RASTA and RESISTANCE

From Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney

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P.O. Box 1892
Trenton, New Jersey 08607
(609) 695-3766

Chapter One

DO YOU REMEMBER THE DAYS OF SLAVERY?

Part I

Slavery and the Roots of Resistance

The atrocities of the Atlantic trade in human cargoes formed an indelible part of the consciousness of the African people of the New World as they daily toiled to produce wealth for Europe. The horrific Atlantic slave trade lasted for more than four hundred years and involved three continents – Africa, Europe and America.

Every Western European State, from Sweden in the North to Portugal in the South, participated in the commerce which was to change world history. The aboriginal peoples of the Caribbean and Central America were virtually exterminated in the wake of the search for gold and silver. In Jamaica and Barbados, the indigenous Arawak population and the Caribs were murdered by the buccaneers and pirates who roamed between the islands.

The Spanish were the most active in the Caribbean, a region of perhaps 50 insular settlements and over 2000 miles of sea. The sea dominates the region, with societies ranging from a few square miles and population of a few hundred, to the large island of Cuba with a territory of over 44,000 square miles.

It was in the waters of the Caribbean Sea that the European pirates fought each other for supremacy. The island of Jamaica was central to the struggle of the pirates, situated as it is in the middle of the Caribbean Sea, on the direct sea routes between North and South America, and between Europe and Panama. As a central station of the pirates, the notoriety of this island reached its zenith with the concentration of plunderers and explorers at Port Royal. The wealth accumulated from the piracy on the high seas and the plunder of the Central American civilisations went towards the setting up of plantations to provide sugar, tobacco and cotton for Europe.

Piracy on the high seas was transformed into piracy on land to exploit the labour of first the Indians, and later the African slaves. Christopher Columbus, the adventurer who laid the foundations for the Spanish military occupation of the region, had previously traded in slaves on the Upper Guinea Coast of Africa. Portuguese explorers had arrived in West Africa shortly before the middle of the 15th century and immediately started seizing Africans and taking them to work as slaves in Europe. This elementary trade was soon superseded by large-scale

trade, when the European traders and bankers realised that they could earn enormous profits by using the labour of Africans to exploit the enormous wealth of the Americas.

This long-distance trade effected a form of organisation and support which strengthened Europe in the same way in which Africa was weakened. By the end of the Civil War in Britain, the English merchants, with the support of the Crown, threw all their resources into the slave trade. By the beginning of the 18th century Britain was the dominant slave trade State, ruling the high seas and binding the Spaniards with the right to supply slaves to Spanish colonies in British ships.

There was hardly a trading or manufacturing town in Britain which was not in some way connected with the triangular trade. In this trade, ships fitted out by European nations sailed to Africa, where slaves were bought for trinkets, cloth, guns, or alcohol diluted with sea water. These African slaves were then taken to the Americas where they were sold in return for goods produced by the very same slave labour. The precise numbers of Africans taken in this trade will never be known, because many perished in the Middle Passage (between West Africa and the Caribbean). It has been estimated that over 15 million Africans landed alive in this hemisphere, but for every African who reached the West, there was one who was killed in the process of the slave hunt, and between 25-35 per cent died during the crossing of the Atlantic.[1]

This savage trade laid the foundations for the primitive accumulation of capital to be re-invested in Europe, which ultimately made Europe the most powerful continent, such that by the 19th century they could militarily subjugate the richest continent on earth – Africa.

Eric Williams was very precise and detailed in illustrating the connections between British capitalism and the enslavement of Africans.[2] The wealth accrued to Europe was the other side of the barbarism and destruction unleashed on Africa. The African countryside, especially along the West Coast, was depopulated as the European nation states set about organising one of the biggest transportations of slaves in the annals of world history. The forts dotted along the coastline of West Africa today are the bloodstained records of a process which initiated the present underdevelopment and poverty in Africa.

Though the subjugation of the African societies was slow, it was a cumulative process which in the end engulfed even those functionaries who participated as intermediaries for Europe. Once the trade in slaves had begun, it was beyond the capacity of any single African State in any part of Africa to change the situation. The combined naval and economic power of the European nations, which were moving from feudalism to capitalism, ensured a level of technological superiority in important spheres of production, especially in the production of weapons. What the Europeans did was to take advantage of the divisions within Africa in choosing their allies. In the process, incipient differences between clans and embryonic nation states (called tribes by Europeans) were exploited; so that if the Europeans saw two sets of Africans at

war with each other, they supported one side and helped them to achieve victory so as to be able to obtain captives.[4]

The Europeans managed to get prisoners of war from both sides. One group would be supported with guns made in France, while another group would be supported by the Danes, and yet another group by the Portuguese, but the end result was that Africans were sold and carried across the seas.

War and violence prevented the consolidation and unification of the nation state, such that even those societies which had developed beyond communalism to form powerful kingdoms[a] were weakened. As the most productive units of the society, the young and able-bodied, were sold into bondage, the challenge of eking out an existence was so much more arduous that those who remained were prone to epidemics and diseases. The ecological balance was changed in such a way that the depopulation was followed in later years by periodic catastrophes of rinderpest and tsetse fly infestation.

During the whole period there were African chiefs and headmen who were prepared to sell their fellow men in exchange for the trinkets of Europe. And yet these Africans, who allowed whites to build forts and send out raiding parties (graphically documented in Alex Haley's *Roots* in the capture of Kunta Kinte), did not have any control over the trade. Though it was only in the last resort that the invaders needed to use armed force, they were not hesitant to use this force, even against their 'allies' who had previously hunted slaves in the interior. Walter Rodney, in his reconstruction of the history of the Upper Guinea Coast, remarked that the only order or production which was possible was that imposed by the Europeans.

