

OPINION

Seaga's Jamaica? Absolutely!

Carolyn Cooper
Contributor

LAST WEEK, two fascinating books were launched in Kingston. First, there was **Jamaica Absolutely**, a coffee table beauty that will certainly enhance Jamaica's centuries-old reputation as a premier tourist destination. Published by London's Hansib Books, **Jamaica Absolutely** is an excellent marketing tool for the Jamaica Tourist Board (JTB). At the elegant launch event hosted by the JTB, Arif Ali, the brains behind Hansib, eloquently demonstrated his powers of persuasion. His enthusiasm for this book on Jamaica is contagious.

When Arif asked me sometime last year to contribute a short essay, I was completely captivated by his cunning. He explained that he wanted a picture book with a little bit of text that wouldn't turn off readers. He'd already done 20 books on a wide range of countries and he'd perfected the formula.

Arif, an astute businessman from Guyana, went to London in 1957 to study economics. He soon discovered he could make money selling West Indian ground provisions instead. He set up shop in Tottenham and his business place became a vibrant cultural centre. He ran a 'box' – the Guyanese term for a 'paadna' – and attracted a loyal following.

As part of his service to his customers, Arif used to import newspapers from all across the Caribbean. It soon occurred to him that he could do one of his own. In an entertaining article in the **Stabroek News**, Arif tells the story of his foray into publishing: "We employed an old Gestetner machine to reproduce articles from the various newspapers. We called it **The Westindian**, sold it for 'tuppence' and, frankly we couldn't print enough." In those days, copyright clearly wasn't the issue that it now is.

Recognising the complexity of the migrant market from across the Commonwealth, Arif diversified his publishing business. In April 1971, he published the first issue of the monthly **Westindian**

Digest and eventually launched three newspapers: the **Caribbean Times**, the **Asian Times** and the **African Times**. I tell Arif that even as a publisher, he's still selling ground provisions. He completely understands the need to feed the body and the mind with real food.

For **Jamaica Absolutely**, I ended up writing a longish essay, 'Disguise Up De English language', focusing on Louise Bennett's humorous account of cultural politics in our society. I took the title from one of Miss Lou's dramatic monologues in

which she wittily tells how speakers of various African languages adapted English to suit themselves: "But we African ancestors dem pop we English forefathers dem. Yes! Pop dem an disguise up de English language fi project fi-dem African language."

SOPHISTICATED STRIP TEASE

The other book that was launched last week is the first volume of Edward Seaga's autobiography, **My Life and Leadership: Clash of Ideologies 1930-1980**. Unlike 'we African ancestors', Seaga does not "disguise up de English language." But he does disguise himself. He cleverly manages both to conceal and reveal his 'true' self. Writing an autobiography is a tricky business. It's a sophisticated strip tease. You want to disclose enough to intrigue your audience but you don't really want to fully unclasp yourself in public.

On the second page of his 'Introduction', Seaga addresses frontally the issue of incomplete disclosure: "Some have suggested that, because of the predominance of historical accounts, there is not enough here of my personal life, no sidebars on relationships or activities of a non-political nature to match the usual format of biographies. But I had little of those things in my life because of my involvement 24/7, as they say, in national affairs."

Yeah, right! But what of non-political

affairs? However "little" of those Seaga had, they ought to have found a place in the autobiography. My search in the index for juicy details under the headings of 'marriage', 'romance' and 'love life' yielded no results. There were some entries about family but they proved to be entirely respectable.

The heading 'Families in Jamaica' turned out to be a sociological account of the "loosely structured extended network, generally with matriarchal leadership". Though largely accurate, this conventional account of the supposedly matriarchal structure of Jamaican families does not fully take into account the role of non-residential male role models who are central to the extended family.

REMEMBRANCE SONGS

'Family history' led me to Chapter 1: The Formative Years. Here, Seaga gives an engaging account of his own family history. But the chapter opens with a startling declaration: "Genealogy is not a subject of much interest to Jamaicans." It is, indeed, true, as Seaga states in the next sentence, that "Genealogical disconnections during slavery made it impossible to trace links to specific locations or families in Africa."

But it is precisely because of the catastrophic disruptions of transatlantic slavery that many Jamaicans – particularly Rastafari – understand so completely the

therapeutic need to reclaim ancestral origins and affirm our sense of lineage. We may have lost our connections to specific places but we know where we come from. Reggae music, for example, is full of redemptive remembrance songs.

I've only skimmed this first volume of Seaga's autobiography. I look forward to reading it leisurely. But what I've seen so far suggests that Seaga's Jamaica is a landscape that is very much shaped by the specificity of his ethnic origins. To some degree, his book counters the conventional view of the Jamaican people that is given by Rex Nettleford in the introduction to **Jamaica Absolutely**.

Under the heading 'Out of many, one people', Nettleford tells the usual, uncomplicated story. Quite a reversal from the challenging politics of his dissenting book, **Mirror Mirror**: "All Jamaicans are part-African, part-European, part-Asian, part-Native American, while being absolutely Jamaican." This is not even part-true. Seaga's story comes much closer to the truth: each of us is the product of particular histories that define our sense of identity. To pretend otherwise is to disrespect each other.

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