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**CONTENTS**

	Page
Dung Farming: A Seventeenth-century Experiment in Barbadian Agricultural Improvisation .....	58
An Archaeological Investigation of the Domestic Life of Plantation Slaves in Barbados .....	64
Laws of Barbados Directed at Quakers 1676 – 1723.....	73
A New Interpretation of Cromwell's Western Design .....	76
The Merchants & Planters of Barbados - 1 .....	85
Book Reviews .....	99

*For Officers and Objects of the Society  
See Back Cover*

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE DOMESTIC LIFE OF PLANTATION SLAVES IN BARBADOS\*

By  
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Little did I realize when I first came to Barbados in 1960 that one day I would address an audience here on Barbadian history. Tonight's talk will be divided into roughly two parts; I will briefly describe the overall context of a research project on Barbados slaves, and then will discuss the archaeological phase of it. The archaeological project that is now being started in Barbados falls within a scholarly field generally known as Afro-American research or studies. Very briefly, Afro-American research is concerned with, among other things, uncovering the social and cultural continuities or changes in African populations brought to the New World, the kinds of societies Afro-Americans created, and the contributions they made to the emergence and development of these societies. What I am particularly concerned with is the general issue of the roots of West Indian culture.

Regardless of the identification and similarities that West Indian societies appear to have on the surface with their erstwhile colonial rulers (for example, the epithet "Little England" for Barbados), it doesn't take a very long time for the West Indian who goes to Europe to discover that essentially he is not English, not, for that matter, French or Dutch. What I am saying is obviously a truism and self-evident. The West Indies are indeed something unique. They possess their own cultural systems and these systems have a very deep and complex history. The general issue, then, is how did West Indian cultures come about? How did essentially West African traditions and cultures come together with those from Northern Europe, within the boundaries of plantation slave-colonial societies, and emerge into something new which we can identify today as West Indian culture in the same sense that we can identify the culture of the United States or any other New World society.

Traditional writings dealing with West Indian social history, in my estimation (and this is not a view that I alone hold) are often biased and quite racist, and almost uniformly very Eurocentric. Their emphasis is usually upon the European heritage and those who carried this heritage into the West Indies. One reads very little of those of African descent, or the kinds of contributions they may have made to the societies in which they lived. Most traditional writings reflect a very heavy colonial bias, and most are primarily concerned with economic and political history. Even when the traditional Eurocentric or colonial biases can be overcome, the emphasis is still by-and-large upon

the institutional aspects of West Indian society - how a House of Assembly originated, the problems that a governor had with a plantocratic group, how the currency system was formed, etc. But, to really uncover the roots of West Indian culture, we have to get very deeply involved in what is called social, and by the anthropologist, culture history.

Within this context, the African ancestors and origins of the vast majority of West Indians today are extraordinarily important. For a variety of reasons, both wittingly and unwittingly, Africa and its past have been greatly distorted. This distortion, created by Europeans but passed on to West Indians of African ancestry, was epitomized a number of years ago in Sparrow's "Congo Man," a very popular calypso at the time. The image of the Congo Man, aside from its double entendre on the sexual level, fits in my estimation the image that many West Indians have of Africa and Africans: the savage, living in a tree, eating people, belching out sounds such as ugh, ugh, scratching his belly - and that was Africa! An image of Africa that has been perpetuated over the centuries.

The topic of this talk is neither Africa nor the African societies from which the slaves came. However, it is important to note that the nature of Africa has been grossly and often maliciously or very naively distorted. This negative image of Africa became part of an ideological system which helped, on the one hand, to rationalize the slave system and serve the interests of the slave holders and others who profited from slavery; on the other hand, this image served to give Europeans a greater sense of their own cultural superiority.