> *"Order, for instance, was introduced only in the sense that Europeans ceased direct raiding and turned to trade. But rapine and plunder, organised merchants, kidnapping that bred more kidnapping, deterioration in the customary law – all these lay behind the façade of relatively orderly and peaceful agreements between European slavers and coastal chiefs."*

Commenting on the actions of Africans towards Africans in fostering the underdevelopment and weakness of their land, he observed:

> *"In modern capitalist society, rules are drawn up to protect members of the possessing class from devouring each other raw; but on the Upper Guinea Coast and the West African littoral as a whole, capitalism paraded without even a loin cloth to hide its nakedness. With no restraints on either side, the confrontation of the two cultures was neither peaceful nor orderly, contrary to exploratory revision, and it proved entirely detrimental to African society which was the weaker party."*[5]

This destruction of Africa had to find expression in the realm of ideas; and the church in Europe, which was the principal ideological organ of the State, found biblical justification for the enslavement of blacks, turning the poetic "Songs of

Solomon" into the rationale for the bloody trade. Quoting "Songs of Solomon" Chapter One, verse five and six, priests blessed the Africans boarding the slave ships, while at the Vatican they debated whether Africans were humans or beasts. While the pontification as to whether slavery was divinely sanctioned was going on, the slave traders, merchants and bankers exposed the fact that the need for profits dictated the ideas with respect to the relationship between Europe and Africa. The bankers, shippers, and iron masters, who made the chains and anchors, pressed ahead with making their fortune, quietening even those who were appalled at the murders on the ships.

'Do You Remember On The Slave Ship, How They Brutalised My Very Soul?'

For those who were captured and chained, the ordeal on board the ship reinforced the conditions of kidnap and the forced march to the coast. Africans were packed like sardines in the hold of the specially made ships, and large numbers died of suffocation. The space allotted to each slave measured five and a half feet in length and six inches in width. Slaves were chained two by two, right leg to left leg and right hand to left hand, and each slave had less room than a man in a coffin. The well publicised hold of the typical slave ship showed how closely packed were the chained Africans on shelves and rows. The slave Equiano, who has left a written record of his capture, gagging and terror, had this to say of the hold of the ship on which he travelled across the Atlantic:

> *"The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspiration, a variety of loathsome smells and brought a sickness amongst the slaves, of which many died, thus falling victims to the improvident avarice, as I may call it, of their purchase. This wretched situation was again aggravated by the gulling of the chains, now become insupportable, and the filth of the tubs into which the children often fell and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women and the groans of the dying reduced the whole to a scene of horror almost inconceivable."*[6]

Equiano's narration of the atmosphere of the ship revealed the greed of those insurers and bankers who profited from this cargo. And yet, despite these chains, when the slaves were taken on deck for exercise they struck, undid the chains, hurled themselves against the crew in attempts at insurrection, and oftimes threw themselves overboard. It was on the ship that they cemented bonds of unity and solidarity, and they were strongly attached to those companions who had come with them on the same ship from Africa. The term 'shipmate' symbolised the first Pan-African sign of solidarity and unity which went towards resisting the oppressive conditions of the plantations.

'When I Hear The Crack Of The Whip, My Blood Runs Cold!!!'

This refrain by Rastafari in the 1970s reinforced the brutalities of the passages to those who were unaware of the primary relationships formed on the ships. For the capture and middle passage crossing, where at least 30% of the cargo was fed to sharks, was reinforced by the seasoning process, or the struggle to break the spirit of resistance among the Africans.

On the auction block the white buyers examined the Africans as if they were examining cattle, and upon purchase they would be branded and given a European name. A red hot iron thrust into the flesh was the mark of being chattel slaves. The new name and the red hot iron rod were the first actions in the creation of a new docile chattel, but it took three years of seasoning, with the whip, to fully break the will of the stronger Africans. During this period of 'adjustment', which lasted between one and three years, between one-quarter and one-third of the Africans died.[7] This high mortality rate, even before the slaves began working, was such that slaves seldom lived for 9 years after their capture in Africa. One reason was that the owners found it cheaper to work them to death and then buy new slaves. While sugar was 'king', the slave masters found it cheaper to buy slaves than to rear children, and the slave population could not reproduce itself.[8]

This treatment gave an added impetus to the slave trade and Jamaica was not only a plantation colony, but it was also a centre for re-export to other British and Spanish colonies. Over a million slaves were brought to Jamaica during the period of slavery, of which 200,000 were re-exported. The very fierce slaves remained in Jamaica, and by the end of the slave period, there were only 323,000 slaves who survived.

As a centre for re-export, Jamaica was the prize of the British possessions, and the planters in Jamaica were the darlings of the British aristocracy in the 18th century, when the wealth of the slaves supported Earldoms and safe parliamentary seats. The organisation of the plantations, which supported the planter class, encompassed the highest form of capitalist organisation at that time - a form of organisation where the instrument of labour, the slave, was at the same time a commodity which could be replaced after being worked to death.

The sugar plantations required levels of capital which placed ownership outside the reach of the small white farmers. These whites employed jobbing gang slaves who would be hired out to the bigger planters. The production of sugar required costly machinery and equipment, and plantations were linked directly to the merchant houses of London, Liverpool, Bristol and Glasgow. The average estate in Jamaica ranged from 800 to 3000 acres, with the plains for growing cane, the rocky hills for the provision grounds of the slaves and the grazing ground for the cattle – the principal means of transport.

Because of the intensive use of cattle for transport, for turning the sugar mills, and for manure, the breeding pen was an important sector of this economy, and

a class of pen keepers emerged in the society. Up to the present many place names in Jamaica bear the names of these pens, e.g., Slipe Pen, Rollington Pen, Admiral's Pen, May Pen, etc.

In essence the cows in these pens were treated better than the slaves, for the field slaves were driven as if they were the lowest form of animal. Because sugar production accounted for the bulk of the labour used in the slave society, it has been the focus of research and documentation. It was a system of production, like the production of tobacco and cotton in the Southern States of the U.S.A., which required hordes of cheap labour. The production process centred around the sugar factory, involving a complex system of production, with five main stages:

1. from the planting to the cutting of the ripe cane;
2. the transporting of the cane to the mill where the juice was crushed from the cane;
3. the boiling house where the juice was evaporated to a syrup and sugar was crystallised;
4. the curing house where the molasses drained from the sugar; and
5. the distillery where the molasses were made into rum.

