

Edward Seaga — Life & Leadership

By Professor Barry Chevannes

The recent, still-fresh passing of Rex Nettleford has brought to the fore in a poignant way one of the central issues to which he dedicated his entire academic life—the assertion, recognition and validation of the African presence in the lives of the Caribbean peoples. In strategies that he studied and designed and in language that only he and he alone could craft and which he wielded, he fought relentlessly for the space denied to those who like him had their origins in the cane piece, but on whose quiet but persistent affirmation of a sense of self, this and other countries of the region have together with other migrants forged in this archipelagic chain of islands where Europe met Africa and Asia on Amerindian soil, as he was wont to say, a culture that is part Europe, part Asia, part Africa, but totally Caribbean.

No Caribbean soul spoke more, wrote more, cajoled and nudged more about Jamaican, and by affinity Caribbean cultural identity than Rex Nettleford. The whole world, from Paris to New York, from London to every capital of the still emerging Caribbean, not to mention his own Jamaica, associate the name Rex Nettleford with what indeed is the central problematic of our history, namely independent countries still striving to be free and independent in spirit on the basis of a racial and cultural identity inferior to none but imbued with a creative imagination capable of contributing to the rich heritage of humanity.

But what if Nettleford had not written his books, articles and speeches? Orator that he was, what if all he did was speak? He used to tell that once on a trip to Cuba he asked a Cuban intellectual why was Jose Marti so revered among them, when it was to Antonio Maceo that they owed their liberation from Spain and the beginnings of Cuba as an independent nation. Marti wrote, came the answer, Maceo did not.

As a prolific writer himself, Rex hardly needed this lesson, but it is a sobering reminder to all of us that unless we commit to the black and white of pen and paper the visions and ideals for which we strive, even the best of legacies will be forgotten by the cruelly impersonal erosion of time, the fading memory of age and the indifference of generations who inherit the wealth but are unmindful of the sacrifices in its creation.

Writing, both the most critical achievement and the most enduring signpost of any civilization, is to Edward Seaga, as it was to Rex Nettleford, the ultimate bequest. For when

all is said and done, it is a gift of oneself. Every word chosen, every paragraph crafted and chapter closed is an act of permanent exposure containing all the risks and vulnerabilities that an inhospitable environment can entail and with such deadly effect. And besides they too—the risks—are permanent for as long as the words and paragraphs are read, and through them every reader is able to encounter the mind and spirit of the writer.

It is bad enough when such bequest is one's ideas alone, as in an academic piece, or one's art alone, as in a novel or a book of poems, or one's interpretation of the past, as in a historian's gloss. Many a life and career has been choked if not destroyed by an inhospitably critical environment. It is positively worse, however, when the bequest is one's self—who you were and have become, how you were formed, the choices you made, the toes crushed, the egos bruised, your fears and your loves, the labyrinths of your thoughts, your actions and their justification, your accomplishments, your failures. If every act of writing, any act of exposure, requires resilience to pass through the gamut of readers and critics, then such gifts of autobiography represent the epitome of courage and confidence. With a novel you can absorb the blows of your critics and write another and better tale, but with the autobiography you cannot. It is done once, or not at all.

Edward Seaga therefore deserves our admiration for the courage he has shown in this total exposure of himself, coming as it does at the end of a long and turbulent career in political jousting in a country that is not particularly distinguished for its sense of compassion, in which “good friends are lost along the way” only to “become your worst enemy”, notwithstanding the tradition of civility inherited from our would-be civilizers. True, never in his forty-odd years of politics was the name Edward Seaga ever associated with anything other than fearlessness, if not fearsomeness among those who knew

him only from afar, but unlike the give and take of political life—taking today, but giving tomorrow, the art and act of writing one's own biography constitute permanent risks including being ignored and misunderstood, if not pilloried.

As Rex Nettleford always reminded himself and his colleagues, you are as good as your last act. Until the curtain comes down and the audience responds, you are never quite sure.

But the man who has bequeathed to us **Edward Seaga: My Life and Leadership** need have no fear. His is a good act, with an encore to follow, he tells us, by exposing only the first fifty years of a remarkable life and calling it Volume 1.

These are years of discovery, of falling in love and of the casting of the die by one of the most improbable of lovers—in pedigree and heritage, in looks and demeanour, far from the cane piece of struggle and triumph that had given shape to the beauty that was to stand before the eyes of the beholder trained to reject and scorn, whose sensibilities were to have been of a different and more acceptable orientation, despite his own mixed racial heritage.

As in the lives of individuals, so here too, the attestation of true love is found not in the saying but in the doing, not in the words but in the actions. Edward Seaga came, he saw and was conquered. He fell in love, threw in his lot with his beloved and devoted the rest of his life in tireless, practical demonstration of that commitment. As a result Jamaica owes this man a profound debt of gratitude.

