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Out Of Many Cultures The People Who Came

The Arrival Of The Africans

By Dr. Rebecca Tortello

Jamaican life in all aspects cultural, artistic, political, economic, scientific was borne out of a brutal system forged through an integration of people and place and emerged as a triumph of the human spirit.

Up until the early 1690s Jamaica's population was relatively equally mixed between white and black. (Senior, 2003, p. 446). The first Africans to arrive came in 1513 from the Iberian Peninsula after having been taken from West Africa by the Spanish and the Portuguese. They were servants, cowboys, herders of cattle, pigs and horses, as well as hunters. When the English captured Jamaica in 1655, many of them fought with the Spanish who gave them their freedom and then fled to the mountains resisting the British for many years to maintain their freedom, becoming known as Maroons (Senior, 2003, p. 5 and 446).



Illustration of Africans being captured and led to the ships for their long journey across the Middle Passage.

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By 1700 Jamaica was awash with sugar plantations and Jamaica's population was comprised of 7,000 English to 40,000 slaves. The sugar industry grew quickly in Jamaica -- in 1672 there were 70 plantations producing 772 tonnes of sugar per annum -- growing in the 1770s to over 680 plantations. By 1800, it was 21,000 English to 300,000 slaves, which increased to some 500,000 slaves by the 18th century. In 1820 there were 5,349 properties in Jamaica of which 1,189 contained over 100 slaves (Brathwaite, 1971, p. 121).

Each estate was its own small world, complete with an entire labour force of field workers and skilled artisans, a hospital, water supply, cattle, mules and horses as well as its own fuel source. Each plantation fueled the wheels of British mercantilism. Sugar, molasses and rum were exported to England for sale and ships were financed to return to Africa and collect more slaves in exchange for trinkets and transport them to the West Indies as a labour source. This became known as The Triangular Trade. Money was not left in England's colonies, the financing came from Mother England, and to Mother England the profits returned.

To a large extent, Jamaican customs and culture were fashioned by sugar. According to John Hearne (1965), for two hundred years sugar was the only reason behind Jamaica's existence as a centre for human habitation (as quoted in Sherlock and Bennett, 2001, p. 157). For centuries, sugar was Jamaica's most important crop. Jamaica was once considered the 'jewel' in Britain's crown. In 1805, the island's peak of sugar production, it produced 101,600 tonnes of sugar. It was the world's leading individual sugar producer.

The cultivation of sugar was intricately intertwined with the system of slavery. This connection has set the course of the nation's demographics since the 18th century when slaves vastly outnumbered any other population group. The descendants of these slaves comprise the majority of Jamaica's population. They have influenced every sphere of Jamaican life and their contributions are immeasurable.

THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

The Atlantic Slave Trade began in the 15th century when the Portuguese took hold of land near Gibraltar and soon encountered Africans. Devout Catholics, they quickly took these "heathens" prisoner, and by mid-century, the first public sale of these prisoners was held. By 1455 Portugal was importing close to 800 African slaves

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a year bartering for them peacefully instead of capturing them through warfare. Sugar cultivation began in the Azores islands, and as the demand for sugar grew, so did the demand for slaves to work the fields of sugar cane. By the 16th century, other countries wanted a piece of this action and the competition for the sugar and slave trades began.

Between 1500-1800 some eleven million Africans were moved as a result (Sherlock and Bennett, 2000, p. 124). They were captured by war, as retribution for crimes committed or by abduction, and marched to the coast in "coffles" with their necks yoked to each other. They were placed in trading posts or forts to await the horrifying six to twelve week Middle Passage voyage between Africa and the Americas during which they were chained together, underfed, kept in the ship's hold in the thousands packed more like sardines than humans. Those who survived were fattened up and oiled to look healthy prior to being auctioned in public squares to the highest bidders. Jamaican slaves tended to come from the Ashanti, Coromantee, Mandingo and Yoruba. Field slaves fetched £25- £75 while skilled slaves such as carpenters fetched prices as high as £300 (Lonely Planet, 2000, p. 21-26). On reaching the plantation, they underwent a 'seasoning' process in which they were placed with an experienced slave who taught them the ways of the estate (Senior, 2003, p. 446).

Although the initial slave traders were the Portuguese and the Dutch, between 1750 and 1807 (the year in which the British Empire abolished the slave trade), Britain "dominated the buying and selling of slaves to the Americas" (Sherlock and Bennett, 2000, p. 161). Shipbuilding flourished and manufacturing expanded: the "process of industrialization in England from the second quarter of the eighteenth century as to an important extent a response to colonial demands for rails, axes, buckets, coaches, clocks, saddles...and a thousand other things" (Inikori, 1979, as quoted in Sherlock and Bennett, 2000, p. 162).

SUGAR ESTATES

A typical sugar estate was 900 acres. This included a Great House where the owner or overseer and the domestic slaves lived, and nearby accommodation for the bookkeeper, distiller, mason, carpenter, blacksmith, cooper and wheelwright. With the exception of the bookkeeper, by the middle of the eighteenth century, skilled black slaves had replaced white indentured servants in these posts. (Brathwaite, 1971, p. 131). The field slaves' quarters were usually about a half mile away, closer to the industrial sugar mill, distillery and the boiling and curing houses, as well as the blacksmiths' and carpenters' sheds and thrash houses. In addition, there was a poultry pen and a cattle yard

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along with a Negro hospital. Some estates, if large enough, had accommodation for an estate doctor (p. 131-2).

