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**Eulogy for Rex Nettleford
Washington, DC, USA***

The ammunition of intellect and imagination

First, let me congratulate the Government of Jamaica and the Washington Chapter of the Alumni Association of the University of the West Indies for sponsoring this celebration of the life and work of Professor the Honorable Ralston Milton Nettleford-Rex Nettleford, and I am honored to have been asked to give a eulogy-to speak well of him-to speak of the many admirable and noble qualities he possessed.

I can just hear him quipping in mock protest that he has been eulogized almost to death.

Given the numerous tributes to Rex Nettleford that have been written, it would be fair to ask if everything that could have been said about this great man has not been said already. I doubt it, but perhaps humility should make us realize that what we paint here this afternoon may be but a pale image of the reality that exists in the hearts and heads of the thousands of persons who have been touched by him and to whom he is still real. There have been tributes from virtually every part of the world and there may well have been some from the non-English speaking world that have escaped my attention. But it is fitting that he should be eulogized globally and although interred physically at the University where he had his heart, figuratively he is buried in a myriad of places and in the hearts of the many men and women who loved him. For as Pericles said of the Athenian dead in perhaps one of the greatest funeral orations ever given:

For heroes have the whole earth for their tomb; and in lands far from their own, where the column with its epitaph declares it, there is enshrined in every breast a record unwritten with no tablet to preserve it, except that of the heart.

And there is no doubt that to many all over the world Rex Nettleford was truly a hero. But I would hazard a guess that Rex himself would warn that we must be careful not to let iconization and lionization shade into deification, for he was very conscious of the

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fact that he was human and heir to the faults that are inherent in the tragedy of the human condition.

Most of the international tributes spoke to his tremendous artistic talent, especially his talent and discipline in the dance and the manner in which he elevated and promoted that art form in the Caribbean and helped to make the national dance theater company a cultural emissary of Jamaica that showed in its performances that they did come from a land with the motto of out of many on people. But the constant theme that he brought to the dance was derived from his deep conviction of the strength of the ties with the African roots of the majority of our people and the affirmation of the virtue and value of black. He was perhaps a perennial and eternal affirmation of Nina Simone's cry:

*To be young gifted and black,
Oh what a precious dream!*

The generations of dancers whom he taught and inspired have made it clear that his legacy with them is secure and the appellation of National in the company's name will forever be almost synonymous with Nettleford. I presume that he must have danced socially for pleasure as most Caribbean people do, but I rarely saw him do it. I am not qualified to comment on the technical aspects of his professional dancing, although like many others, I enjoyed watching him and his work. However, I do recall his saying to me once as we watched some youngster dancing, that the African in us made our dancing centripetal as opposed to the centrifugal character of the European movement—our movements concentrate around the center. The videos of the Trinidadian carnival or dancehall lead me to accept his thesis and in spite of my medical training, I confess to wondering if there is not some special anatomical feature of recent origin that permits the center to move independently of the rest.

Many of the tributes that I have read in the local Caribbean press were by those who might be described as the ordinary folk who have shown their appreciation for the fact that he never considered anyone ordinary. Much has been made of his frequent use of the Jamaican expression “smaddy” which connotes being somebody, to refer to the fact that everybody is somebody important. He was in the grand tradition of the cultural entrepreneur, Louise Bennett who also did so much to invite Jamaicans to find, establish and take pride in their cultural identity.

I have used the word passion often to describe him recently. He had a passion for people, a passion for perfection in what ever he did and a passion to perfect the perception of our people about their proper and rightful pride in themselves and their intrinsic worth. He has been eulogized as a teacher by those who were fortunate enough to sit at his feet and joust with him intellectually and by all accounts he was formidable in the lists. Similarly, politicians of all stripes have spoken of his counsel to the powerful and his fearless commentary on the important issues of the day.

But this evening as we are gathered here at the invitation of the government of Jamaica and the Washington Chapter of the Alumni Association of the University of the

West Indies I wish to focus more on his connection with our/his University. This was the institution that he would claim made him the man he was. This is where he derived his infant academic nurture and this is the institution that provided the home in which his many and varied talents could flourish. This is the place in which he could sow the seed of the idea that the concept of creative imagination was neither oxymoron nor tautology and that an academic institution was the richer for embracing the activities that gave expression to the culture of its people, not as an addition, but as something that should be woven into the many and varied ways it sought such truth as there is and tried to educate the young to take their places in our societies. It is proper that we should celebrate the life of Rex as among the first fruits produced by the founding sons of the University: fruits that were a part of the harvest dreamt of by the founding fathers who conceived of a place of learning and generation of the ideas that should be central to the creation of a Caribbean ethos and identity.

The bald historical facts now widely known are that Rex Nettleford-a poor black boy from Trelawny entered Cornwall College on a government scholarship and left there in 1953 to enter the University College of the West Indies also on a Jamaica Government Exhibition. He graduated with a BA (Hons) in 1957 and proceeded to Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship soon after to read for his MPhil and as his citation from Oriel College for his honorary Doctor of Civil Law in 2003 said:

“He applied himself to the study of the manners and rituals of contemporary society and to the illumination and understanding of our own lives”.

His initial academic appointments were in the Extramural Department, influenced no doubt by his mentor, Sir Philip Sherlock who once described him as: *“A renaissance man of many talents, a real life demonstration of the creativity, artistic genius and intellectual ability of the Caribbean people”*. He rose from being a Resident Tutor to being Professor of Extramural studies. He was appointed pro-Vice-Chancellor for Outreach and Institutional Relations, then Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Vice Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor emeritus in 2004. He described his areas of academic and professional specialization as including Caribbean history, Caribbean politics and social development, Development studies, Creative Arts, Culture and development and Caribbean Dance Theater. He mined each one of those areas seriously and his academic credentials in them were obtained the old fashioned way-he earned them. He wrote dialect poetry and reviews as an undergraduate, but his intellectual production from the time he returned to the University until his death was simply prodigious. His bibliography includes some 750 items, including books, chapters in books, articles, addresses and lectures and in addition he choreographed 71 productions.