My research project on Barbados slaves began in 1965. After about fifteen months of social anthropological research on the island, I became very interested in the origins of the people among whom I had lived. Briefly, the research project that was started in 1965 was aimed at trying to reconstruct the social and cultural life of the slaves, and how the African traditions they brought with them had been modified, retained, or lost under the conditions of the plantation system and the society in which they lived. I decided to focus upon the slave period, from roughly the middle of the seventeenth century to Emancipation in 1834, because I feel that this is a crucial period in West Indian history. "

Although Africans were forced immigrants, they were immigrants nonetheless. I want to stress the notion of the African as an immigrant who, like all other immigrants, was a bearer of cultural traditions. Often when we use the word slave, we tend to forget that we are speaking of human beings. We are speaking of people who thought, who felt, who were emotional, cried, laughed, and nurtured their children. We are dealing with people who were wrenched from their home countries, normally as young adults in their early twenties or late teens, who had incorporated the values, mores, and ethics of their own cultures; they came with their own conceptions of the after-life, attitudes towards illness and disease, beliefs concerning hospitality and deference to old age, and so forth. That is, those persons who were able to survive the tortuous passage from inland Africa to cross the Atlantic, and who arrived on the shores of the New World, Barbados in particular, did not arrive with blank minds, with minds that were a clean slate, so to speak, upon which were gradually implanted the culture of their European masters. Africans came *as* slaves, but importantly they came as thinking, emotional human beings, and they brought vivid memories of the home and village life and governmental systems in which they had been raised.

Given that one is trying to understand a human population which came from a

diversity of cultures in Africa, how, then, could this population function under the restrictive conditions of the slave society? What, indeed, was the nature of the social and cultural life of the ' slaves on and off the plantations of Barbados?

In answering this question, the use of historical sources poses a variety of difficulties. For one thing, all of the primary sources, or the vast majority of them, were written by Europeans, usually Englishmen, of another age - an age alien to me. I have to read the writings of such Englishmen and see Africans, who were alien to them, through their eyes. A two-fold translation thus takes place - the Africans to the Europeans to me. Not only is there the problem of cultural translation, of viewing one population indirectly through the eyes of another, but also what early Europeans chose to write about the social and cultural life of Barbadian slaves is relatively limited, and represents but a small fraction of the information available on Barbados in the early years of its history.

What Europeans wrote is usually biased and ethnocentric (that is, filled with the view that one's own way of life is superior). In general, the ethnocentric and racist attitudes, the extraordinary naiveté with which the early English - and native born Barbadians of European ancestry - viewed the Africans, and their general disinterest in describing slave life, make it difficult (but not impossible) to acquire detailed information on some of the fundamental, everyday, features of life. These are the features which concern the anthropologist in dealing with any human population: How did the slaves construct their houses? How did they bury their dead? What kinds of conceptions did they have about the afterlife? What sorts of foods did they cook and what recipes did they employ in food preparation? What did they do when they returned to their villages at night after working in the fields during the day?

In considering questions such as these - not the dramatic events of history such as armadas sailing the oceans or political revolutions - the everyday life of a human population, the historical sources simply do not help as much as I would like. They give a general picture of what was going on, but for many areas of slave life they do not yield detailed information.

After a number of years of historical research, it occurred to me that perhaps the historical sources (which I think have provided as much information as they are going to in certain areas of slave life) could be left alone for the time being, and that new information could be sought by digging in the ground - which is what archaeologists do. By digging and trying to uncover the material remains of the slaves, and what they used and manufactured, perhaps we could acquire information that would not only supplement information gained through library research, but also provide a more objective check upon the historical sources themselves. In addition, excavations might provide information which is simply not available in the historical sources.

Briefly, much of archaeology does not fit the popular image of ancient civilizations and dramatic finds such as the Egyptian pyramids and buried treasure; much of it is concerned with more mundane human artifacts and peoples who did not live in elaborately organized state systems. Archaeology becomes especially useful where historical documents are lacking, and the archaeologist carefully seeks in the ground for the material remains that people laid down many years ago. The archaeologist is ultimately concerned with reconstructing past cultural and social systems through these material remains. Most importantly, through what has been left in the ground, the slaves

will be talking directly to us without the intermediary of the recorded observations of Europeans.

