

YESCuba

YesCuba, the official newsletter of Jamaican Youth and Elders in Solidarity with Cuba, No. 14, May 2010

Professor Keith Ellis

One of the most outstanding Jamaican intellectuals now alive

- ◆ First Jamaican to receive the Doctor Honoris Causa from the University of Havana
- ◆ First black person to be elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, a group of the top professors in the country, elected by their peers
- ◆ Recipient of The Award for Excellence in Academia bestowed upon him in 2004 by the Association of Black Students and Alumni of the University of Toronto
- ◆ Recipient of the Dulce María Loynaz International Prize for contribution to literary studies and understanding of and support for Cuba, given by UNEAC (The Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba)

In this special issue, YESCuba shares with our readers, an interview with outstanding Jamaican academician, Keith Ellis, Professor Emeritus, at the University of Toronto, author or editor of eighteen books and some one hundred articles published in all the top journals in his field of Spanish American literature and culture Professor Ellis is a long-standing, active defender of the Cuban revolution.

Mt. Angus, St. Mary, and Calabar High School

Ellis: I grew up in Mt. Angus, a village in western St. Mary and went to the Elementary School there. At eleven years old, I won one of three parish scholarships and went to Calabar High School. I spent a long time at Calabar because after graduating I was asked to stay to teach Spanish and History for about three years before I left for



university studies in Toronto.

Kindness and Respect for People

I believe that those first eleven years in St Mary were the crucial ones in my development and in the formation of my world view. I went to Sunday School and, even though I and my group of close friends weren't well-behaved in church, we adhered to the basic ethos that derived from the church and that coincided essentially with what could be observed in the general community. Besides, my family was known for its kindness and its respect for people.

Faithful to the School

That allowed me to feel a certain warmth throughout the whole area of western St. Mary. My family has remained faithful to the school. At Calabar I missed my friends, bright children, who were mainly older than me. I realized at that time, with only 1.5% of the children having the chance to go on to high school, how unfair the educational system was. This was complicated for me by certain experiences I had in my early days in high school.

"I might have hit him, but I would have dirtied my car."

For example, the Head of Calabar Theological College, which was on

the same campus, had newly come from England to lead the whole Baptist community in the island. He bought a new car and invited two or three small boys for a drive. We didn't get far from the gate of the school when a boy of about my age crossed the street at a pace that forced the reverend chief missionary to slow down. I was shocked in a way that has been lasting to hear him say: "I might have hit him, but I would have dirtied my car."



Defamatory Language about the People

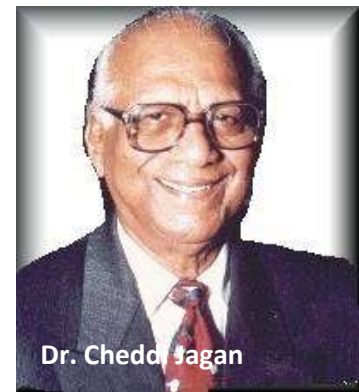
At the other end of the age scale, the son of one of the masters at the school, who had also recently arrived from England, befriended me enough to show me a letter from one of his friends in England. The letter contained the most defamatory language about the people that this newly arrived boy in Jamaica was assumed to be meeting.

Socialism and Impatience with British Colonialism

There were more positive examples from the British presence in Jamaica. For example, the

Headmaster of the school showed some real socialist leanings and regarded the boys as future adults, with the result that none were caned during the time that I was deputy head boy or a teacher there. Experiences such as these made me impatient with British colonialism.

These feelings were intensified by events that occurred in British Guiana (now Guyana). The overwhelming vote for the Jagan-led Peoples' Progressive Party (PPP) was nullified by the British colonial masters who suspended the constitution and occupied the country by armed force, imprisoning political leaders and poets.



Are we ready for Independence?

At that time the burning question in Jamaica was "Are we ready for independence?". And we had to counter the arguments of a surprising number of our teaching colleagues who vociferously said "No!". In fact, the question is still being asked and there are many columnists and others who are still staying "No!".

The Multiparty system had an immediate disruptive and divisive effect on our group

I was about nine years old when the British granted universal adult suffrage to Jamaicans, based on

Ellis and classmates at Calabar. Missing from picture is PJ Patterson and head boy, Burchell Russell.



the multiparty system. This measure had an immediate disruptive and divisive effect on our group. I couldn't understand on what basis some of my friends supported passionately one party or the other. I remember that the wealthiest of the three candidates in my constituency offered his car to take people to the polling station on election day. But he promptly sold his debased car on the following day to buy a new one.

I believe that there is a much greater need and capacity for unity in our society than this multiparty system allows us to achieve. It is an obstacle to our identifying the core issues that affect our common development and it is a convenience for those outside forces that are known to ruthlessly further their interests by exacerbating divisions.

We have to aim for unity in ways that are innovative

I believe we have to aim for unity in ways that are innovative. For example, the tendency to exert tough punitive measures on people, a tendency inherited from slavery, continues to be favoured as a way of countering violence. even though it is shown not to be effective.

Nurturing Uplifting Cultural Activities

I believe that more room should be given to tenderness and the nurturing of uplifting cultural activity. That has to be within the framework of a social and political system that channels our human and material resources to the common benefit of our people.

Intellectual opinion that clearly serves the interests of external forces that have frustrated our social and economic development and from which have come the models of violence, prevails to an alarming extent.

It seems that what was of greatest



distinction in the university's 270 years of existence?

It was a great honour, especially because the University of Havana gives these distinctions for serious academic reasons and because you become a Professor of Merit (the highest academic level) of the Faculty that nominates you for the honour.

