

•BY HYLTON DENNIS

**T**HE HONOURABLE Louise Bennett-Coverley, affectionately called "Miss Lou" by many Jamaicans at home and abroad, deserves to be included among Jamaica's national heroes for the role which she has played for at least four decades.

Both nationally and internationally, Miss Lou has helped in the very wide acceptance and appreciation of the Jamaican culture and traditions. But perhaps, I might be indulging myself in wishful thinking, for it seems that the honourable title of 'National Hero', is reserved solely for politicians (although there are two non-politicians numbered as exceptions among the seven which we have presently). It is politicians who bestow this honour exclusively, at their own fiercely guarded liberty or leisure.

Either that, or it is bestowed by their assigns (the Governor General maybe). This certainly is bad for the country - we need some deregulation here!

#### Distinguished career

Miss Lou has had a distinguished career of service to Jamaica - the land of her birth and to the Jamaica people. Her life has been devoted almost

# Miss Lou on politics

.....things remain the same

solely to the promotion for acceptance and understanding of our culture, lifestyle (the promotable aspects) and cultural traditions.

Rex Nettleford, a Jamaican who has also been serving his country well in the promotion of our arts and culture, said of Miss Lou in his introduction of her book 'Jamaica Labrish'.

"Louis Bennett has been described variously as Jamaica's leading comedienne, as the "only poet who has really hit the truth about her society through its own language", and as an important contributor to her country of "valid social documents reflecting the way Jamaicans think and feel and live."

Nettleford continued "She is all these things and more, for her understanding and feeling for the language which most Jamaicans speak has already carved for her a well-earned place in the infant nation's cultural history. Through her poems in the vernacular, she has raised the picturesque dialect of the Jamaican folk to an art level which is acceptable to and appreciated by all in Jamaica. In her poems she has been able to capture all the spontaneity of the expression of



•HON LOUISE BENNETT

the Jamaican's joys and sorrows, his ready, poignant and even wicked wit, his religion and his philosophy of life."

If I am not mistaken, that introduction by Professor Nettleford, which so aptly describes the honourable lady - Louise Bennett and acknowledges her work and worth so graciously, was written way back in the mid sixties, (before my time). Miss Lou goes back long before my time too and my most vivid recollections of her ways and wit is from her famous 'Ring Ding' programmes aired on JBC TV every Saturday in the seventies. She was awarded

a British Council Scholarship which took her to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, in the late forties!

So much for that lengthy introduction of my hero Miss Lou.

#### Political aware

Jamaicans may be far more aware politically now, than our parents and grandparents about whom Miss Lou has written so much, were in their days (nineteen thirties up to Independence). Not only that, but we are also politically more demanding and intolerant than our older folks were in their days. Which is good and could be better if we planned seriously to make it work to our advantage!

The first "free" and "fair" elections to be held in Jamaica was in 1944 under Universal Adult Suffrage. It came with or was provided for by a new constitution known as the Jamaica (Constitution) Order in Council 1944. Of the newly granted privilege - the right of all persons of a certain age regardless of colour or social standing to vote, Miss Lou wrote in a dialect entitled 'Revelation' that:

Everybody got a vote, an Every vote given swell de score; Missa Issa, Missa Hanna, An de man wat sweep de store. Chimney- sweep an money lenda, Sore-foot beggar man an chief, Docta, lawya, ex-fish venda, Parson, obeah man an t'ief.

#### New confidence

Then there is her poem (Miss Lou's) 'Is Me'. This poem is a pointed comment on the new confidence of Jamaican political leaders vested with power by the 1944 Constitution. According to the introduction: "Many a public figure was said to assume new proportions of self-importance which made them want to claim exemption from certain rules of conduct. The question - "Don't you know who I am?" was increasingly asked of those who failed to recognise authority in the flesh and blood. And some d'd not even think it necessary to explain who they were. The statement "Is Me!" - had to suffice."

The introduction went on to state that the poem is based on rumours of such a statement ("Is Me!"), being made by the leading political figure of the day,

caught breaking a rule against peeping by visitors to a public institution.

Here are a few humorous lines from the poem:

Is who dat a-sey "who dat"? Wat a piece ..... Gal yuh know is who yuh talkin to? Teck a good look, is me! I is dis country staff an sword Dem fate an destiny, Ah push me head which part Ah want, Because I is "Me"!

#### The more things change

I realised as I read those interesting poems by Miss Lou, how true it is of certain situations that "the more things change the more those things remain the same."

Jamaica is, in my opinion, no more mature in its politics now than in 1944. It is possible that we may have descended to lower levels despite all the hog wash.

As for the totally self-confident politicians, as one man in the street put it recently, they are merely "security guards" masquerading as absolute rulers and givers of "life".

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