

B/M Seaga, Edward

# A life on a cultural mission – Pt. 1

**M**Y INSTALLATION as a Fellow of the Institute of Jamaica, a rare honour, is an occasion which will have a special place in the history of my life. I have already been honoured with another rare and prestigious award, which I treasure, Distinguished Fellow at the University of the West Indies. But this occasion touches a special place in my heart because it is in recognition of the work I love most, cultural development, and it goes back to the starting point of my career.

In those early days, I had no career path. When I ventured out to live in rural Jamaica, I left my mother in fear that I would never return from life in an unknown area with people I did not know. Little did she know that I was not only in safe but loving hands which reached out and took me into the family of the village as one of their own. I value the friends I found, many of whom are still around to be my friends today. My mother did not know that she gave me the basic principle for this success. She taught me the simple maxim: "If you treat people nicely, they will treat you nicely too."

My father could be heard at the breakfast table grumbling loudly as I replayed the tapes of the revival sessions I attended the night before. He repeatedly asked my mother, "Is this what I sent him to Harvard for?"

## BEWILDERED

I was as bewildered as my parents because while I was being driven by fascination with the new life and the experiences I encountered, I did not know how this would fit into any future career, which was undecided at that time. But I continued to be driven by the

Edward Seaga



mysteries of folk life in Jamaica and gladly allowed myself to go with the flow.

## CHARTING NEW GROUND

From the beginning I knew. I was charting new ground, because living in a community, Buxton Town, full time, or 24/7 as we now say, which was a research approach being used for the first time and, indeed, as far as I know, the only time since, enables the researcher to probe areas of life which would otherwise be missed. And so it did. The moonlight nights with ring plays and folk tales of rolling calf, anancy, duppies and the black heart man; the weekly butchering of the goat with children encircling the butcher each one hoping to be the one to get the 'eye-tooth' (testicles); the friendly talks about the history of family and village. No questionnaire would ever capture these events and reminiscences. I was penetrating deeper into folk life than academia had done before.

After nearly one year of rural life, my next stop was in a distinctly different setting, Salt Lane, behind Coronation Market. Every lane in deep inner-city communities is virtually its own little community. Sometimes it is a cluster of lanes. In this case, Salt Lane, Corn Lane, Chapel Lane were all one community. Life began and ended there.

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# LIFE

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Family bonds were strengthened by new generations. In this particular case, everyone was either a street vendor, market seller, domestic worker, tradesman, port worker or handcart man to transport the goods. The people were all simple folk in the day, but full of liveliness which would blossom in the night when the mysteries of their own unique religion would emerge.

Salt Lane was the home of one of the powerful revival 'bands' (always plural). Its 'seal' (church) where ceremonies were held and spirits visited or resided, was a spacious yard with two small wooden houses to one side. A small unit the size of an outdoor lavatory was the 'office' of the shepherd where individuals seeking spiritual help would be received.

## FULL OF LIFE

Children romped on the streets day and night, sellers and buyers bargained, old people were never inactive, and teenagers were always busy doing errands or fraternising. The lanes were full of life and tales of every-day happenings. In the evening hours, the singing and chanting of pukkumina revivalists would lace the night air with fleeting glimpses of deep ancestral roots. The allure, the magic, the aura of spiritual power in the air made this little community a sparkling jewel of our heritage.

From all these encounters and experiences of a unique culture came recordings of music and a rich education which no university could provide. Rural or urban, these facets of folk life were the transposed experiences of mother Africa diluted by the exigencies of conformity to the modern demands of making a living and finding acceptance in the order of society. Jehovah God was still the supreme deity but too busy to deal with mundane problems of ordinary life. Here, the spirit becomes the activist, the intercessionary, with the awesome power of the archangel, cherubims, seraphims and spirits of the dead solving the problems of

love, health, justice, fortune, childbearing and child rearing.

This is a complete world of its own linked by ancestral bonds to Africa and by convenient ties to the Western world.

## WHAT NEXT?

After 42 months, my work at both rural and urban locations was over. I pondered what next should be done. The fledgling University College of the West Indies had no post-graduate faculties. So it was off to London University with the assistance of my good friend, Dr. M.G. Smith, the renowned anthropologist, to do my advanced degree. It was there that I wrote the outline for my proposed thesis on revival which has since been published in the *Jamaica Journal* (1969). But that only made matters worse.

The process of academia calls for deep groundings in theoretics. To me, it was boring. I had seen, lived, and done the real thing and I wanted to get back to the excitement of Jamaica, away from the dullness of text book explorations which I needed to by-pass as I was already ahead of the theoretical world. So after three months, back to Kingston with the resolve that I would pursue a post-graduate degree when the University of the West Indies was ready to offer these courses. However, for me, that never happened. Political life seemed to me to be a natural arena for transposing what I had learned into policies to enrich the Eurocentric forms of culture which existed outside of folk life, in which we have been colonially captured. I wanted to be that agent of change to open the eyes of all to the cultural wonders and richness among us.

The rest is known. History records that I returned to university life 50 years later, but history does not say that everything that I did in those 50 years was in preparation for what I am now engaged in doing: writing and recording in transposing the past into the future for the benefit of past generations and those to come.

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**WINSTON SILL** / FREELANCE PHOTOGRAPHER

Former Prime Minister Edward Seaga (right) receives his citation from Governor-General Professor Kenneth Hall (second right) during a ceremony to install Mr. Seaga as a Fellow of the Institute of Jamaica, held at the Little Theatre in St. Andrew, last week. Looking on from left are Professor Barry Chevannes and Transport, Works and Housing Minister Robert Pickersgill.