He was very clear about the future role of the University, which I believe would have been grounded in his brilliant history of the institution written with Philip Sherlock. He saw the need for leadership in a new dispensation, as he put it one of contradictions, creative and disintegrative tension and contrariness in which the need for regional

solidarity was ever more important. He envisaged a University that was free of the shackles of some of the traditions that now made no sense. He would say:

“Such freedom should prepare leaders who understand diversity and its exploration in creative ways, to comprehend structures that call for network management rather than hidebound, up-down, hierarchical command interaction in structures that are defiant of such arrangements, precisely because of the nature of interdependence itself. The creative response to the challenge of change is how we in the University of the West Indies describe the criterion of leadership performance in a world which some of our founding fathers knew had begun to take on the form it now palpably has, ever since the end of the Second World War. The flexibility and adaptability needed to respond to the social developments that were radically defining the relationship between society and the higher education in most countries of the globalized world are exactly what is needed for the redefining of relations between the developed and the developing world in a process of change and complexity of issues, cross-fertilized into diverse phenomena that constitute contemporary reality.”

But it is not only on the number of his publications that we should dwell. It is also how he used language to convey some of the more important images of who and what we are and who and what we should aspire to be. Rex was a fervent proponent of the thesis that it is important for a people to establish an identity and some of his more eloquent passages speak to the need for the appreciation of self which must precede the self respect that a people must have if they are to truly develop in the sense of enlarging and enhancing their capacities for living. He was racially conscious without being racist and it was clear that for him it was necessary to appreciate the dissonance inherent in the racial and ethnic diversity that was native to the Caribbean as a pre requisite to achieving the harmony that for Rex and many others of us is almost a holy grail. Dissonance is essential for harmony.

The University and the Caribbean are indebted to him for his insistence that cultural studies had a proper place in academia and on leaving the post of Vice-Chancellor he created the Cultural Studies Initiative. Rex was impatient with the view that culture was a characteristic of the privileged and that cultural expression did not involve and permeate almost all if not all of our activities. Our humanities reflect our culture and I can attest to the effect it has on the teaching and practice of medicine. He might have said that it is really our culture which defines us and would espouse the view that academia should embrace the opportunity for displaying in tangible ways the sharing of that culture-the attitudes, values and practices that define us as a people.

Barry Chevannes would point out that it was not enough to read what Rex had written. It was important to see and hear him as his facial expressions, his voice, his inflections, his body language were as important for the image he was portraying as the

content in the spoken word. He was an artist in every sense and the artistry of the stage and the artistry of the podium were not fundamentally different.

Ladies and gentlemen, the last “good” that I will speak of Rex was that he had class; he had style in the sense of a certain flair and quality of imagination and individuality that showed in his bearing, his dress and his words. Generally these are not primarily the product of external influences. They come from within, but the example of persons like Rex can inspire those in whom these qualities are latent to let them shine through.

You cannot clone Rex Nettleford. But you can hold up his legacy to those who continue to rent here as he would say and those who come after. The University has therefore established the Rex Nettleford Foundation for Caribbean Cultural and Social Studies to ensure that the critical images, the ideas and all the other elements of his legacy last for generations to come.

Let me end with two personal reflections. My own interactions with Rex over the 57 years we knew one another were many and perhaps the last formal one was about a year ago when I gave him the Chancellor’s Medal in a beautiful ceremony in St. Augustine. The Chancellor’s Medal is a special award of distinction made by the Chancellor of The University of the West Indies to a person who has made a signal, substantial and likely lasting contribution to the welfare and development of The University of the West Indies as a regional institution. It is also awarded to persons who have enabled the University to access resources for the fulfillment of its mission: delivering to the region quality higher education through teaching, outreach and research.

I have given only one other in seven years. That evening Rex was brilliantly reflective on the benefits the University had given him and others like him and said:

In its sixty years of existence there are a couple or so generations of us who can look back, praise the Lord and pass the ammunition of intellect and imagination in creative, conscious transfer of knowledge and know-how to a new generation and, through that generation, hopefully to one yet unborn.

He ended by saying;

How could I not graciously accept this prestigious honour with the deepest appreciation, humility and gratitude which I owe this flagship Caribbean institution of growth and instrument of development? This is, indeed, a force of exultation, a celebration of luck!

At the end of the ceremony, we embraced and he was emotional as he said: “*bless you brother*”.

Mr. Ambassador, on the morning you and I went to identify his body, you saw me give him a coin and you asked why. My heart was too full to reply then. I gave him a coin so that he would have money to pay Cheiron the boatman to ferry him over the river Styx. Those who could not pay were doomed to spend one hundred years wandering on the banks of the river. I wished Rex to be able to “come over” and join his comrades on the other side so that he could rejoice with them, perhaps dance the Kumina again and when he was finished he could find Albert Huie who was also from Trelawney and had just come over and perhaps they would join the NDTC singers who were there and sing:

*When wi roas di yellow yam
An wi slice it eena two
How nice it will be
Wid di ackee and di salt fish
An di sweet flour dumpling
An di coconut ile
What a glorious day
When wi roas di yellow yam.*

Long may Rex roas di yellow yam.

I thank you.