Here is why.

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Erna Brodber, Jamaica's celebrated novelist and writer captured the essence of the problem left by an incomplete Emancipation of 1838, namely the absence of, and consequently the need for re-engineering black space. Brian Moore and Michele Johnson, the much acclaimed historians, writing out of Mona, laid out in their history of Jamaican social relations in the rest of the century after Emancipation the struggle between contending ideas about self and about culture that defined day to day life of the time.

The question underlying their study was on what basis would a country already fractured with a history of three hundred years experience of slavery be able to forge a new sense of identity. Their answer could be found in the resilience and assertiveness of those black descendants of the Africans, who with a patience born of a keen sense of timeless process crafted and celebrated a life and a culture if not entirely independent of those who willed the country into being at least on their own terms, all the while resisting the efforts to be absorbed and assimilated.

There were from the earliest years two Jamaicas, not merely in material circumstance but in thinking as well. And two Jamaicas they remained into the early 20th century when Herbert George Delisser characterized the folk culture of spirit possession and healing, of energetic singing, drumming and vigorous, pelvic-moving dance, as *the mud*, and the acquired culture of Sunday morning church in laces and ribbons, jackets and tight-fitting shoes as *the gold*.

Two Jamaicas there were through the years of Garvey's travails and were still there when Roger Mais wrote **Brother Man**, when Norman Manley gathered around him artists and writers who were seeing gold where Delisser had seen mud, and making their choices, when Edna Manley passed a Rastafarian and thought, a black God—was the greatest creative act since the birth of Jesus.

They were still there when a young Edward Seaga, born into one Jamaica, but tinged with a stroke or two of the tar brush from the other, wandering about in search of purpose, certain what he did not want, uncertain what he did, chanced—yes, chanced—upon his love and his life. Life does this to us all the time. No one is ever self-made. We are as much the products of chance encounters and opportunities grasped, of accidental relationships and fortune, good and bad, as we are of our own rational plans and application.

His turn to the social sciences was the result of a chance visit to the Library of the Institute of Social Economic Research; his three years in Buxton Town the result in part of the chance visit to the island of a famous psychic. Even his being drawn from the periphery into the mainstream of politics was the result of a decision made for and not by him. As for the timing of his birth and life, he had nothing to do with the fact that he was at thirty-two years old just at the peak of his intellectual and creative power when this country negotiated its Independence.

The result of all these conspiracies of fate, chance, choices, opportunities and circumstances was a Malcolm Gladwell outlier, someone in the right place at the right time, in love with the mud, with the beauty of its cosmology, its art, its dance expression, its faith and religious constructs, and—most critical of all—with the means and power at his disposal to validate this love, to remove it from the detritus out of which it was born, to justify and celebrate it, and give it pride and purpose. He writes:

If Independence was to be truly meaningful to Jamaicans it would have to be through the encounters of daily life, ensuring a more sustainable flow of national pride. Pride was the link to the feelings of the people in belonging to something and something belonging to them, in other words, an embraceable identity. My plan was to focus on building this identity, using independence as the glue (p. 113).

His was not the power of the word, but the power of the deed. And his imagination was on fire, shaping with the hammer and the anvil of political will and managerial leader-

ship institutions of pride and belonging, "an embraceable identity". Even incomplete, the list is still impressive:

The Festival movement – float, dance, beauty contest, song, speech, drama
Garvey's Return and National Hero status
The promotion of ska uptown through Byron Lee
Things Jamaica
National Heroes Week and Heroes Day
Devon House
The *Jamaica Journal*
The acquisition of Kapo's works
The Urban Development Corporation
The National Family Planning Board
The Jamaica Stock Exchange
The Students Revolving Loan Bureau

Most were the fruits of his own creative imagination, some his running with the good ideas of others. Some, like the UDC, were the fruits of serendipitous insights; some, like the successful return and interment of Garvey's remains, the result of sheer luck, or of rational planning, like the Stock Exchange. But in the end, all were the bricks in the building of an "embraceable identity" that in the space of less than a decade were to make both "the mud" and "the gold" proud to proclaim *I am Jamaican*.

An "embraceable identity" is a self-appropriated identity; is saying to the image reflected in the mirror *That's me*, is accepting and finding satisfaction in ourselves; is, instead of saying, *Ebri jangkro tink im pikni white*, saying *Ebri jangkro know im pikni black*.