Our specific aim in the archaeological project that has been started over the past few weeks is, to put it simply, to excavate in the villages of plantation slaves. What I would like to talk about now is something of what is known through the historical sources, what we hope to find out, and how we are proceeding in our work. I'll take a small slice of slave life for illustrative purposes, and briefly describe the slave houses and villages. Such information serves as the wider framework guiding the archaeological excavations.

Today, in Barbados, if one talks about slave houses, people invariably point to the stone houses (some of them still inhabited) found in parts of parishes such as St. Peter or St. Lucy. Although these houses are probably similar, if not identical, to the former slave ones (I don't know if the houses seen today were actually inhabited by slaves), stone houses for slaves really appeared at a late period in the history of slavery in Barbados; there is evidence that some date from the late eighteenth century. But, by-and-large, throughout the slave period the most common type of house was something one doesn't see today and this was a house made out of organic materials, which we call wattle and daub. It was a small hut, made by inserting poles or posts vertically into the ground, and then inter-lacing the poles horizontally with vines or twigs so as to form a latticework; these latticed walls were then plastered with clay or mud. Such a house probably resembled the "trash hut" that one hears referred to today, and I remember seeing such a hut in 1961 - in Lakes, St. Andrew but at that time I didn't know what it was.. At any rate, as best as I can ascertain, even by Emancipation in 1834 the stone house was not the most common type of slave dwelling and most slaves lived in wattle and daub houses.

The roofs of these, as well as the stone ones, were thatched with materials such as cane trash, palm branches, or plantain leaves. The houses were square to rectangular in shape and usually quite small (though in the later days of slavery they may have become, on the average, somewhat larger). Houses were normally partitioned into two rooms, sometimes three: One room would be employed as a sleeping chamber for the man and his wife while the other served as a sort of parlor and for the sleeping of children.

The houses were sparsely furnished. They contained an occasional stool or bench - sometimes a table and chairs - and cooking utensils and containers such as earthen pots, gourd or calabash dishes, comgrinding stones, and sometimes an iron pot. More elaborate furnishings could be found in some of the houses, usually in those belonging to people with a higher rank on the plantation - the drivers or various of the tradesmen. Slaves slept on boards or planks, but occasionally used rough mattresses made from, for example, plantain leaves. In early days they also slept on the earthen floors of their houses, and it wasn't until late in the slave period that wooden plank floors were used, especially in the stone houses. In fact, one plantation owner was very concerned about the expenses involved in wooden floors because the slaves apparently ripped out the floor boards and used them as fuel for their cooking fires. Cooking usually took place over open fires, but by the early nineteenth century there were detached kitchens, usually made out of wattle and daub. The houses, as one might expect, were fragile, very susceptible to fire and destruction by natural causes. Conditions were crowded, and one can conjecture upon the facility with which diseases were communicated.

Houses were clustered into small, compact, villages. A slave village was located (and this is very important for our archaeological purposes) very close to the plantation yard, in an area usually not far away from the owner's or manager's house. These slave villages were called, in the historical literature at least, "Negro yard." Today, in Barbados, one often hears the expression "Nigger yard," and many plantations still have "Negro yard" or "Nigger yard" fields. Closely associated with the villages were, gardens or small plots of land, burial grounds, and water supplies. I'd like to briefly comment on each of these.

In the British West Indies there were two general methods by which the slaves acquired their food. In some of the mountainous islands, such as Jamaica and the Windwards, slaves were allotted plots of land in the interior where they were expected to grow all, or most, of their own food. In other islands, such as Antigua and St. Kitts, foods were generally imported. Barbados fell somewhere between these two methods: A considerable amount of food was imported, but also a great deal was locally grown on plantation fields. (Remember that in the days of slavery, plantations did not grow as much sugar proportional to their arable acreage as they do today.) In addition to those plantation fields planted entirely in food crops, there were separate garden areas which the slaves cultivated for their own use - not only to supplement the often meager food allowances they received from the plantations, but also to trade or sell their produce on the island's intricately organized internal marketing system.

