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 affair of national significance as a recognition 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 21st century. More than 400 scholars, coming from all latitudes, gathered at the Mona Campus to celebrate the intellectual tenet that has sustained and inspired a life-long quest to legitimize the uniqueness of the Caribbean experience and, the centrality of the African dimension within it. UWl's new 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 who has voicefully described 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 cascadie. It immediately became apparent that no one else could have been so effective in matching the '.standard ofbehind and beyond the circumstances of a long-overdue personal tribute, looked the agonizing, and still unanswered, question; what is the purpose of life, and troubling region headed? And it was precisely in search of the answer, and because of that question, that Nettleford had become, in such a towering figure internationally.

In none of his endeavours (as scholar, dance-choreographer, philosopher, political analyst or social critic), has Net teford 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, Obena 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 went on to say, "in clear, eloquent, rhythmic, poetic, dancing words, the entire audience was drawn into a solenn silent reflection. Lamming chanted: "the sight of these Cuban/West Indians worshipping in their own churches still speaking their native tongue, and increasingly so...

The Crisis of Epistemology Within the UWI
One of the high points of the conference came when Mr. Lloyd Best, one of the pioneers of the most enduring and utilizing The University of the West Indies and called for the establishment of an extra-disciplinary, multi-lingual Graduate School to which he has repeatedly returned. This was Lamming's "institutional proximity". It 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 called for "a more enthusiastic round of applause when he said that "though problems of staff, finance, equipment, administration and government 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 Cor nell University's African Studies Department Chair, Professor Patricia 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 with the very essence of national culture", said Emory University Professor Richard Long, "Nettleford was instrumental in the creation and growth of musical and dance-enduring institutions in the entire Caribbean; the National Dance Theatre Company of Jamaica (NDTC). The Caribbean Intellectuals 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 intellectuals itself. "Carib bean Academics", said Marta Moreno Vega, Executive Director of the Caribbean Cultural Centre in New York, "must turn both social critics and cold writers, if they are to be relevant to their people". University of Illinois' Dr. Charles Mills, spoke of the ontological implications of reggae and the phenomenon 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, Euroamerican elite since independence had laid the groundwork for the kind of "machines of blackness". "Too many well-off Black Jamaicans have been assimilated into the social snobbery, racial prejudices and social stereotypes 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 generation of 'elite repositories' in Jamaica and the region by implication. In his keynote address, on the closing night of the conference, the honouree delivered a go-to-things dreamy, artistically, scholars and intellectuals from those he termed 'mechanical academics'. The latter, Nettleford said, have contributed to "the general advance of human knowledge. In general terms, and voiced a variety of ways, a dominant theme at the conference was the idea that the Caribbean intellectual had continued to "be held behind world events so long as a scholarship based on global fundamental research, confrontation of ideas, and political and economic forces have not become the primary concern of the regional intellectuals."

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 extreme response from the honoree to the effect that "someone's crass is still rear even when behind the wheel of a Mercedes Benz." Nettleford equally showed concern for warnings from scholars such as the poet and historian, Professor Kamaud Braithwaite, of New York University, to now "be adept at neutralizing the art forms, thoughts, questions, and prejudices of the common folk of the Caribbean to the forefront of intellectual praxis and discourse. Such elites, said Braithwaite, "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 barriers of language and ignored the more insidious barriers of academic and/or administrative rules 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 filmmaker, 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 programs of music/dance and songs that can be witnessed in the Caribbean. "Garrebenta" (a kaleidoscope of ritualistic ancestral cemeteries, poomcanomas and myal dances), "Spirit at a Gathering", and "Is lands", are some of Rex Nettleford's latest choreographic works. "Tribute" a work by the famous choreographer, Eduardo Rivero Walker (an Afro-Cuban of Jamaica ancestry who had come to 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 premiere of "The Footsteps of Baragua" - a 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 65 and beyond (one of the interviewees, a Cuban/Jamaican lady, gave her age, 85), 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 cane fields and sugar mills of the Cuban El Dorado. And most never returned to the lands of their birth once that mirage expired, revealing a total failure in living a potato of exodus 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, pulkitude 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 film-maker 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 over centuries of suffering."

As the conference closed, these heartfelt words continued to echo in most minds, and it dawned upon those upon whom those feelings and words rested, that this had been indeed a most powerful and soul searching experience. For four days, we academicians and reconnected with... life...