This process called into being a wide range of workers, from the skilled slaves, such as carpenters, coopers, masons, sugar boilers, distillers, to the slaves who did the most arduous tasks –the field slaves. These slaves were distinct from that layer of 'house slaves' – the maids, butlers, cooks, gardeners and coachmen who acted as spies for the masters; and often the overseers would keep a string of mulatto women so that they could be kept informed of the rumblings of the field slaves.

Field slaves were expected to open up at least one hundred holes a day for planting the cane, and failure to do so was punished by whipping.* The slave started working at 4 a.m. and several jobs had to be completed before going to the fields; these included carrying mould to the cattle pens, cutting up the dung, making mortar, carrying white lime to the works, and doing various odd jobs. It was during crop time, when the cane was reaped, that the slaves were driven to exhaustion, because it was on the plantations that the factory system was perfected in preparation for the industrial revolution in Europe. Those estates which could not afford jobbing gangs worked two shifts, one beginning at twelve noon and the other at midnight.

*Some of the forms of punishment for the slave included "Burning them by nailing them down on the ground with crooked sticks on every limb, then applying fire by degrees from the feet and hands, burning them gradually up to the head, whereby their pains are extravagant.... For crimes of lesser nature Gelding chopped off half of the foot with an ax ... For running away they put iron rings of great weight on their ankles, or Pottocks about their necks, which are Iron Rings with two long Necks rivetted to them, or a spur in the mouth... For negligence they are usually whipped by the overseer with Lance-Wood Switches, till they be bloody, and several of the Switches broken, being first tied up by the hands in the Mill Houses. After they are whipped till they are Raw, some put on their skins pepper and salt to make them smart; at other times their masters will drop melted wax on their skins and use several exquisite tortures...." Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery*, pp 82-87.

> *"The boilers and other Negroes who formed the spell about the works went to the field to cut the canes about 1.30 p.m. and continued to do so until it became too dark, about 7 p.m. They finished off by carrying cane tops or grass to the cattle pens and then rested for about four hours. At 12 midnight they received the spell in the boiling house and the rest of the works which had relieved them the previous noon. The relieved spell then rested until about 4.30–5 a.m. when they worked until 12 noon at which time they went to lunch and then returned to the works at 1.30 p.m., and so the cycle continued."**

The field slave worked an eighteen-hour day and during his lunch break was expected to work in his provision ground, for the slavery form of capitalism did not take care of the subsistence cost of labour. Legal statutes compelled the planters to keep a small plot of land where each slave cultivated yams, plantains, and those agricultural products which they had planted in Africa.

In order to maintain the pace of the 16- or 18-hour day, the overseers employed *slave drivers* who were armed with special whips which, when cracked, sent a loud sound all across the fields, and left deep wounds in the flesh of the slaves. Some of the more renowned whips were the supple jack, cat-o'-nine tails and bamboo switch. These drivers, themselves slaves, often abused their authority and could themselves be whipped by the overseer for not forcing enough work out of the tired slaves.

Because slavery was not calculated to bring out the best in those who fell under its sway, whether owner or slave, the system had a debasing effect on the character of those involved. This was explicitly so for those tyrants who were head gang-men or drivers. These representatives of capital in the field, along with the house slaves, were permeated with the vices of their white masters and scheming bored mistresses, and they despised the slaves in the field. They internalised the ideas of their masters and were imbued with self-hatred.

Apart from the physical violence, the field slave was exposed to every form of outrage and mortification to break his spirit. There was no law to protect the slave and the institution of slavery was stamped in the colour of his skin. Race prejudice was emphasised to demoralise the blacks. Despite the efforts of the apologists who try to compare black slavery with the slavery of the Roman era, they forget that the children of Roman slaves were usually born free, and slavery was never reserved for one race. From the earliest days of Spanish occupation, indentured whites could be seen in the fields with blacks. This was soon deemed dangerous; colour was the most obvious sign of differentiation; and it became the legal and rational basis for keeping blacks in servitude. Slavery or bondage was deemed the natural role for blacks, and overlordship the right of the whites.

This distinction between whites and blacks was most fundamental to those whites who saw their white skin as the sole basis for their superiority to blacks. This was especially so where there were many poor whites, as in 18th century Haiti and in the Southern States of the USA in the 19th century. Spokespersons

and the ideologues of that period refined the theory of racism to the point where some whites assiduously maintained that Africans were not human beings, but a lower form of animal, ordained by God to be the white man's beasts of burden.

The rise of white racism as a deeply rooted element in European thought took a leap in that period and can now be distinguished from all other forms of prejudice in the annals of human history. This was because no other system had claimed universal dominance as the world capitalist system did. The whip on the plantation in the 'New World' was only a lever in the long process of exploitation which centralised the wealth of the world in Europe, and later in North America. The well preserved records of the Jamaican plantation, where 300 years of continuous oppression of blacks were commemorated in 1970 in a document entitled *A Jamaican Plantation, The History of Worthy Park 1670-1970*, have given some idea of how much wealth was gleaned from Jamaica over the period. In addition, Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery* states:

> *"In 1773 British imports from Jamaica were five times the combined imports from the bread colonies; British exports to Jamaica were nearly one-third larger than those to New England and only slightly less than those to New York and Pennsylvania combined."*

When in 1783 the abolitionists began their campaign, Lord North, the Prime Minister, reminded them that "the slave trade had become a necessity to every European nation". Planters from Jamaica also told these humanitarians that between 1790 and 1791 Jamaica sugar alone added "at least £1,600,000 sterling to the balance of trade in favour of the parent state".[10]

The Westindian islands were central to the accumulation process in Europe, and while many economic historians today examine the Jamaican economy or the British economy as if they were entirely autonomous, European economists in the 18th and 19th centuries had no illusion about the interconnections between their 'national' economies and the world at large. England, the seat of the industrial revolution, was the chief beneficiary of this plunder, for the county of Lancashire was for a very long period the entry port for the slaves at the port of Liverpool. The economic advance from ship building and banking at the Port of Liverpool led to investments in the textile mills which used cotton planted by the slaves in Montserrat and Georgia.

