

## 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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## Whither free education?

THE GOVERNMENT has declared free education for all up to the secondary level. Based on this declaration, government-funded schools are given school fees annually for each child by the Ministry of Education. This year, the funds from the ministry should have been disbursed three times in the year. Schools expected to receive the third disbursement at the beginning of the second term. This has not happened.

The Ministry of Education has since sent out communication to the effect that because of financial constraints that the Government is experiencing, the ministry's payment to the schools has been delayed. There is no indication as to when the schools will receive these funds.

This is having a serious impact on schools that depend solely on the funds from the ministry to operate their institutions. There are schools that now have to send their utility bills to the Ministry of Education to be paid. All of this is happening in the context of the Government advising parents that the auxiliary fees that schools charge to assist in meeting the expenses of running the institutions are not compulsory. Since this announcement, school administrators have seen a decline in the number of parents who are paying auxiliary fees.

Contrary to the perception that this is because of the inability of parents to pay, some of the parents who do not pay are non-compliant simply because they have declared that it is "free education" time now. On the other hand, there are parents who are domestic workers and labourers who come in to make arrangements with the school to pay even \$1,000 a week until the fee is paid up. These parents take pride in the fact that they can contribute to their children's education. They have not bought into the 'freeness mentality' which is so prevalent in our nation.

Some questions therefore arise: Can the country, in its present financial crisis, afford to fund 'free education' for all? Can the country afford to pay for the education of the children of parents who can afford to pay

school fees? What quality education will be delivered to the students of schools where the funds are not forthcoming in a timely manner from the Ministry of Education and which do not have supplementary funds from auxiliary fees? How can the minister of education be required improved education output with reduced resources?

## CANNOT CONTINUE

I believe that the Government needs to acknowledge that it is not able to continue to fund free education up to the secondary level. It needs to return to the cost-sharing arrangement which was previously in place in the secondary schools. Under this arrangement, parents who needed financial assistance from the ministry would apply for it. These applicants would be interviewed by the school's guidance counsellors and their application forwarded to the Ministry of Education. The approved assistance would be forwarded to the school. This arrangement seems to be more suitable to our present financial crisis. Let those parents who can afford to pay, do so.

In *The International Handbook on the Economics of Education*, Jamaica was cited as one of the countries in the World Education Indicators survey that compared to countries such as Greece and France spent a significant per cent of its gross domestic product on education. Whereas in 1999, Jamaica spent 7.5 per cent, Greece spent 2.6 per cent and France 4.4 per cent. I think we have to look again at the practicality of the 'free education' policy in light of our current realities.

As it now stands, a number of schools have to be relying on the auxiliary fees paid by parents to keep the schools functioning. Yet, our prime minister called principals who require parents to pay additional fees, "extortionists". This was a most unfortunate position for him to have taken and it will forever be etched into the minds of the hard-working principals who are required not only to be instructional leaders, but finance

solicitors of their schools.

With the cost of utilities increasing steadily, schools are now required to pay, for example, an astronomical amount of money for electricity. Another prohibitive cost is that of security. The Ministry of Education has issued a Safety and Security Policy document to the schools but there are no resources accompanying the document to implement the policy. It is the auxiliary fees once again that have to be used to cover much of the security costs.

The Ministry of Education is encouraging the increased use of technology in the schools. The E-Learning Project supplies the schools with equipment, yet there is no technical support provided to maintain the system. It is the auxiliary fees that are used to provide the needed technical support.

## CO-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

The global current trend in secondary education is to produce students who are not only academically educated but students who are rounded by participating in co-curricular activities. These activities such as sports, service clubs, academic and performing arts clubs are not financed by the Ministry of Education but are supported by the auxiliary fees paid by the parents. Yet, when students who do not pay these fees are told that they cannot participate in these activities, there are accusations of unfairness and exclusion. We need to become realistic with regard to the true cost of educating the Jamaican child at the secondary level. This assessment needs to include the cost of producing the rounded student so many parents and employers want to see.

The Government produces policies and edicts without the supporting resources. This approach might result in political mileage but it does not result in an improved education system. We need to be realistic. We need to acknowledge that, as a nation, we are not at the place to implement 'free education'. We need to set a standard of education and allow the parents who can afford to assist in providing this education for their children to do so.

