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Rex Nettleford
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Rex Nettleford, Jamaican Scholar and Educator, Dies at 76

By ROB KENNER

[Rex Nettleford](#), a Jamaican scholar, educator and choreographer who devoted his life to studying postcolonial Caribbean culture and in the process helped shape it, died in Washington on Feb. 2, one day before his 77th birthday.

The cause was catastrophic brain injury following cardiac arrest, Dr. Christopher Junker of the [George Washington University](#) Hospital said.

Mr. Nettleford was in Washington to participate in a meeting of experts charged by the [United Nations](#) with monitoring the state of racial discrimination around the world. He had been expected in New York for a Jan. 28 fund-raising event for the University of the West Indies, where he had worked for over a half century.

Although he was a trusted adviser to political leaders throughout the Caribbean and the driving force behind the University of the West Indies' extramural studies department, which widened the institution's reach by offering educational opportunities to the general population, Mr. Nettleford is perhaps best known as a founder of the National Dance Theater Company of Jamaica, which was established in 1962, the same year Jamaica gained independence from Britain.

Incorporating traditional West Indian music and dance forms like kumina, ska and reggae, Mr. Nettleford served as the choreographer and even in his later years remained a lead dancer of the troupe, which still tours internationally, exploring the unique blend of African and European influences that comprises Caribbean culture.

Prime Minister Bruce Golding of Jamaica called Mr. Nettleford "an intellectual and creative genius" whose "contribution to shaping and projecting the cultural landscape of the entire Caribbean region are unquestionable."

Raised in the rural town of Falmouth in the parish of Trelawny, where he was born on Feb. 3, 1933, Mr. Nettleford enrolled in the University of the West Indies in Kingston and went on to earn a Rhodes scholarship to study political science at [Oxford University](#).

To celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Rhodes Scholarships in 2003, Mr. Nettleford was one of four alumni presented with honorary degrees. In addition, the Rhodes Trust established the Rex Nettleford Fellowship in Cultural Studies at the University of the West Indies.

Alister McIntyre, a classmate of Mr. Nettleford's at Oxford whom he eventually succeeded as vice chancellor of the University of the West Indies, recalled that Mr. Nettleford had never considered pursuing the

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opportunities available to him in England: "He had a one-track mind. For him returning to the Caribbean meant everything. He wanted to make contact with the wider population." To that end, he founded and ran the Trade Union Education Institute, which offered free classes to agricultural and factory workers.

Shortly after returning from Oxford, Mr. Nettleford was chosen by Prime Minister Norman Washington Manley to undertake a serious study of the [Rastafari movement](#), which had taken root in the slums of West Kingston and grown increasingly vocal in demanding repatriation to Africa. While Jamaican society considered the Rastas dangerous outcasts, the groundbreaking report written by Mr. Nettleford and his two colleagues, published in 1961, credited the movement with helping reconnect Jamaica with its African roots, calling it "a revitalizing force, albeit a discomfiting and disturbing one."

Mr. Nettleford's field research among the Rastas informed his work with the dance troupe as well as his seminal 1969 study of Caribbean identity, "Mirror Mirror." And his reframing of the Rastafari movement helped pave the way for the worldwide explosion of Rasta-inspired reggae music in the 1970s.

Mr. Nettleford was also influential in [Unesco's Slave Route Project](#), which studies the centrality of the slave trade in shaping the modern world.

He is survived by a sister, Daphne May Wylie.

"He was probably one of the most brilliant African thinkers of the last century," said his friend and colleague Howard Dodson Jr., director of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem. "He was looking for ways to use his incredible intellectual gift to empower African people and to come to their defense and protection in a frequently hostile world."

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