

Slavery and plantation in trinidad and tobago



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Slavery and Plantations have always been linked, driven by economic objectives (Williams 1994), from the earliest period of sugarcane cultivation in the Caribbean. Despite the complexity of the events and circumstances that created this relationship, sugar growth and slavery both were booming during the relatively peaceful early years of the 18th century. The European need for sugar had been increasing, and England's sugar demands led the pack. The British islands like T&T were a mono-crop society, with few settlers growing anything but sugarcane

The Business of Slavery

The Triangular Trade is a term commonly used in discussions of the slave trade. Slaves would be brought from Africa to the plantations, which would send sugar and other local goods to Europe, who would in turn send goods to Africa. The goods usually sent to Africa were guns and other manufactured items because there was no industry in Africa. In the West Indian islands like T&T, however, the selling of slaves was an important part of the economy. The need for more slaves was always greater than the market could provide, and the West Indian companies were opened up in the 1700s to outside trade to help provide additional slaves to colonies that produced sugar. The French encouraged this trade on their islands by exempting slaves from most import and export taxes.

Life on Plantations

Working Conditions: Slave Labour in Plantations

' the toughest season, a season of toil from sunrise to twilight, bare ankles and calves stung by cowitch, knotted muscles slashed by cane leaves that cut like straight razors, backs split open by the whip'

The plantation land consisted of cane-fields, provision grounds, woodland and pasture. Each planter preferred to have more than 200 acres of cane land. Provision grounds were used by the slaves to cultivate root crops, plantains and vegetables for food. The woodland provided lumber and firewood and the pasture was used for grazing cattle (Handler 1965). The cane fields had either newly planted canes or ratoons. The ratoons were new shoots growing from old cane roots which were left in the ground after a previous crop of cane was harvested. Usually a ratoon field was less productive. A typical sugar estate had factory buildings such as the mill, boiling house and curing house. Around these factory buildings there were other smaller buildings and sheds in which, blacksmiths, wheelwrights, carpenters, masons, coopers and other artisan slaves worked. There would also be a small " hospital" for sick slaves, and a small " jail" which kept slaves who were being punished. There were storage rooms for tools and supplies and sheds which sheltered livestock or stored cane trash or bagasse which was used as fuel. Not far from the factory buildings were small houses in which the European managers and supervisors lived. They were generally overseers, book-keepers, skilled craftsmen and office staff. In the biggest house lived the estate owner. The slave quarters were some distance away from the homes of the managers.

A work day consisted of 15-16 hours a day, during harvest time and, could go on during harvest and milling for 16-18 per week 7 days a week and

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according to Stamp (1956) the slaves were given the task to prepare the land for planting. Their normal working day began before daybreak and ended after sunset. They cleared the grass and bushes by weeding and burning (children between the ages of six and ten might be active as water carriers while children between the ages of ten and twelve were organized into gangs and put to weeding). Cane holes were dug and into these cane tops were planted. As the cane grew, gangs of slaves manured the field and weeded bushes that sprang up around the cane plants. Female slaves did much of the weeding and the manuring. After 12 to 15 months the cane was now mature. The field was set afire to burn off the leaves from the cane stalks and at the same time to get rid of snakes which lived there. The field slaves, using cutlasses, then cut the cane stalks, packed them in bundles and loaded them on to ox-drawn carts which transported them to the mill. At the mill, the cane was crushed and the juice flowed through gutters to large metal containers. The cane trash was removed and stored for use as fuel for the boilers. The juice in the large containers was clarified by heating and the addition of a small quantity of lime. This clarified juice was then ladled into a copper boiler in which it was boiled. After a while, the juice from this copper boiler was ladled into a smaller boiler and was boiled again and then still further in a yet smaller boiler. By then, it had changed into sticky syrup which was allowed to cool, and then poured into wooden hogsheads standing on beams in the curing house. Through small holes at the bottom of the hogsheads, molasses seeped out and was collected in containers set below the beams. After about three weeks, the remaining syrup in the hogsheads crystallised to form sugar. The sugar remained in the hogsheads which were later packed into ships for export to Europe. Some estates also

manufactured rum by fermenting juice from the first boiling and about the same quantity of molasses. Almost all of this specialised work carried out in the manufacture of sugar and rum was done by skilled artisan slaves who were highly valued by their owners. During the milling season, slaves worked in shifts throughout the day and night.

Even after the crop season was over, the estate owner did not allow his slaves to be idle. The fields had to be prepared for the new crop, weeding and manuring of the ratoons had to be done, and repairs to drainage and irrigation canals, fences and buildings had to carry out. Work was even found for children from the age of six years old. They collected firewood, cut grass to feed farm animals and fetched drinking water to slaves working in the fields. The plantation owners did not want their slaves to involve themselves in idle conversation since they felt that the discontented slaves may use the occasion to plot rebellion.