There were two types of slave gardens. On some of the plantations the garden plots were within the villages, located adjacent to, or surrounding, the houses; in such cases people not only cultivated food crops, but also raised small livestock and poultry. On other plantations, there was a field, located away from the village, known as the "Negro ground." This field was allotted solely for slave use, and each family or head of household cultivated a separate plot within it. The "Negro ground" was distinguished from other plantation fields planted in food; these were collectively reaped by slave gangs, and the produce was then divided among the slaves as the plantation management saw fit. Slave gardens, whether located in the villages or in the "Negro ground," were a very important feature of slave life, and slaves attached great value to having time off to work them. Not only could they generally plant what they wanted to, but in working for themselves, they gained some temporary relief from the repressiveness and control of the normal work day in plantation fields; they were able to exercise some autonomy of decision and some degree of freedom of choice within, of course, the constraints of the slave system.

Another important feature of the slave village was the burial ground. A consistent theme in the historical record is that the funerals, burials, and reverence for the ancestors were extraordinarily important to Barbadian slaves. There is no doubt about this, but many details are lacking concerning the beliefs and practices associated with these areas of slave life. They buried their dead in relatively elaborate and well attended funerals and burial ceremonies, and often-times rituals were annually performed over the grave sites of their close kinsmen. The burial grounds were assuredly very important, but where were they located? There are references indicating that sometimes people buried their closest kinsmen under the dirt floors of their house; however, most of the dead were apparently buried in a special slave burial ground located somewhere on the plantation. (Of course, only those who were baptized could be buried in church burial grounds, and

since the vast majority of slaves throughout the slave period were unbaptized they were ineligible for church burials.) But all the historical record yields is vague references to, for example, the "usual burying places on the estates," or "places set apart for that purpose on each plantation." We hope to locate a burial ground and by excavating in it uncover details on mortuary practices and the religious beliefs associated with them.

The water supply was a third major feature of the slave village. Plantation owners and managers usually used cisterns or wells, but the slaves largely drew their water from ponds which were located close to their village or the plantation yard. One sees evidence of such ponds, throughout Barbados today, even though the ponds may no longer contain water. A plantation usually had several ponds. One, or a few, may have been reserved for the livestock, and one for the slaves. But there are indications, especially during the earlier periods of slavery, that slaves often shared the ponds with livestock. It is therefore not surprising to read that maladies such as diarrhea and dysentery, though certainly not unique to the slaves, commonly afflicted the slave population.

In general, then, one has a picture of the plantation yard, containing the owner or manager's house, sugar-mill, boiling-house and other out-buildings; not far away was the slave village, its houses clustered in a relatively compact area, with the burial ground, ponds, and gardens forming part of the settlement complex. This is the general picture which provides us with the clues on what to look for and where to look. But we would like to learn, as I said, many more details: What, for example, was the specific architectural design of various types of slave houses, and what were their floor plans? What constructional materials were used? What were the spatial relationships between houses in the villages? Approximately how many people did the houses contain, and what types of furniture and utensils were employed? What foods were consumed? What will the burial grounds tell us about religious beliefs, mortuary practices, and conceptions of the after-life? What will the skeletons of the dead reveal about the age and sex of those who died and, through analysis of the bones, the kinds of diseases from which they suffered? There are many other questions we would like answered, and there will be undoubtedly many more questions as the work proceeds. Hopefully, then, archaeological investigations will not only answer some questions, but raise new ones as well.

