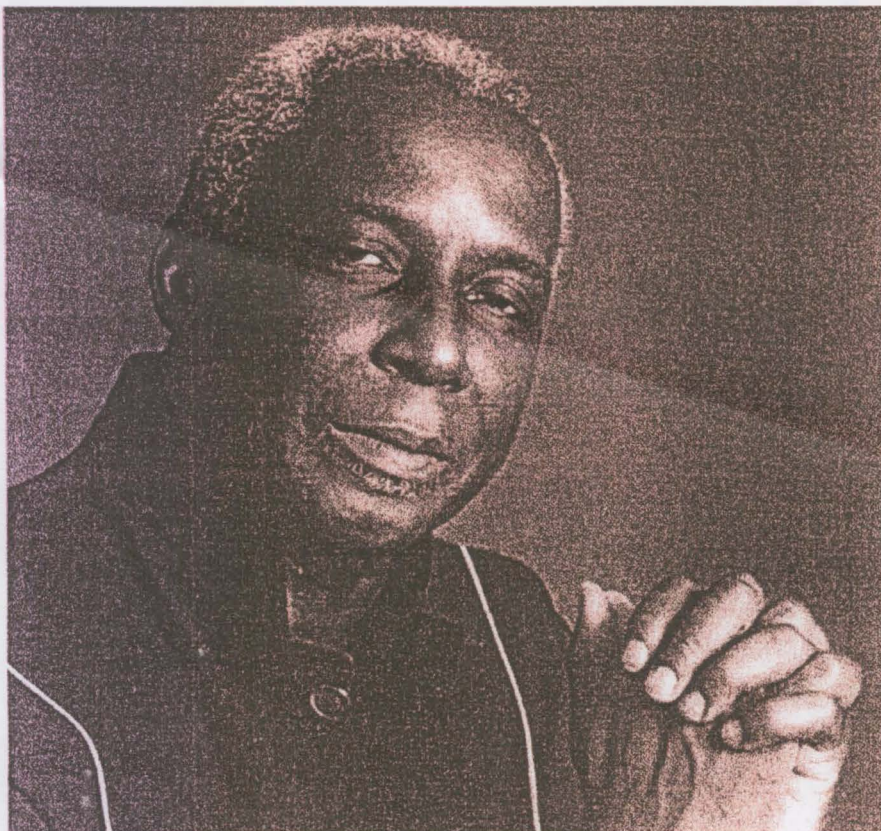
He was seen also as the voice of ordinary people, particularly the poor. His own life showed how far a boy from rural Jamaica could go with determination, resilience and "smdification" — a term used of an outsider with character who is accepted socially.

In all his many activities Nettleford was motivated by the desire to help Jamaicans to find and enjoy their multiracial identity. Through his writings, lectures and choreography he sought to free the Caribbean spirit and imagination from the residual mental slavery of colonial times and rejoice in the region's cultural landscape.

Nettleford was awarded his country's Order of Merit, the third-highest honour, in 1975. In 1991 he became one of only four people to be appointed a Fellow of the Institute of Jamaica, which presented him also with the Gold Musgrave Medal. Although he confessed that he had lost count of the number of awards he had received, Nettleford was proud of the Order of the Caribbean Community, to which he was appointed in 2008, because it put him in the distinguished company of his mentor Sir Philip Sherlock, as well as Abstar McIntyre and Shridath "Sonny" Ramphal.

Among his many other distinctions Nettleford was a member of the Inter-American Committee on Culture, a founding governor of the International Development Research Council, and a consultant to the Caribbean Community Secretariat, Caricom, the Organisation of American States, the International Labour Organisation, the World Bank, the Government of Ghana, the Festival of African Culture, the Caribbean Free Trade Association and Unesco.

Ralston ("Rex") Milton Nettleford was born in 1933 at Falmouth in the parish of Trelawny on the island's northern coast. It was in this rural upbringing close to the inaccessible



Nettleford: he was true to his own maxim that Man must achieve his full potential through education

hilly Cockpit Country, and at Bunker's Hill school, that he experienced the rhythms of country life that stimulated his creative imagination. He credited his mother, Labertha, (who died last year aged 100) and grandmother, who brought him up, with developing his country boy's consciousness of community.

After graduating from Cornwall College in Montego Bay and attaining a history degree at the University College of the West Indies (London University), Nettleford went on a Rhodes scholarship to read politics at

Oriel College, Oxford, in 1957. Forty-seven years later the Rhodes Trust, in marking the centenary of Rhodes scholarships in the Caribbean, established the Rex Nettleford Fellowship in cultural studies tenable at UWI.

Nettleford resisted the temptation to stay on in England, fearing that he would lose touch with his roots, and in the early 1960s returned to Jamaica to take up a post at UWI under the tutelage of Sherlock, its founder. He made his mark particularly with the Department of Extra-Mural Studies. On becoming Vice-Chancellor, from 1998

to 2004, he was the first graduate of UWI to head the region's premier institution of tertiary education. It has been said that his self-effacing leadership could be discerned at every stage in UWI's development. In that, he was true to his own maxim that Man must attain his full potential through education, Nettleford founded and headed the Trade Union Education Institute by which agricultural and factory workers could meet scholars and others in the highest seats of learning. For more than 20 years until his death he was director of the University Sing-

ers at the Mona (Kingston) campus.

About the time that Jamaica achieved political independence in 1962 Nettleford and Eddy Thomas founded the National Dance Theatre Company, of which Nettleford remained the artistic director. He regarded the arts as being the source of cultural survival and the dance theatre members as cultural ambassadors. He introduced to the company dance and music elements of the Kumina and religious movements and drew on the emerging influence of Rastafarianism and ska music.

Nettleford was a strong supporter of Caribbean unity and admired the ideals of the statesman Norman Manley. He was cultural adviser to his son, Michael Manley, Prime Minister, 1972-80, and 1989-92, and served Bruce Golding, the present Prime Minister, in a similar capacity.

Not content with merely imitating European culture in the immediate post-independence years, Nettleford was committed to including those minorities who had been considered pariahs, particularly Rastafarians. He

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was the author with M.G. Smith and Roy Augier of a ground-breaking study of the Rastafari movement in 1961. The best known of his other writings are *Mirror, Mirror: Race, Identity and Protest in Jamaica* (1969), a compilation of the speeches and writings of Norman Manley and the *New Jamaica* (1971), *Caribbean Cultural Identity: The Case of Jamaica* (1978), and *Inward Stretch, Outward Reach: A Voice from the Caribbean* (1995).

Nettleford was also a fine orator. He had a speaking schedule that would have daunted most people and a boundless energy and generosity of spirit that endeared him to all he met. He was in the US to attend a fund-raising gala for UWI when he suffered brain damage from a heart attack and was taken into intensive care at the George Washington Hospital, Washington, where he died a week later.

Professor Rex Nettleford, scholar, was born on February 3, 1933. He died on February 2, 2010, aged 76