Punishments

While each plantation had its own set of social, religious, and labour codes, all had the basic format for an instilled hierarchy in which the slave master reigned as god. He maintained the element of slave misery, by controlling the degree of pain (Starobin 1974). Treatments were given such as mutilation, branding, chaining, and murder which were supposedly regulated or prohibited by law. Whippings, beatings, drownings, and hangings were as unpredictable as they were gruesome.

It was clear to plantation owners that slavery could not survive without the whip (even though owners were forbidden to deliberately kill or maliciously

mutilate a slave). Males and females were whipped indiscriminately. The severity of whipping depended on the number of strokes to the type of whip. Fifteen to twenty lashes were generally sufficient, but they could range much higher. Other items used for punishments included stocks, chains, collars, and irons. It was also commonplace that women could be raped by the owner of the plantation, his sons or, any white male.

Methods of Control

The White plantation owners in T&T used various methods to maintain complete control over their slaves. Their principal method was that of “divide and rule”. Members of the same tribe were separated on different plantations to prevent communication between them. The aim behind this was to prevent any plans to rebel if they were together. This separation, however, created a problem of communication, since the plantation would have different groups of slaves speaking different languages. Therefore, the planters had to find a way to communicate with their slaves. Soon a new language, known as Creole, developed and this became a common tongue among the slaves. When the British took control of the twin islands in the nineteenth century, English words were injected into the language and it became the basis of the Creolised language.

Slaves were also prevented from practising their religions. Quite a few slaves were Muslims while many others had their own tribal beliefs. But since the Christian planters saw non-Christians as pagans, they made sure that the slaves could not gather to worship in the way they were accustomed when they lived in Africa.

Later Christian missionaries were permitted on the plantations and they were allowed to preach to the slaves on Sundays. In time, many of them were converted to Christianity; it was the general feeling that the converted slaves became docile and was not willing to support rebellion on the plantations.

Another means of control was the creation of a class system among the slaves. Field slaves formed the lowest group, even though some of them had special skills.

The lowest ranking slaves, the backbone of the plantation economy, were the field slaves. The field slaves were divided into 'gangs' according to their physical strength and ability, with the strongest and fittest males and females in the first gang. The incentive used to encourage hard work, was lashes of the cart whip, which were freely administered by the drivers, who were 'privileged' slaves under the overseer's supervision. Higher up the slave hierarchy were the artisan slaves such as blacksmiths, carpenters and masons, who were often hired out by the planters. These slaves also had opportunities to earn money for themselves on various occasions. Still higher up in this class system were the drivers who were specially selected by the White planters to control the other slaves. The domestic or house slave had a special place in this arrangement, and because they worked in the master's house and sometimes receiving special favours from the master, they held other slaves in contempt. Usually, the slaves in the lowest rung of this social ladder were the ones who rebelled and often domestic slaves were the ones who betrayed them by reporting the plots to their master.

Then there were divisions based on colour. In the early days, it was relatively easy for a pure African to rise to the level of a driver. But mixtures occurred through the birth of children as a result of unions between White men and black women (mulatto), White men and mulatto women (mestee) and mulatto men and black women (sambo). Some slaves of succeeding generations thus had lighter complexions, and the White planters discriminated in favour of them. These slaves with White fathers or White relatives were placed in positions above those of the field slaves. This was the beginning of colour discrimination in the Guyanese society. Of course, in all of this, the Europeans - the Whites - occupied the highest rung of the social ladder and they found willing allies among the mixed or coloured population who occupied the intermediate levels. The pure Africans remained at the lowest level

Women and Slavery in the Plantations

According to Bush (1990; 33) the primary reason for the presence of women in T&T during the time of slavery was due to their labour value. In the early days of slavery, plantation owners attempted to produce healthy patterns of reproduction and encourage marriage, but found it was economically illogical to do so. Instead, it was more profitable to purchase new slaves from Africa (until the continued supply of female slaves being delivered from across the Atlantic was threatened by abolitionist pressure in the eighteenth century). Girls worked on estates from the early age of four. Occupations for girls between the ages of 12-19 varied from field work, to stock work, to domestic work, to washing e. g. clothing, dishes, etc. (Reddock 1985 pg. 64), . Other forms of work for mature women included midwife, doctress, and

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housekeeper. European plantation owners generally regarded most slave women as suitable for field work, which consisted of jobs such as digging holes for canes, weeding, and hoeing. In Jamaica, the majority of women between the ages of 19 and 54 were working in the fields.