Eric Williams showed some outstanding examples of traders, insurance brokers and iron foundries which boomed out of sugar and slaves. The Barclay family owned slave plantations in Jamaica and it was from this accumulation that they were able to set up Barclays Bank, one of the foremost trans-national banks in the 20th century. A similar economic foundation led to the development of Birmingham as an industrial centre. Probably the most outstanding contribution the slaves made to the world of science was to provide the capital to finance James Watt and the steam engine.

A similar path of development took place in the United States of America, where the Northern colonies had direct access to benefits from slavery in the

American South, and in the British and French Westindies. As in Europe, the profits made from slavery went firstly to commercial ports and industrial areas, mainly the Northeastern areas of New England and New York. While the centre of capitalism boomed, the periphery of capitalism exuded forms of economic and intellectual backwardness which deformed the societies. The plantation society was fraught with debauchery, drunkenness and the kind of mental enslavement of those who kept blacks in bondage. Hence, the only source of creativity in the slave society were those who were supposed to be beasts of burden for Europe, the hewers of wood and drawers of water.

The slaves were fashioning a lifestyle of *survival* in the face of the bizarre mutilation which was meted out to them. A culture of resistance, which developed in a slow undramatic manner, exploded in massive slave revolts, and the planters were enslaved to the dread and terror that one night the slaves would organise to rid the world of racial slavery. Thus, two cultures were boiling in the Caribbean, one of domination and oppression which involved economic, political and racist subjugation, and a culture of resistance where the slave even transformed his personality to preserve his humanity, hiding the plans for open revolt. These two cultures struggled for dominance and it is only in the era of Rasta that the white culture is being beaten back. It is this resistance which links the revolt of the slaves to the present Rastafarian movement.

Resistance to Slavery in Jamaica

> *"I would rather die upon yonder gallows than live in slavery"*
> *Sam Sharpe, 1832.*

The existence of a repressive culture which harmonised the economic exploitation of black people with the idea of white supremacy prevented the constitution of a Jamaican national consciousness, hence the black man's consciousness as an African constituted the centrepoint of his identity. It is this identification with Africa which laid the foundations for the doctrine of Rastafari – an ideology which combined the resistance against oppression with an underlying love for the freedom and emancipation of Africa and African peoples.

African resistance to slavery began on the slave ship and continued up to the present. It was the struggles on the slave ship which led to the chaining of the slaves. The restlessness of the slaves caused revolts to be endemic and the slaves

broke tools, committed suicide, ran away*, and mothers preferred their children to die at birth rather than to grow up as slaves. As early as 1522 slave revolts were taking place in the Americas, long before the slave trade had become central to the triangular trade. The rebellious nature of the slaves differed according to the areas which they came from in Africa. The Gold Coast slaves – usually called Coromantees – were supposed to be the most fierce. These slaves, from the Ashanti-Fanti speaking peoples, were the most feared by the slave dealers, and they featured prominently in the revolts. It is from the ranks of these Gold Coast Africans that the Maroons emerged.

The core of the Maroon community was the small band of slaves left behind by the Spaniards when the English captured Jamaica in 1655. These slaves formed the free communities which gave refuge to the runaway slaves. Major uprisings in 1673 and 1685, when the slaves rebelled in plantations in St. Ann and St. Catherine, increased the number of slaves living in the free communities in the hills. These slaves, called Maroons, carried out detailed studies of the soil, topography and climate which aided their strategy of guerilla warfare. This system of guerilla warfare, where the Maroons attacked the plantations at night, undermined the whole system of slavery.

The survival of the Maroon communities depended on the mode of social organisation of the villages. In order for the Maroons to survive they had to organise a system of production and exchange, superior to the plantation levels of co-operation, reminiscent of African communalism where they divided the tasks as they hunted, fished and gathered wild fruits.[12] Their scouts carried out intelligence activities on the white plantations to learn the military movements of the white people's army; they never confronted the whites on the plains and blew the *Abeng* horn to forewarn their villages of the impending attacks. This Abeng horn was made from the horn of a cow; the top was cut off, leaving a small opening about 1½ inches from the top end. There was also another opening over which the blower placed his mouth. The sounds were controlled with the thumb, opening and closing the small hole at the top end of the horn.

This *Abeng* horn became the sound of warning, war, and battle among the first band of Africans whose struggles were recounted throughout the world of slavery. For fifty years the British tried to suppress these offspring of Africa who, like the Saramaka Maroons of Surinam and the Cimaroons of Santa Domingo, challenged the system of bondage. The major Maroon War in Jamaica, 1729-1739, was fought under the leadership of Cudjoe, the son of Nangua, a proud Ashanti. Cudjoe had sworn that he would never become a slave and waged war for ten years, co-ordinating his battles with the Maroon

*This was the most widespread form of resistance, desertion from work. In Cuba the slave Esteban Montejo lived to tell his story of how he ran away from slavery. See Esteban Montejo, *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*, Penguin Books; London, 1970. Meanwhile, in the USA the runaway slave perfected desertion in the setting up of the 'underground railroad.' Harriet Tubman, herself a runaway slave, became the most renowned conductor in this struggle. For an analysis of the role of black women like Harriet Tubman, see Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's role in the Community of Slaves", *Black Scholar*, No.4, 1971.

communities spread out over the island. They neutralised the superior weapons of the redcoats and lured them to mock villages where they would be surrounded and attacked from all sides. So successful were these blacks that the British army begged them to sign a peace treaty. Richard Hart quoted the desperate call by these whites, who called for more help from Britain in these words:

> *"We do ... apply to your majesty to implore your most gracious assistance in our present dangerous and distressed condition – the danger we are in proceeds from our slaves in rebellion against us ... our attempts against them having been in vain, only convinced us of our weakness; so great, that instead of having been able to reduce them, we are not in a condition to defend ourselves. The terror of them spreads itself everywhere ... The evil is daily increasing, and their success has had such influence on our slaves, that they are continually deserting to them in great numbers; and the insolent behaviour of others gives us but too much cause to fear a general defection; which without your majesty's aid and assistance must render us prey to them."*[13]

It was against this fear of losing their lives and after spending £100,000 that Britain signed a peace treaty with Cudjoe in 1739. By the terms of this treaty, sealed with blood, the Maroon communities were guaranteed a level of autonomy and independence which was unthinkable for blacks ir the 18th century. The four main terms of the treaty were:

(1) that the Maroons should govern themselves in their own communities in five main settlements – Moore Town, Nanny Town, Charles Town, Scotts Hall and Acompong Town;
(2) that the British should discontinue efforts to enslave the Maroons;
(3) the right of the Maroons to hunt and fish unmolested; and
(4) the continued ownership and occupation of Maroon lands.

