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Waves of Accolades: INTERNATIONAL ACCLAIM FOR NETTLEFORD

by Carlos Moore, Visiting Fellow, Institute of International Relations

The four-day Conference on Caribbean Culture held in Jamaica on March 3-6, 1996 to honour the internationally-reputed scholar, Rex Nettleford, was as much an affectionate outpouring of admiration for a fertile mind that has been central to all of the great debates of the past 35 years in this region, as an urgent call from The University of the West Indies, host of the event, to rise to the gigantic, world-wide challenges presented by the 21 century.

More than 400 scholars, coming from all latitudes, gathered at the Mona Campus to celebrate the 'intellectual temerity' Nettleford had exhibited in a life-long quest to legitimize the uniqueness of the Caribbean experience and the centrality of the African dimension within it.

UWI Vice Chancellor, Sir Alister McIntyre, described Nettleford, during the opening ceremony, as a true renaissance Caribbean man who was the proud progeny of Aime Cesaire, the poet/philosopher/playwright/political activist of Martinique who launched the black-consciousness movement known as 'negritude' in the 1920.

George Lamming:

The Keynote Address of a Sage

Barbadian novelist and social critic, George Lamming, delivered the opening keynote address. His stirring words of wisdom flowed in a deliberately slow and unequivocally authoritative manner, with the ease and certainty of a high cascade. It immediately became apparent that no one also could have been so effective in reminding the audience that behind and beyond the circumstances of a long-overdue personal tribute, loomed the agonizing, and still unanswered, question as to where is our troubled, and troubling region headed? And it was precisely in search of the answer, and because of that question, that Nettleford had become such a towering figure internationally.

In none of his endeavours (as scholar, dance-choreographer, philosopher, political analyst or social critic), has Nettleford failed to place his genius at the service of the region's peoples, Lamming said. Nor had he allowed the unpopular agendas of the deprived (Rastafarian, Garveyites, Obeah-followers...) to be swept under the carpet of selfish elite interests. Nettleford's intellectual life had never been divorced from, but rather intertwined with, the wide concerns of the ordinary Caribbean woman and man, Lamming said; and as he spoke, in clear, eloquent, rhythmic, poetic, dancing words, the entire audience was drawn into a solemn silent reflection. Lamming chastised in no uncertain terms the academic posturing and substandard production that too often passes for 'academic achievement' (i.e. an 'achievement' grounded more in fierce tenure-seeking and ladder climbing inter-personal battles, than in scholarly confrontation of ideas...).

The conference was the brainchild of Dr. Barry Chevannes, Head of the Depart-

ment of Sociology and Social Work, and a high-powered Conference Planning Committee comprising Dean Joe Pereira of the Faculty of Arts and General Studies, Dr. Rupert Lewis and Tony Bogues of the Department of Government, and Mrs. Jean Smith of the Office of the Vice Chancellor. Much praise was showered on that team, in the corridors and in the multiple feverish one-to-one 'mini-conferences' that peppered the time of attenders in between the work of panels, which ran at the rate of six per day, simultaneously, and two daily plenary sessions.

That Sir Alister McIntyre would have so readily embraced and facilitated the organization of such an event, beyond the obvious recognition of Nettleford's immense contribution to the growth of The University of the West, was taken by many to indicate his own awareness, and perhaps growing concern, about what one panelist described as 'a crisis of infertility' at UWI.

The Crisis of Epistemology Within the UWI

One of the high points of the conference came when Mr. Lloyd Best, one of the plenary speakers, detailed the ills afflicting The University of the West Indies and called for "the establishment of an extra-disciplinary, multi-lingual Graduate School to which the humanities, and not the sciences, would in the first place be pivotal". Speaking with convincing urgency and with scalpel-like precision, he voiced concern over what he described as UWI's "institutional prolixity". This was exemplified, he said, "by a Department of Economics which had spawned a department of management and which in turn has bred an Institute of Business owing to the initial failure to design an appropriate programme". He drew a most enthusiastic round of applause when he said that "though problems of staff, finance, equipment, administration and governance needed urgent attention, the ultimate challenge lay in 'a change of epistemological strategy'".

As speaker after speaker took to the rostrum to praise the breadth and originality of Nettleford's scholarship (illustrating their analyses with appropriate quotes from Nettleford's manifold works), it became apparent that Best had struck a particularly sensitive nerve. Nettleford's approach, said Cornell University's Africana Studies Department chair, Professor James Turner, contrasted sharply with the "intellectual indigence" of too many of his contemporaries who had "satisfied themselves with a surrender of their critical minds to then prevalent simplicities, including Marxism-Leninism".

"By correlating the discourse of Music/Dance with the very existence of national culture", said Emory University Professor Richard Long, "Nettleford was instrumental in the creation and growth of one of the most enduring cultural institutions in the entire Caribbean; the National Dance Theatre Company of Jamaica (NDTC).