By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, there were more women working in the field than men due to their lower mortality rates. Despite the common stereotype whereby men are stronger and more physically capable than women, it can be argued that women were as important, if not more important, to field work during the period of slavery in T&T. The importance of women in the plantation economy is reflected in the price of female slaves between 1790 and the end of the slave trade. The price for a “ new” male slave was approximately £50-£70, while the price for a new female slave was approximately £50-£60. (Bush, 1996: 33)

Apart from occupations such as doctress, midwife, and housekeeper, which were considered to be higher employment positions for slave women during the time, the slave elite was nearly entirely made up of men. Women were confined to fighting for lower positions in the socio-economic hierarchy and were always excluded from the more prestigious and skilled jobs (i. e. carpentry). Among the limited amount of occupations available to Trinbagonian slave women, the most prestigious job was found to be nursing.

One way in which women slaves would occasionally amass income and resources for themselves was through sex trade (Morrissey 1989 pg. 69). This was a common way for women slaves to save money for freedom,

particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in T&T. The majority of enslaved domestic workers in towns were expected to support themselves through prostitution.

Culture of Slavery and Plantation life

Home

Plantation slaves were housed in slave's cabins. Small, rudely built of logs with clapboard sidings, with clay chinking. Floors were packed dirt. They were leaky and drafty and the combination of wet, dirt, and cold made them diseased environments. On the plantation, the slaves were housed in buildings which were some distance away from the master's house. Most of these slave houses had thatched roofs and walls of old boards or of wattle and mud. The floor was the earth itself and there were no furniture except some rudimentary pieces that the slaves managed to make.

Clothing

Slaves were not well-clothed; they had inadequate clothing for people engaged in heavy labour all year. Children would dress in long shirts. Men possessed little besides with two shirts and two cotton pants. Women were provided with an insufficient amount of cloth and made their own clothes. The cloth was cheap material, produced in England that was dubbed " Negro cloth". The slaves also obtained a clothing allowance roughly every year. The men received a coarse woollen jacket, a hat, about six yards of cotton, and a piece of canvas to make a pair or two of trousers. Women received the same allowance as the men, but children received none. The children remained naked until they were about nine years old, or were given cast-off clothing that their parents managed to find or were able to purchase.

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Food

The food was generally adequate in bulk, but imbalanced and monotonous. Typical food allowance was a peck of corn meal and three to four pounds of salt pork or bacon per week per person. This diet could be supplemented by vegetables from their gardens, by fish or wild game, and molasses (not usually). The slaves prepared their own food and carried it out to the field in buckets. While the slaves were provided with certain foodstuffs by the master, they raised their own subsistence crops of vegetables, plantains and root crops on small garden plots that the master allowed them to use. However, they could only do their personal farming on Sundays when they had no work on the plantation. They also took the opportunity to fish on Sundays in the nearby canals, the rivers or the ocean. Each adult slave was given one pound of salted cod fish every Sunday by the plantation owner. The salted cod fish was imported from North America. A child slave was given a smaller allocation. On special Christian holidays, there was an additional allowance of about a pound of beef or pork, some sugar and a quantity of rum.

Religion

The general view held by the plantation owners was that the African slaves did not hold to a system of beliefs that could be described as a religion (Mbiti 1969). At best - so the members of the plantocracy and the church that served them felt - their beliefs amounted to nothing more than heathenish superstition. Not a few of them, perhaps, felt that the Africans were incapable of religious sentiment. But the Africans held religious beliefs derived from their homeland. It may be useful to note that some of the

slaves, particularly these who came from the Fula-speaking area of Senegambia, were Muslims. The practice of the planters of separating tribesmen from one another, and of discouraging the assembling of slaves for any purpose whatsoever, was not calculated to allow Islam to survive. Again, the small number of African Muslims that came to plantations in T&T lacked the leadership of Imams and the possession of the Qur'an. Then, too, the plantation life did not lend itself for long prayers at fixed times, worship on a set day, fasting at prescribed periods, or feasting on holidays which did not coincide with those observed by the plantocracy.

On the other hand, indigenous African religious beliefs, which became labelled as " obeah", survived the difficulties of estate life. But these beliefs underwent significant changes although they remained clearly " African" in structure (Saraceni 1996). Three factors were mainly responsible for these changes. In the first place, African religious ideas were capable of modification in response to the new circumstance of estate life. Secondly, the practice of African religion was frowned upon by estate authorities. This meant that the religion could only be practised secretly and irregularly. The result has been that some aspects of African religious practices withered away while others lost their nationality and language and became garbled. Thirdly, the exposure to Christianity led not only to the conversion of Blacks to that religion, but also to the overlapping of African and Christian beliefs.

Free Time

Except for earnings enjoyed by the artisan slaves, most of the slaves depended on obtaining money by selling surplus produce from their provision grounds and also the sale of livestock that they reared. On

Sundays, village markets were held and the slaves seized the opportunity to barter or sell their produce. On these occasions the slaves made purchases of a few pieces of clothing and other items for their homes.

The Sunday markets were also occasions when slaves from different plantations were able to socialise and to exchange news and pieces of gossip.

There were also times of recreation. These were usually at the end of the “crop” and at Christmas and on public holidays when the slaves were allowed to hold dances which had to end by midnight.