It was over this final point that the British extracted a compromise from the Maroons not to give solace to runaway slaves. Britain hoped to use the ruse of taxation to force them to pay for the land, but they rightly asked why they should pay taxes or pay for the land when they were settled there before the British. So, while the British accepted that the Maroons could own the land, the Maroons promised never to give refuge to runaway slaves. This agreement paid dividends in 1865 when the Maroons saved the whites from being driven into the sea.

Going Back To Africa, Cause I'm Black

However, this treaty proved tenuous because the whites did not feel bound to honour the agreement, and in 1795 a second Maroon War broke out over the question of the flogging of two Trelawney Maroons in Falmouth. The British governor tried to enslave the Maroons, who insisted that by the 1739 treaty they

should be tried in their own courts and any offence should be dealt with in their communities – they should not be whipped under the white man's law. With this provocation the Maroons resorted to guerilla warfare and inflicted serious losses on the local militia.

In desperation, the Governor imported large hunting dogs from Cuba. The impending use of these dogs led the Maroons to propose a second treaty which was quickly accepted by the Governor; but in a proper British manner the Governor organised the illegal deportation of 556 of these Maroons – they were taken to Nova Scotia in Canada. Mindful of their military skills, they were called upon to fight in the Napoleonic Wars against the French. There they acquitted themselves well in battle and after the war agitated to be settled in Africa. Fearing another outbreak of violence, and at the urging of the abolitionists, these Maroons were returned to Sierra Leone in Africa. They were the first group of blacks in the New World to be resettled in Africa.[14].

Me No No Quashie

The majority of slaves never accepted the system of slavery, contrary to the historical accounts which referred to the slaves as docile, lazy and child-like in character. This slur on the character of the black and African person has become entrenched in European thought, and in the Caribbean it is taught in schools, in the history books written by Carlyle, Trollope and Froude. But what the chroniclers of slavery did not understand was that the peculiar personality trait of the slave was in itself a response to and a form of resistance to slavery.

The black man, knowing that the planter expected him to be a dumb beast, acted his part well. It is from this personality trait that the "smart-man" Anancy character emerged, where it was said that Anancy "play fool fe catch wise". The majority of slaves adopted an attitude of wooden stupidity before the planters, and if asked an indifferent question, he would seldom give a prompt reply – pretending not to understand what was said, forcing a repetition of the question so that he or she could have time to consider, not what the true answer was, but what was the most expedient one to give.

Unfortunately, even recent writers on slave society have misunderstood this form of resistance and sought to give some intellectual support to the concept of lazy Quashie*. Being owners of the means of production and controllers of the State, the planter class were in a position to pursue policies which shaped the society, seemingly to justify the stereotype Quashie. It was a pity, therefore, to see Orlando Patterson quoting from pro-slavery journals of the time and seeking

*Quashie is the Akan name for a male child born on Sunday. It is used in Jamaica to refer to someone who is foolish or stupid.

*This line of reasoning, which gives a seemingly critical account of Quashie, is pursued by Ken Post in *Arise Ye Starvelings*.

to give an ambiguous account of Quashie without understanding how the African could change his very character to fight the unjust system*. Those who took the trouble to observe the slave outside the shadow of the whip were astounded at their dual personality. One white commentator, who gained the confidence of the slaves, remarked that:

> *"One has to hear with what warmth and volubility and at the same time with what precision of ideas and accuracy of judgement this creature, heavy and taciturn all day, how squatting before his friends tells stories, gesticulates, argues, passes opinions, approves and condemns both his master and those who surround him."*[15]

The slaves were fond of mocking their masters. They could laugh and talk about anything reprehensible that their masters did; they could invent nicknames which were most appropriate and would stick. This so-called Quashie could laugh at himself, his master and others around him, and this stood high to his credit.

It was at these nocturnal sessions that African stories were told; there was the telling of folk tales and the use of oral history to solidify the consciousness of being an African. In these sessions the hero was none other than Anancy, and stories of his genius were told with such precision that it played a part in moulding the cunning and guile necessary to turn the tables on the oppressor. Anancy symbolised the possibility of the underdog emerging triumphantly against the strong. The tales of Brier Anancy and his son Brier Tacooma reinforced the influence of the Ashanti among the slaves, and provided the psychological release necessary to face the day-to-day task of providing surpluses for Europe.[16]

The retention of African culture and religious expressions in Jamaica was enhanced by the continuous flow of new slaves to Jamaica. As a result, there was always a large proportion of slaves who remembered Africa, and these Africans commanded great respect, especially those with a knowledge of African medicinal practices and religious rites. They were in the forefront of transmitting the tradition of oral history and restoring those African beliefs to slaves who were being creolised.* It was these slaves who generated and stimulated the practices which resisted the cultural and ideological domination of Europe, and their religious rites symbolised the struggle for self-expression and dignity.

In every sphere of life, in language, in the planting of his provision ground, and in the burial of the dead, the slave sought to preserve his dignity as an African person. This was so marked that in death the slave believed that they would once again return to Africa; consequently, their relatives and friends would leave rum and food at the graveside so that the departed one would not go hungry on his journey to Africa. Funeral rites were accompanied by music,

*This word, creole, has been handed down in Caribbean literature to depict the mulatto culture of ambivalence.

dance, drumming and song. The jubilation at the return of the spirit to Africa was not tempered with grief; many slaves committed suicide rather than live in slavery. The songs and lamentations sung at the graveside were of hope. One popular song, sung by Africans throughout the New World and later featuring prominently as a Negro spiritual, said:

"Oh Freedom, Oh Freedom, Oh Freedom I love thee
And before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord and be Free."