The first problem in proceeding with the archaeological field work is locating a plantation's slave village. We are using two approaches to this problem. One involves the use of old plantation maps which actually show the location of the slave village. However, such maps are rare and I only know of a handful. (Usually old plantation maps simply show the fields, often identifying them by letters of the alphabet, and do not depict the slave villages.) By calculating measurements from the maps at our disposal, and relating the slave villages marked on the maps to contemporary evidence of other features marked on the maps, such as an old mill, pond, or the main house, we are able to locate the "Negro yard" even if today the field is under cane and known by a different name.

Another way of approaching the location of slave villages, a way that we are depending on with greater frequency, derives from a suggestion made a few years ago by the late Sir John Chandler. In an article in the Journal of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society (Vol. xxxii, pp. 133-143) he suggested that many insights into local history could be obtained by examining plantation field names. Following this suggestion, we inquire on plantations as to whether there is a field by the name of "Negro

yard" or "Nigger yard." And as we talk to more and more people, we are surprised to learn that many plantations have fields known by one of these names; even if the field name has been changed in recent years, there is invariably someone who remembers which field was called the "Negro yard."

As we walk around these plantations we find that everything more or less fits with the historical record. The "Negro yard," as identified by plantation people, is generally located where we would have expected it to be in relation to the ponds, plantation yard, and plantation house. It is thus very important for our work to interview people. As we talk to old laborers, for example, who have been on these plantations since they were children, we find they remember many things useful to our research; things they themselves observed or things that had been related to them by their parents or grandparents - all clues, little bits and pieces of information, which add up into a meaningful picture.

After we locate with a reasonable degree of certainty the "Negro yard" field, and if it is not under a heavy cover of sugar cane, we carefully walk over the field picking up whatever we find on the surface. What one finds is not very dramatic, by-and-large broken pottery, and an occasional pipe-stem made of white clay. But pottery, because it is one of the most enduring things that humans create, is a very important artifact to the archaeologist. It gives him clues as to where evidence of human habitation might exist underneath the surface, helps him to define the "material culture" of a people, and helps him to establish a chronology, or dating system, which, of course, is particularly important for any kind of historical research. Although deep plowing and intensive cultivation pose many problems for archaeological work in Barbados, the way in which pottery is distributed or concentrated on the surface of a "Negro yard" field helps to indicate the areas to probe further by excavation.

When we have decided upon a field and have received permission to excavate (I might add that plantation owners we have spoken to thus far have been most cordial and cooperative and have not hesitated to grant such permission) the field is first surveyed and a map made of the larger area within which we are going to dig. This is done in order to record in a systematic and precise fashion, as excavation proceeds, the location of artifacts or other evidence of human occupations or activity. By such recording we can get a visual perspective on how these finds are related to one another in the ground. Surveying stakes, measured in with respect to a central point on our map, are placed in the ground in order to demarcate the outlines of small trenches within which we will start our digging.

The initial excavating is, in effect, a trial and error sampling procedure. By carefully digging small holes, called test trenches by the archaeologist, in various parts of the "Negro yard" we hope that one or more of these will uncover evidence of human activity, such as a fragment of a house post, part of a cooking fire, or a portion of a grave. If this procedure yields something of interest, then the test trench is expanded over a wider area by digging holes adjacent to it. Thus far, we have only been digging for a few days and our test trenches have yielded very little of importance. They have thus been refilled, and we plan on repeating the procedure at another plantation. A great deal of patience is required and one can expect to go down many wrong paths before a productive one is discovered.

I have tried to give you some idea of the wider research project within which the

archaeological phase falls, as well as an idea of the kinds of things we know through the historical record and the things for which we are looking . The archaeological work is planned to continue until around the end of April so that within the next few months we should have a more concrete idea of how profitable archaeological research will be in uncovering information the social and cultural life of Barbados slaves. However, it will take longer to complete the analysis of our materials and produce a written account of the excavations and then results. Hopefully, within a year we will be able to provide some definitive answers, not only to the questions we initially raised, but also to those that the excavations themselves will undoubtedly bring to our minds.