It is pleasing to me too that the University of Havana considers my continuing work to be of the level that allowed them to award me *last week* the Medal of the University. I value these honours from the University as well as the Dulce María Loynaz International Prize

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concern to the British in 1953 and what moved them to send the Black Watch regiment to Guyana was the display of local unity, with Jagan and Burnham functioning within one party, a unity that was hailed by the poet Martin Carter and to which the future Walter Rodney would have certainly contributed.

YESCuba: How does it feel to be the first Jamaican to have been awarded an honorary doctorate from the prestigious University of Havana in 1998, especially considering that up to that time only 104 scholars had had that

for my contribution to literary studies and understanding of and support for Cuba, given to me by



Walter Rodney

The multiparty system is an obstacle to our identifying the core issues that affect our common development and it is a convenience for those outside forces that are known to ruthlessly further their interests by exacerbating divisions.

UNEAC (The Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba).

I value them even more than the distinction I had of being the first black person to be elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, a group of the top professors in the country, elected by their peers. The Cuban honours are more clearly linked with a broad humanity than the Canadian ones.

The Revolution generates intellectual curiosity in every area

When I say that I have a greater feeling of gratitude for the Cuban honours, it is partly because I find my involvement in Cuban Studies to be extremely stimulating and



Dr. Keith Ellis, First Jamaican to be Honoured by Cuba's University of Havana



broadening. The centripetal, unifying force that the Revolution generates promotes intellectual curiosity in every area.

If you read well the work of a poet such as Nicolás Guillén, you are led to more than a superficial interest in a variety of fields.

A high level of education

Apart from the achievement of high skills in the medical field, Cuba's achievement of an infant mortality rate of 4.8 per thousand live births, the lowest in this hemisphere, involves a high level of education for the general

population, the substantial overcoming of racial and social discrimination, the equitable distribution of economic benefits and a feeling of confidence in the governmental system.



Nicolas Guillen

And if we examine one of these factors, let's say the scientific aspect of this, one might ask what are its roots. We find them in the progressive forces that struggled from the early nineteenth century against colonialism and for an independence supported by a culture in which science and the humanities would be in harmony

This trend reached its highest pre-independence point in the thinking of José Martí who wrote about scientific education and about science wedded to tenderness, while he led the fight for Cuban independence. Achievement of full

independence, led by Fidel Castro, opened the way to the implementation of these ideas which in turn invigorate the intellects of people who have a humanist bent. When the Revolutionary government made the decision to enter into scientific research and production at the highest world levels, the person chosen to become the head of the leading institution, the Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology was a man who at age thirteen, when the Revolution triumphed, was not going to school. In Santiago de Cuba he was just a black boy working as an apprentice to a Jamaican shoemaker when he wasn't selling sweets on the street.

Rescued by the Revolution

He, along with many other Cuban boys and girls, both black and white, were rescued by the Revolution. Many of them can now be found working in the more than sixty-five high-level scientific research centres which are contributing

strongly to Cuba's GDP, sometimes producing products that no other scientists have succeeded in producing.

Scientific Collaboration between Jamaica and Cuba

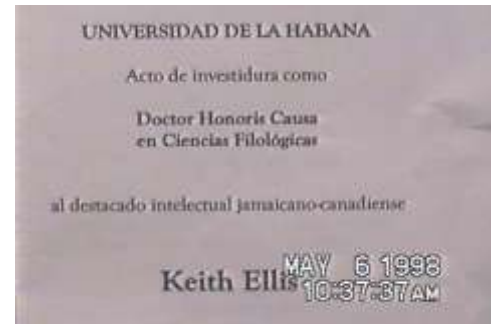
Cuba is exporting these products to more than fifty countries. My interest in science is not just academic. On my visits to some of Cuba's scientific research centres, I have been struck by how many of their scientists look just like Jamaicans and are no doubt just as bright. This prompted me to work for collaboration between the Cuban Centre of Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology and our Biotechnology Centre at Mona, an arrangement that would be greatly beneficial to us.

I spoke to President Fidel Castro about this in 1999, and he approved of the idea. The head of the Cuban Centre invited, through me, the head of our Centre to visit his Centre with all expenses paid, but for the \$180

airfare.

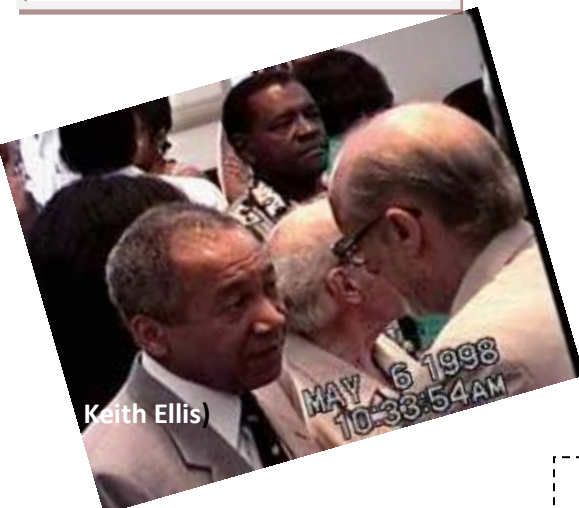
A case of colonial fear

The head of the Jamaican Centre said he would look around for airfare. I offered to pay it. To my knowledge he has never gone. A case of colonial fear is a strong



Professor Ellis in Jamaica in 2009 where he addressed Jamaicans who had won art scholarships from the Cuban government.

Photo Gallery



Keith Ellis

Health Care in the Times of Cholera in Colonial Jamaica

The weakened victim conscious of the grave finality of the trip took a deep breath and shouted with all his might: "Mi nuh dead oh!"

The local health inspector himself under relentless orders, ordered the hesitant bearers of the cot: "Carry im galang!"



Keith Ellis