This song depicted freedom in a promised land, in this case consistent with the promise of freedom in the life hereafter of the Christian religion. In Jamaica, the religion of the slaves was distinct from the religion of the masters until the end of the 18th century when Baptist missionaries began to be active among the slaves.

Formerly the planters were opposed to any religious instruction being given to the slave, and when the Moravians and Baptists insisted that by Christianising the slaves they could make them better slaves, the masters refused to countenance the possibility of any religious teaching which could make the slaves literate. Even so, the blacks resisted the Christian religion and only a section of those exposed to free black ministers, like the ex-slaves George Lisle and Moses Baker, were responsive to the European version of Christianity. In the main African religious expression held sway in the hills.

Of the Spiritual World and the Material World

The era of the renaissance and enlightenment in Europe led to a sharp division between the spiritual and the material worlds. The philosophy of mechanistic materialism, which was consistent with the rise of capitalism, separated matters of the soul from matters of science and technology. The ideology of enlightenment postulated that science and technology, by their 'progress', determined every sphere of life, transforming social relations in the process. Feudal ideas which said that progress was guided by God were superseded by the notion that this function was fulfilled by the 'laws of nature'.

In this way, religion was retailored to conform to the reproduction of alienation and to justify capital exploitation of labour. The Christian religion, like all other religions, then settled the problems of relations between people and nature and the relations among people (social classes). In the process, myths concerning the European variant of Christianity were developed to justify the plunder of the globe. The European mode of social organisation and concomitant ideological (religious) formulations, claimed universal validity in that the capitalist system was the first global system. Thus as a universally valid religion, the ideological organs in the form of the established churches, whether the Dutch Reformed, the Anglican or the Catholic Church, rationalised and blessed the plunderers of the globe.

It was therefore not surprising that for three centuries the slaves resisted this

ideology, and the European religion was practised only by those slaves who were creolised. For those Africans who held on to the vision of Africa and the religion of their ancestors, their ceremonies were carried out in the hills and slave huts, out of the reach of the masters and their mulatto underlings. In the eyes of the established church, where the debauchery, rape and kidnapping was sanctioned, the religious rites of the slaves could only be pagan and cultist.

This ideation has been handed down and reshaped by modern anthropologists and sociologists, who term African religious practices which they cannot control 'cultist' or 'millenarian'. Laws were passed against African religious expressions such as Cumina and Shango, and the use of the drum, the main instrument in the outpouring of emotions which went with these ceremonies, was banned. This attempt at legal extermination forced the most overt African expressions underground, and it is not surprising that they only emerged in the revival of 1860-61, and the more African form, called *Bongo* cult, was not observed until the 1950s.[17] The Bongo men were slaves who defied authority and recognised no authority higher than themselves.

Europeans denigrated African religion both in the New World and in Africa. A barrage of derogatory treatises were written in Europe which called African religion ancestor worship, superstition, magic, fetishism and paganism. But the Bongo men who resurfaced were the product of African religion, the product of centuries of development and the accumulated experiences and ideas of generations. These religious and cultural experiences (developing independently according to region) were interwoven with religious ceremonies, rituals and beliefs, and guided the evolution of customs.

Because the crude materialism of capitalism did not exist in Africa, the spiritual world was not separated from other spheres of human endeavour. All things, material and immaterial, were linked to the spiritual needs of the society. Hence, various foodstuffs, tools, utensils, clothing, shelter, art objects, the drum, and collective monuments were all linked to the spiritual needs of the society so that these objects served as use-values, while at the same time being the means of expressing scientific ideas and beliefs, and satisfying emotional needs. An African utensil was not just a utensil, it was a work of art and an expression of religious emotion as well.

This is why all over Africa scientific achievements, such as the building of pyramids in Egypt, the acropolis in Zimbabwe, or the Axum temples in Ethiopia, were linked to religious expression. There was no need to separate science from religion, and religious leaders had high standing in the communities. This is not to say that there was no social differentiation, for myths concerning natural phenomena and the means of placing them at the service of the community were integrated in a broad philosophy to justify the social order.

This was most pronounced in those areas where the State had emerged (particularly in the great Kingdoms of Axum, Egypt, Nubia, Mali, Songay and Zimbabwe). In these States religious ideology functioned to justify the paying of

tribute by the toiling masses. Like the great religions of the East – Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism – African religions served the reproduction of social hierarchy, and the more developed the society, the more important religion was in stabilising the system.

Religion and Resistance

For three hundred years the religion of the slaves' ancestors survived in the New World, and in Jamaica it was not until there were native literate preachers that the Christian religion began to gain some currency. The history of the Baptists in Jamaica is replete with the struggle to convert the slaves while maintaining some sense of dignity in being African. Black preachers who were literate began to gain influence at the end of the 18th century, because they could read and write, and in this way they could interpret the great debates which were raging in England between those who wanted the slave trade abolished and those who spoke for the local assembly and called for even more brutalities.

It was this quest for literacy which began to influence the slaves towards Christianity, for the literate Mandingos could not read the English language. Black preachers of the Baptist denomination used the bible as an ideological tool, preaching deliverance, and the stories of the bible which depicted resistance were the most popular among the slaves. Outside the organised churches, the fusion of African religious ceremonies and the words of the bible were best expressed in a religious formation called *Pocomania*.*

The modern Pocomania was a spin-off of an African religion called Cumina, and the intense drumming of the ceremonies was considered subversive by the planters. The planters had good reason for fearing these religious practices, because those Africans who possessed training as spiritual leaders commanded great respect, and they were usually the ones in the forefront of revolts.