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## Global tourist industry rebounding

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WARM WEATHER destinations have been given a boost by the severe winter in North America and Europe that could be prolonged, based on current forecasts. Jamaica and other Caribbean destinations so far appear to be benefiting, which must be a welcome relief to the industry after the downturn suffered last year. The weather-induced increase in tourist traffic in the early months of 2010 comes on top of the pick-up in the late months of 2009 when global travel markets stabilised and started to turn around.

The ongoing, though choppy recovery under way in the major economies has prompted the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) to predict growth of three to four per cent in international tourist arrivals in 2010, up from an estimated decline of four per cent in 2009. The Caribbean, having returned to growth in the last four months of 2009 which enabled it to contain the decline to just two per cent, is likely to experience further improvement this year, with a possible growth of four per cent, according to the WTO. With regional economies so heavily dependent on tourism, this prospect is encouraging in terms of recovery in the levels of economic activity.

The WTO's projections point to the pick-up in business and consumer confidence, low inflation and interest rates, and the expectation that the slump of 2009 will be followed by a rebound due to pent-up demand, as the critical factors driving the turnaround. It also noted that the global travel industry has shown flexibility in adjusting to rapid shifts in consumer behaviour and volatile markets and that this has made it more resilient. Evidence of the industry's comparative resilience is that whereas international arrivals declined by an estimated four per cent and receipts by six per cent, world exports dropped by approximately 12 per cent.

## CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR SHIFT

Locally, tourist operators are having to manage in a market environment where a much bigger share of their bookings are last minute, evidence of the shift in consumer behaviour. Nonetheless, Jamaica was among a limited number of tourist destinations in the Latin American region (Cuba, Chile, Colombia, Curaçao, Dominican Republic, Guyana, Honduras, Nicaragua and Uruguay) that withstood these shifts and registered increased arrivals. Expanded, competitively priced room capacity proved decisive in the island's ability to hold its position in key markets in the United States (US) north-east region and to continue rapid growth in Canada, even as there was slippage in the United Kingdom (UK) and other European markets.

The Canadian market was again the best performing region, with arrivals growing by 22.9 per cent, pushing it ahead of Europe, including the UK, for the first time. This is a trend that began in 2004 with visitors from Canada growing by 10.9 per cent that year, followed by annual growth of more than 20 per cent in subse-

quent years to 2009. As a result, the number of Canadian visitors moved from 95,265 in 2003 to 290,307 in 2009, or by more than 100 per cent. Even though the recession in Canada was milder than in the US and unemployment less severe, it will be difficult to sustain this pace of growth, but Jamaican tourist operators continue to market aggressively in that country and new routes have been opened up.

Improvement in the US market in the latter months of last year also contributed to the out-turn of 3.6 per cent growth in stopover visitors to Jamaica. From monthly declines in the second half of 2008 and the early months of 2009 at the peak of the recession, there was a rebound in US arrivals starting in April. Thus, the number of US tourists increased by two per cent for the year, a far cry from the 10.1 per cent decline in March, a traditional peak month.

## CHALLENGE

The major challenge for Jamaica was in the European market from which arrivals declined by 2.8 per cent down to 276,800 behind the 290,307 from Canada. The slowness of the UK economy to emerge from recession was of particular importance, as that market is our largest by far in Europe. Indications are that even as most European economies are in the recovery mode, instability in financial markets and the fiscal crisis in Portugal, Ireland, Greece and Spain will exacerbate the unemployment problems and affect consumer spending. New joint marketing initiatives between RIU, the JTB and one of Europe's leading tour companies, TUI, will provide momentum in Germany and adjoining markets.

The new properties that are opened this year, Palmyra Resort & Spa and Secrets in Montego Freeport, will add to Jamaica's appeal, high-quality product, and competitive strength, especially in the US and Europe. We should, therefore, expect improvement over last year's performance in both arrivals and earnings, though there will be continued pressure to satisfy consumers looking for the best bargains. For Jamaica, this means that employment in the industry should remain relatively stable, even if operators will be pressured to keep costs under control so as to remain price-competitive.

The WTO has cautioned, however, that the industry still faces several downside risks related to the fragility of economic growth in major source markets, the US and Europe. Elevated levels of unemployment which are a drag on consumer spending also remain a particularly important challenge. It has reminded as well that oil prices, while being moderate at present, have the potential for volatility that could negatively affect the cost of travel. We should also recognise that last year Jamaica benefited from a diversion of tourist traffic from Mexico because of the outbreak of swine flu, and with Mexico returning aggressively to the travel market, the local industry will face greater competition from that destination.

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