Estates had estate gardens and the slaves had their own kitchen gardens as well as polnicks provision grounds found in the hills, which were required by law from as early as 1678. During slavery, however, slaves kept pigs and poultry and grew mangoes, plantain, ackee, okra, yam and other ground provisions (Brathwaite, 1971, p. 133-4). The cultivation of these lands took on greater proportions as plantations were abandoned when the island faced increasing competition from Brazil, Cuba and beet sugar, a loss in labour after emancipation in the 1830s as well as the loss of protective trade duties after the passage of the 1846 Sugar Equalization Act in England.

The workforce on each plantation was divided into gangs determined by age and fitness. On average most estates had three main field gangs. The first was comprised of the strongest and most able men and women. The second was comprised of those no longer able to serve in the first, and the third, of older slaves and older children. Some estates had four gangs, depending on the number of children living on the estate. Children started working as young as 3 or 4 years old (Senior, 2003, p. 207).

FOLK CULTURE

Jamaican slaves came mainly from West Africa. Their customs survived based on memory and myths. They encompassed the life cycle, i.e. a newborn was not regarded as being of this world until nine days had passed and burial often involved libations at the graveside, and the belief that the dead body's spirit would not be at rest for some 40 days. They included forms of religion in which healing was considered an act of faith completed by obeahmen and communication with the spirits involved possession often induced by dancing and drumming. African-based religions include Kumina, Myal and Revival. Many involved recreational, ceremonial and functional use of music and dance (Brathwaite, 1971). "Slaves," Brathwaite explains, "danced



Christmas street parades of Jonkonnu were misunderstood by Europeans.

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and sang at work, at play, at worship, from fear, from sorrow from joy" (p. 220). They recreated African musical instruments from materials found in Jamaica (calabash, conch, bamboo, etc.) and featured improvisation in song and dance. All of these customs and many more such as the Christmas street parades of Jonkonnu, were misunderstood and undervalued by Europeans with the exception of the political use of drumming to send coded messages from plantation to plantation.

Drumming of any kind was therefore often banned. Jamaican music today has emerged from the traditional musical forms of work songs sung by slaves, the ceremonial music used in religious services and the social and recreational music played on holidays and during leisure time (Senior, 2003, p. 339).

The cramped housing space provided to the slaves, which limited their dwellings (often made of wattle and daub) to one window and one door, meant that very little other than sleeping took place indoors. Life, as in Africa, was lived communally, outside. (Brathwaite, 1971, p. 233-4).

Similarly language, as in Africa, is considered powerful particularly naming. Brathwaite (1971) gives an example of a woman whose child falls ill and wants her name to be changed, believing that this would allow her to be cured, (p. 237). Language is certainly an area where African retention is strongest. Jamaicans today move between Patois a creolised English and standard English. Jamaican patois was born from the intermixing of African slaves and English, Irish, Welsh, Scottish sailors, slaves, servants, soldiers and merchants. The African slaves spoke many dialects, and given the need for a common tongue, Jamaican patois was born. It has been in use since the end of the 17th century by Jamaicans of all ethnicities and has been added to by the Jews, Chinese, Indians, Lebanese Germans, and French Creoles who also settled on the island. Some words also indicate Spanish and Taino presence in Jamaican history (Senior, 2003, pp. 273-276).

Many of these traditions survive to this day, testament to the strength of West African culture despite the process of creolisation (the intermingling of peoples adjusting to a new environment) it encountered (Brathwaite, 1971).

FAMOUS JAMAICANS OF AFRICAN DESCENT

There are too many notable Jamaicans of African descent to name. Here is a small sample: George William Gordon, National Hero, George Steibel, the island's first black millionaire who built Devon House, Sir Alexander Bustamante, the island's first Prime

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"This is an absolutely fantastic series. It is critical that we preserve these for the long term as well as continuing to share with upcoming generations so that they can understand

Minister, Norman Manley, the island's first premier, Marcus Garvey, black nationalist and National Hero and more contemporarily, Merlene Ottey, Jamaican track and field star, T. P. Lecky, creator of the Jamaica Red Breed of cattle, Cecil Baugh, world-renowned potter, Bob Marley, worldwide musical superstar and the Hon. Louise Bennett-Coverley, cultural icon.

Their impact, and that of many others, whose contributions to Jamaican life in all aspects cultural, artistic, political, economic, scientific was borne out of a brutal system forged through an integration of people and place and emerged as a triumph of the human spirit. ***It is largely thanks to Jamaicans with connections to Africa that Jamaica is what it is today an intense land, a place of extremes that is rarely boring or predictable an island that is 'little but tallawah.'***

Sources: *Brathwaite, E.K. (1971). The Development of Creole society in Jamaica, 1770-1820. Oxford: Clarendon Press., Brathwaite, E.K. (1974). Cultural diversity and integration in the Caribbean. Great Britain: Savacou., Cundall. E. (1934). Lady Nugent's journal. (London: The West India Committee). Hearne, J. and Nettleford, R. (1970). Our heritage European and Asian influences in Jamaica. London: William Collins and Sangster Jamaica Ltd., Nettleford, N. (1970). Mirror, mirror - Identity, race and protest in Jamaica. London: William Collins and Sangsters Jamaica Ltd. Senior, O. (2003). The Encyclopedia of Jamaican heritage. Kingston, Jamaica: Twin Guinep Publishers. Sherlock, P. and Bennett, H. (1998). The Story of the Jamaica people. Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers. (January, 2000). Lonely Planet Jamaica 2nd Edition. Victoria: Australia: Lonely Planet Publication Party Ltd.*

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"I think these proverbs are very, very good especially for me who always like my roots and culture so much. Indeed I appreciate things of like this that not only educate but keeps one in line with their past. Once again thank to you all for this great effort. Now I know where to procure educative information. I am really impressed. Go my Jamaica. " -

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The First 500 years in Jamaica

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