Jamaica acquired special significance during the period of slavery, not only because it was the most prosperous of the British colonies, but also because it was the area of the most slave revolts in the New World. There were more than 400 revolts with major confrontations in 1729-39, 1760, and 1831-32, each involving over a thousand slaves. The Akan slaves were militant, and the ones called Coromantees shook the hearts of the planters.

The Armed Slave Revolts – From Tacky to Sam Sharpe

The 1739 peace treaty between the British and the Maroons had made the problem of revolt more difficult, but this did not stop the regular uprisings. Numerous organised plots emerged, only to be given away by weak-hearted slaves or those mulattoes who were the eyes and ears of the masters. One of the

*This Pocomania is still a very powerful force among the working people of Jamaica. It is derived from the *Cumina* religion, a form of religious expression which was accompanied by elaborate ceremonies, drumming, singing and spirit possession. See Leonard Barrett, *The Sun and the Drum*.

most organised revolts, after the Maroon War, was the rebellion of Tacky, another Gold Coast African. The rebellion was planned in secrecy among the Coromantees throughout the island, who aimed at "a total massacre of the whites and to make the island a Negro colony".[18]

More than a thousand slaves were involved and for six months in 1760 they fought the planters. It was only after Tacky, the strategist, was killed that many of them committed suicide rather than allow themselves to be enslaved. The usual vengeance of the white population was meted out. During the course of the rebellion 60 whites were killed, and in the aftermath 600 slaves were executed. Patterson details 18 plots between 1765 and 1784. In one case, in 1776, when a plot was discovered in St. James, the whites reacted with their developed and cumulative brutality; those involved in the plot were gibbeted, burnt alive, hanged or transported out of the island.

The struggle for freedom and independence epitomised by the Maroons and articulated by Tacky was carried to its historical conclusion by slaves in Santa Domingo – now called Haiti. The rebellion of the Africans in Haiti shook the foundations of slavery and capitalism in the Caribbean, North America and Europe. This revolt exposed the military genius of the black general, Toussaint L'Ouverture, and led to the creation of the first black independent State in the New World. This revolt – the Haitian Revolution of 1804 – was the only case of a successful rebellion in Caribbean history, not only on the cultural plane but also on the political and economic planes.[19] René Depestre, the Haitian revolutionary who has himself seen the limitations of this cultural and nationalist victory, conceded that:

> *"This successful slave revolution – the only one known in human history – was in itself a glorious act of identification for the black man. It showed the entire world that liberty and human dignity also have a black face in the history of civilisations. It further highlighted, in universal life, the personality of the black man by giving full exposure to great men like Toussaint L'Ouverture and the heroes of the early independence era in Haiti.*
>
> *"The Haitian revolution also allowed the Negro, wherever he is in America, to acquire a new vision of himself and to begin to destroy all the stereotypes of the Negro which had been created by colonialisation."*[20]

This act of liberation in Haiti was an inspiration for slaves in the New World in the same way in which it deepened the fear of the whites. Jamaican slave-holders trembled for their safety as they followed the victories of the black freedom army and their already precarious sense of unease was further jeopardised by the appearance and tales of those refugees arriving in Jamaica. Slaves and mulattoes who had been pressed into the Westindian regiment to fight their brothers in Haiti were refused permission to re-enter the island. They happily returned to join the Haitian Revolution. Even the much celebrated philanthropists in the United Kingdom were shaken by the fact of black people making their own

history. In Haiti slaves had given wider meaning to the concepts of liberty and equality evolved by the bourgeois philosophers of the French Revolution; and the British abolitionists were blind to the possibilities of slaves involving themselves in their own liberation. In essence, the anti-slavery movement was distressed by every sign that slaves intended to take matters into their own hands.

Pressures in England at that time consisted of parliamentary initiatives towards amelioration of the whippings and wanton brutalities. But in Jamaica, the planters panicked and vowed never to give up their 'right' to enslave black men. This was the political expression of a dying stratum; by the beginning of the 19th century the changes from mercantile capitalism to industrial capitalism was such that the leading capitalists (the industrialists) found that the trade in slaves and the use of slave labour were no longer in the interest of further development. The spokespersons for the industrialists were the abolitionists, such as William Wilberforce, who understood that the transformation of slaves into wage labourers would mean an increased market for the rising industrial bourgeoisie, increased production, and increased profits. These abolitionists saw the process of emancipation emerging gradually over 40 or 50 years, and though the trade was illegal after 1807, they deliberately decided to go easy on the question of full freedom.

While they equivocated, the slaves decided to take matters into their own hands. Those slaves who could read and write eagerly read the reports of the anti-slavery movement, and the insurrectionary movement swept the islands. There were rebellions in Barbados in 1816 (involving over 13,000 slaves), in Trinidad in 1819, 1825 and 1829, and in Antigua in 1831.[21]

The year 1831 also witnessed a major revolt in the United States when a literate preacher, Nat Turner, started with a force of six men and swept the State of Virginia, moving from plantation to plantation, freeing the slaves. All these rebellions were discussed with trepidation by the planters, who openly expressed their determination to defy any Act of Parliament to abolish slavery.

To demonstrate their will to be free, the slaves in Jamaica organised the biggest slave revolt in the Western part of the island when over 20,000 slaves rose up and for two weeks set free the slaves in the parishes of Trelawney, St. James, Westmoreland, Hanover and St. Elizabeth.

The widespread nature of the revolt and the organisational skills which went into the planning was the result of a new kind of leadership; this was the leadership of the religious preacher, literate in the English language and in the African religious practices, who combined the ideas of deliverance and resistance. It was a leadership which could read the newspapers and interpret debates to fellow slaves.

Such a leader was Sam Sharpe, who was a 'native' Baptist lay preacher. He worked in close co-operation with other leaders such as 'Daddy Thorpe', an African religious teacher whom the whites called a myal man.

Sharpe used the freedom of movement which he earned as a lay preacher to mobilise the slaves on the plantations in four parishes. He carefully laid his plans from August 1831 and ensured that there were no weak-hearted men among his cadres. When the whites thought they were holding prayer meetings, Sharpe was holding forth on the evils and injustices of slavery, and then binding his followers with an oath telling them that "if black men did not stand up for themselves and take their freedom, the whites would put them out at the muzzle of their guns and shot them like pigeons".