The Caribbean Intelligentsia and Regional Leadership

Over and again, the view was expounded

that regional leadership performance could only be as good as the critical/analytical performance of the Caribbean's intelligentsia itself. "Caribbean Academics", said Marta Moreno Vega, Executive Director of the Caribbean Cultural Centre in New York, "must be both social critics and cultural engineers, if they are to be relevant to their people".

University of Illinois's Dr. Charles Mills, spoke of the ontological implications of plantation slavery and the emergence of 'global white supremacy' as an ideological phenomenon based on the denial of black personhood. Dr. Rupert Lewis, of UWI's Department of Government, said that the emergence of black-skinned, Europeanized elite since independence had created a new situation in the Caribbean. "Too many well-off Black Jamaicans have been assimilated into the social snobbery, racial prejudices and social stereotyping of the black majority by the old social groups that dominated plantation and post-plantation Jamaica", he said. He saw this phenomenon as a new problem of 'elite reproduction' in Jamaica and the region by implication.

In his keynote address, on the closing night of the conference, the honouree himself took care to distinguish artists, scholars and intellectuals from those he termed 'mechanical academics'. The latter, Nettleford said, have contributed very little to advancing the frontiers of human knowledge.

In general terms, and voiced a variety of ways, a dominant theme at the conference was the idea that the Caribbean region would continue to lag dangerously behind world events so long as a scholarship based on global fundamental research, confrontation of ideas, and verification of 'apparent' facts did not become the primary concern of the regional intelligentsia.

The 'Iconization' of an Iconoclast?

Fears that Nettleford's fresh intellectual insight and contributions might be captured and held hostage thereafter by an 'unproductive elite' elicited an extempore response from the honoree to the effect that "someone crass is still crass even when behind the wheel of a Mercedes Benz". Nettleford equally showed concern for warnings from scholars such as the poet and historian, Professor Kamau Brathwaite, of New York University, who alluded to the dangers of 'co-option' by the region's ruling elites of Nettleford's relentless struggle to bring the art forms, thoughts, aesthetics and preoccupations of the common folk of the Caribbean to the forefront of intellectual praxis and discourse. Such elites, said Brathwaite, "are adept at neutralizing non-conformist thinkers by turning them into emasculated 'icons' and inoffensive 'monuments'".

The Glory of Gloria Rolando and of the NDTC

Throughout four days an all-embracing spirit of fraternity loomed over Mona Campus. Scholars defied the natural barriers of language and ignored the more insidious barriers of academic and/or administrative rank to reach out to one another. This atmosphere was further

reinforced by two grand artistic events that gave the conference another flavor - the performance of the National Dance Theatre Company of Jamaica, which has entered its thirty-fourth year of successful existence, and the viewing of the film, 'The Footsteps of Baragua' by Afro-Cuban film-maker, Gloria Rolando Casamayor, one of Cuba's most talented documentalists.

The Little Theatre, with a seating capacity of 600, was host to nearly one thousand people who had gathered to watch and hear some of the most exquisite programmes of music/dance and songs that can be witnessed in the Caribbean. "Gerreh-benta" (a kaleidoscope of ritualistic ancestral kumina, pocomania and myal dances), "Spirits at a Gathering", and "Islands", are some of Rex Nettleford's latest choreographic works. "Tribute" a work by the famous choreographer, Eduardo Rivero Walker (an Afro-Cuban of Jamaican descent, who often visits Jamaica to work with Nettleford and the NDTC), is a vibrant celebration of Jamaica's reggae music and of Bob Marley.

Close to one hundred scholars crammed a small screening facility on Mona Campus to watch the premier of "The Footsteps of Baragua", a 45-minute documentary on the life of four successive generations of Cuban/West Indians (a community which some analysts have estimated to be close to one million). Many wept at the sight of women and men, age 85 and beyond (one of the interviewed, a Cuban-Jamaican lady, gave her age as..92!), recounting the circumstances that drove them out Jamaica, Barbados, Antigua, Trinidad, Grenada.., during the years preceding 1920 and increasingly so after that. Most had gone to labour in the canefields and sugarmills of the Cuban El Dorado. And most never returned to the lands of their birth once that mirage exploded into a life of loneliness and material misery.

The sight of these Cuban/West Indians worshipping in their own churches still speaking their native tongue, and socializing younger generations in the old West Indian tradition of hard-work, pulchritude and devotion to the scriptures, was too much for even the most hardened and detached sensibility.

The ovation that exploded spontaneously at the end of the film, brought filmmaker Gloria Rolando herself to the verge of tears.

"I wanted to make this documentary", she explained, "because Cuba's economy owes a great deal to the labour and suffering of our brethren from the neighboring islands". There is, she added, "a reciprocal duty of solidarity among all Caribbean Peoples, for we have been forged in a similar crucible of suffering".

As the conference closed, those heartfelt words continued to echo in most minds, and it dawned upon those who'd been fortunate to be among the attendees that this had been indeed a most powerful and soul searching experience. For four days, we academics and reconnected with... life!