These were, as he himself says, the golden years, when everything was new and fresh and a world was there for the making. Building institutions was one thing, but sustaining them another. Most have survived and prospered, like the Jamaica Cultural Development Commission, which presides over the Festival movement through an intricate network of agents reaching into the towns and villages of the island; or like Devon House, the pride of a city desperate for cultural and recreational space and the initial home for what later became the National Gallery of Jamaica; or like the Students Loan Bureau, still the only hope for tens of thousands of our children accessing a tertiary education.

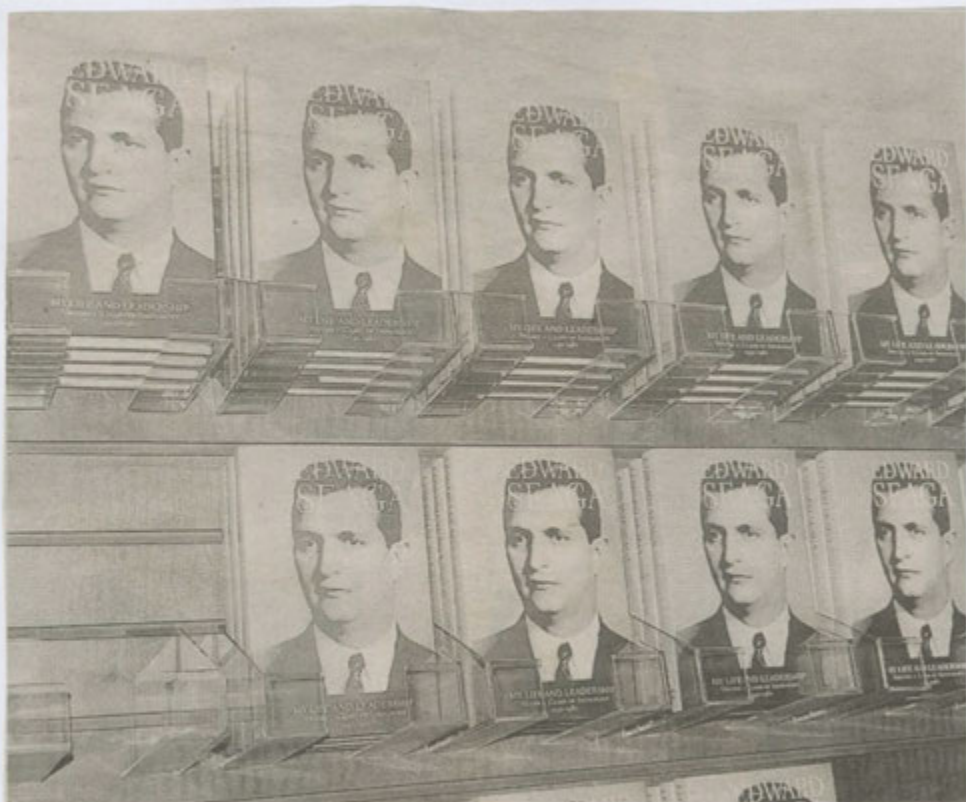
But there is no misreading of the author's regret that a few have withered on the vine, like the Hundred Villages programme that promised the kind of development that would have stanchied the hemorrhaging that was eventually to kill rural life and make of urban life a nightmare; or like Things Jamaica that not merely promised but succeeded in the short time in which it flourished to make of Jamaica the craft brand-name that countries like Indonesia and China have become.

He's well aware of the nature of the politics of the country, of which he was an architect and a tough player. But that's all the more reason for writing. A hundred years from now a generation will look back and marvel at the times when jangkro did tink im pikni white and wondering how such self-denial was possible and find explanations crafted by one Rex Nettleford. They will study his words, piecing them together with those of another philosopher-sage named Marcus Garvey and honour them for what they did.

They will choreograph a dance to enter the annual festival, research the folk origins of the movements in the annals of *Jamaica Journal* and on an October day somewhere in the 22nd century receive a national honour for outstanding work in the performing arts.

They will experience great pride in being Jamaican, and could believe these institutions to be timeless — always there; practices and not know that there was a time when they were not, when one man willed them into being. They could. But because of Edward Seaga's *My Life and Leadership* they will know and they as much as us will acknowledge a profound debt of gratitude.

(Professor Barrington Chevannes of the Mona School of Business officially launched "Edward Seaga — My Life and Leadership, Volume 1: Clash of the Ideologies 1930–1980" at the Mona Visitors' Lodge & Conference Centre, University of the West Indies, Mona Campus on Wednesday, March 3.)



An Adonis Mr. Seaga graces the cover of his autobiography.



The Most Hon Edward Seaga, author of "Edward Seaga — My Life and Leadership, Volume 1: Clash of the Ideologies 1930—1980" thanks Professor Barry Chevannes (right) of the Mona School of Business after his presentation at the launch of Mr. Seaga's autobiography.

ASHON WILLIAMS PHOTOS