The plot was simple. The slaves planned to use the period of the Christmas break, 1831, to lull the whites into believing that the merrymaking and dancing of 'John Canoe' was a sign of contentment. Three days after Christmas, when the slaves were supposed to return to work, the signal to begin the battle was given when slaves at Kensington Estate (on the hills overlooking Montego Bay valley) burnt the trash houses. That very night the fire and drum signalled the beginning of an all-out attempt by the slaves to free themselves.

Local commanders, who had previously taken on the guise of deacons, proceeded to march from plantation to plantation freeing the slaves and burning to the ground the homes of the most vicious planters. The drum, conch shells and the blowing of horns called other slaves to the ranks, so that before the night was out 20,000 supposedly docile slaves were precipitating the death-blow to slavery in the British domains.

As usual, capital was called upon to defend its own interests and one of the most feared overseers, Grignon, assumed the rank of Colonel to command the Western Interior Regiment to defend the estates. But the determination of those who stood up for their rights was such that Grignon soon had to retreat to the sea, along with those whites who had already been put out to sea in the Montego Bay Harbour. This retreat left the countryside to the slaves, who pushed from Montego Bay to Savanna la Mar, freeing slaves and blowing the horns of freedom.

From the safety of the harbour Grignon sent a column of 'coloured' troops to engage Sharpe's liberation army, but the slaves retreated only to attack when the militia were on the defensive. In one battle, when the whites were retreating from Montpelier, the slaves attacked and forced the whites down towards the sea. All the plantations were under the control of the slaves and the Governor declared martial law when over £1 million of plantation property had been razed to the ground.

Knowing that the slaves believed that Parliament had abolished slavery, the Governor declared an Amnesty for those slaves who would surrender. This call for Amnesty was couched in language which suggested that slavery had indeed been abolished and that the British Army would do them no harm.

The promise of Amnesty led the slaves to lay down their arms, but the whites who had been held prisoner now carried out their blood-thirsty passions. The blacks had allowed some whites to flee, and during the two weeks that the slaves held control of the plantations, only fourteen whites and three mulattoes were killed. Yet after surrendering thousands of Africans were put to death by

bullets, firing squads and by a gallows which was erected in the central square at Montego Bay. Those who escaped death faced the lash: 500 lashes, 300 lashes were the order of the day.

Henry Bleby, a missionary who recorded for posterity the atrocities of the whites, tried to induce confessions from the slaves who were on the way to the gallows; but Sam Sharpe, who was executed in Montego Bay on May 23, 1832, refused to utter a word of remorse, telling Bleby that:

> *"I would rather die a slave upon yonder gallows than live in slavery."*[22]

Bleby and other commentators were astounded at the richness in spirit of the leaders of the revolt. They were amazed at the capacity for reasoned discussion and clear exposition of ideas exhibited by Sharpe and his deacons. For in the consciousness of those who had internalised the idea of the black man as a beast, the intelligence of Sharpe and his organisational skills were a rude awakening. Bleby accurately understood the implications of this revolt and he remarked:

> *"The revolt failed of accomplishing the immediate purpose of its author, yet by it a further wound was dealt to slavery, which accelerated its destruction, for it demonstrated to the imperial legislature that among the Negroes themselves the spirit of freedom had been so widely diffused, as to render it most perilous to postpone the settlement of the most important question of emancipation to a later period.*
>
> *"The evidence taken before the committee of the two Houses of Parliament made it manifest that if the abolition of slavery were not speedily effected by the peaceable method of legislative enactment, the slaves would assuredly take the matter into their own hands, and bring their bondage to a violent and bloody termination."*

The Sam Sharpe rebellion forced the question of abolition in England, and the British Parliament legislated for the abolition of slavery in all British dominions on August 1, 1834.

Part II

From Emancipation to The Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865

"Blood, blood, we must humble the white man before us."

When the emancipation proclamation was read on the steps of the government buildings in Spanish Town on August 1, 1834, there was jubilation, singing, drumming and shell blowing. But the dancing did not end before it sunk in to the former slaves that £20 million compensation had been paid to their masters and they had to serve a four-year mandatory period of apprenticeship.

Apprenticeship was a transitional expedient to convert slave labour into wage labour. The planters tried to get the maximum amount of labour out of the workers, while the blacks preferred to do their compulsory 40½ hours in the first four days and then have the other three days to work on their provision grounds. Those planters who had used the shift system during crop time now found that blacks refused to work at night, and in the confrontation between estate capital and labour the whites used coercion and legal fiat in their hope to survive on the estates.

However, changing conditions in Europe made the demands of the Westindian sugar interests subsidiary to those of the rising industrial bourgeoisie; and in any case, the sugar importers could buy sugar cheaper from Brazil and Cuba, where slave labour was still being used. Planters tried to control workers by levying rents on their houses and provision grounds. When they realised that the Africans placed great importance on the burial places of their ancestors, the planters taxed the grounds as a way of ensuring that the blacks supplied a continuous flow of labour. Use of taxation as a means of alienating labour was enacted in Jamaica prior to its widespread use in colonial Africa.

The response of the blacks was to leave the sugar and coffee estates and go to the hills. When the planters clamoured for more cheap labour the colonialists imported Asian indentured labour in order to cheapen the cost of labour, and between 1834 and 1865 6,000 Indians were imported into Jamaica.[23] However, the number of Indians imported was insufficient to affect the demands of the blacks, and this did not have the divisive effect on the class struggle that it had in Trinidad and Guyana.[24]

Black workers employed varying tactics in their struggle with the planters, who had become so accustomed to slave labour that they made no effort to improve the conditions of work by introducing new machinery or an economic infrastructure capable of properly utilising the resources of the society. Those who survived exported their profits to England, wallowed in conspicuous consumption and cursed the hard-working blacks as being lazy; thus laying the cornerstones of the economic dependence which still plagues Jamaica.