An African proverb about identity says: “if lions do not have a story
teller, tales of hunting will always favor the hunter.” The morale is
that identity enables communities and persons to tell others who they
are and what they do from among themselves, and from their own
perspective. It prevents others from calving out another communities’
identity for them.

This paper is about African-Caribbean Christian identity—who we
take ourselves to be, and how we orient ourselves to others. In a sense,
it is about how identity is perceived within the context of our world.
This may include the contradictions, conflicts, and even the failures of
our people. In a more critical sense, it is about the central place that
religion, culture, and theology play in all this. These concerns are taken
up through a consideration of how they play out in the Caribbean
Christian context.

The Roots of the Socio-Cultural and Religious
Factors of Caribbean [Jamaican] Christian Identity

In his inaugural lecture as Distinguished Fellow of the University of the
West Indies on May 12, 2005, Edward Seaga, Jamaica’s former prime
minister, gave some penetrating analyses of what he termed as “The
Folk Roots of Jamaican Cultural Identity.”

Seaga suggests there are some activities of social and cultural nature
in the Jamaican Caribbean context that call for deep probing in order
to determine their contribution to, and therefore relationship with,
other social and cultural—and one may add—religious manifestations
in the quest for identity today. He lists four such activities as follows:

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1 Edward Seaga, “Social Riddle Rooted in Cultural Identity” Jamaica Gleaner Online,
High levels of aggressive behavior and discipline
- Concepts of learning and earning
- Robust individualism and vibrant creativity
- Family ties and deep religious faith

These factors determine future patterns of development of the individual, and thereby, the building of the community.

If pregnant mothers lack sufficient nutrition to provide required protein for their unborn babies and children in early childhood stages, the result will be inadequate brain development, and learning will be impaired in later life. The logic is that the educational process will become handicapped by that very deficiency.

Furthermore, when love and lavish affection for children are soon replaced by the onset of sharp discipline—as the child is considered old enough to have sense to observe proper practices like toilet training, one can only imagine the extent of the traumatic effect in the life of the child. Aggression begins to emerge at this stage when training is not so much by teaching as by strong reprimand and punishment, including some measure of corporal punishment.

A report produced by UNICEF shows that about 72% of Jamaican households use methods of punishment that incorporates some form of violence. This introduces the notion that learning can be enforced by punishment, without observing that lack of learning may link back to insufficient nutrition and, therefore, brain under-development.

Violence and confrontational attitudes continue into later years as prevailing poverty exposes children to a competitive environment of scarcity in which they have to struggle for their share of food, bed space, play things, clothing, and attention.

At the same time as the assertive, forceful, and aggressive individuals begin to emerge, so do their counterparts—the subdued, servile, and easily-led individuals, who are also fashioned by the influence of this aggressive, competitive environment.²

It is important to note here that the increasing act of violence and verbal abuse are symptoms of a radical change in society that is based, in good part, on the growing need for respect.

² Seaga, “Social Riddle.”