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Strategies of Slave Subsistence

The Jamaican Case Reconsidered

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To the Arawaks, the first known inhabitants, Jamaica was a land of streams and forests. It is also a land of mountains, savannas, fertile valleys, coastal plains, the lower basins and deltas of the larger rivers which have rich alluvial soil, and 'karst' lands known as the Cockpit Country. At some risk of oversimplification, it can be said that in slave days the larger sugar plantations or estates occupied fertile, lowland areas; cattle pens, the savannas and hills; coffee, the hills and mountains; minor staples and slave provision grounds, areas of sparse population and broken terrain. Jamaica was Britain's richest colony in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, linked by trade and shipping to the metropolis, West Africa, North America, and Latin America. While coffee growing became important in the 1790s and early 1800s, sugar cane planting and processing was the base on which was erected Jamaica's great wealth and income. What was needed in land and physical equipment for a profitable sugar estate was a large extent of level, fertile and well watered land to grow sugar cane, provision grounds for the slaves, pastures for livestock, and woodland for fuel and building materials. At a central location on the estate were the sugar works consisting of the mill for crushing the canes, a boiling house, curing house, rum distillery, hothouse or slave hospital, and various outbuildings. The planter's great-house was generally built on rising land overlooking the sugar works and the village of huts occupied by the slave workers, and at an intermediate point stood the houses of the white overseer, bookkeepers, and skilled craftsmen.

Most crucial to the functioning of the sugar estates and other labour using activities were the African West Indian slaves who were known as the 'sinews of empire'. As the planting frontier of Jamaica expanded from the

late seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries, masses of labour were needed to clear new land, construct sugar works, slave quarters, great-houses and grow and process sugar canes and other export staples. Slave trade statistics show a total of 828,185 African slaves imported into Jamaica in the period 1702-1808, of whom 193,597 were re-exported to other markets, leaving 634,588 to labour on the island. Slave population estimates for the island are 45,000 in 1700, rising to 300,000 in 1800. This meant that some 575,000 (634,588 less the 58,505 slaves imported in the period 1801-8) new labourers were needed during the eighteenth century to increase the population by 250,000, or a ratio of about two imported slaves to one net addition to the island's slave population.¹

To feed this work-force owners and managers had to import food or have the slaves produce it, either as part of the regular work of the estate or on their own account. The second course, where practicable, was more economical and less risky. In Jamaica, although imported foodstuffs and estate-supervised production of provisions played a part in subsisting the slaves, the dominant system came to be one of unsupervised production of food crops by the slaves. They were allotted parcels of land, unsuited to the growing of sugar cane and other export staples to produce a variety of foods, 'such as tree crops, vegetables, and edible herbs and roots, as well as craft materials'. In time, they came to produce surpluses which they took 'to local markets and exchanged for other commodities or sold for cash'.²

The Jamaican provision ground and internal marketing system was characterized by the largely unsupervised food growing and marketing by slaves who were allotted small plots known as 'yards', 'house plots', or 'kitchen gardens', near their huts in the slave village, and on the outskirts of plantations larger plots known as 'provision grounds', 'negro grounds', or 'polincks'. This system of largely self-organized subsistence production, it is argued, benefited masters and slaves. It saved masters much trouble and expense and was a means of guaranteeing cheap labour; it kept the slaves usefully employed in seasons of slack demand for plantation labour; it minimized the risk of food shortage and famine at times of natural disasters and wartime shipping embargoes.

At the same time, the provision ground system enabled the slave to get away from the oppressive plantation environment and work with family members and interact socially with other slaves. It increased the slave's capacity to function independently and intelligently, is said to have provided him and his family with a better diet, a small income from the sale of foodstuffs and other products, and gave him a feeling of proprietorship in the land. Sidney Mintz and Douglas Hall, authors of the pioneer monograph on the origins of the Jamaican internal marketing system, argue, among other things, that the provision grounds and markets helped to make the slaves less discontented, less likely to run away, and less prone to rebel. Mintz, in a later publication, uses the term 'proto-peasant' to characterize those

activities that provided slaves with agricultural skills, craft techniques and other essentials by which a peasant-style life was created, in spite of the repressive conditions of slavery.³

'Jamaica', according to Orlando Patterson, 'was the first of the West Indian islands to utilize the provision ground system as the main source of supplying the slaves with their subsistence and it was the island in which the system was most highly developed'. Evidence of rudimentary provision grounds can be found as early as the period 1671-5, when Governor Sir Thomas Lynch gave detailed instructions for establishing a cocoa plantation on which he said there was a need for provision grounds for both white indentured servants and African Jamaican slaves.⁴

It was openly acknowledged, however, that the provision ground system in fact at times fell short of satisfying the slaves' basic needs. The results were vividly described by Governor Sir Edward Trelawny who wrote in 1746 that 'some of the poor Creatures pine away and are starved, others that have somewhat more spirits, go a stealing and are shot as they are caught in Provision Grounds; others are whipt or even hang'd for going into the Woods, into which Hunger and Necessity itself drives them to try to get Food to keep Life and Soul together'. Subsistence crises followed drought, storm, hurricane and wartime shortages of imported supplies. A combination of successive hurricane years (1780, 1781, 1784, 1785, 1786) and wartime shortage produced an outright famine officially estimated to have killed 150,000 slaves.

It is clear, however, that in other seasons some slaves had produce to sell. Slaves brought their provisions and other articles to markets established for the white community, the first of which was held at Spanish Town in 1662, seven years after the English occupation. Marketing activity increased in subsequent years, so much so, in fact, that in 1735 an act of the Assembly of Jamaica provided that 'Slaves may carry about, and sell, all manner of provisions, fruits, fresh fish, milk, poultry, and other small stock of all kinds, having a ticket from their owner or employer'.⁵ This article investigates the contradictory evidence relating to the provision ground system and brings to question its adequacy as a method of slave subsistence.

Leading Jamaicans asserted, in a report from the Committee of the Assembly (23 November 1815), that the treatment of slaves had improved markedly both before and after abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. The laws now afforded protection to the slave in the important points of life, that is, 'exemption from cruel and excessive punishment, or severe labour, and secures to him food, raiment, and a fair trial for offenses, involving the punishment of death, transportation, or protracted confinement to hard labour'.⁶

Lending credence to the above committee report is the recent work of John R. Ward. He estimates that the productivity of slaves engaged in sugar production in the older British West Indian colonies (which include

Jamaica) increased about 35 per cent between 1750 and 1830. This rise in productivity he attributes chiefly to improvements in the quality of the labour force, for experience showed the planters that 'a better-fed, self-reproducing labour force was superior in efficiency to contingents of half-starved Africans'. Ward adds much to our understanding of technical changes which contributed to the increased productivity of labour and to planter-directed measures to ameliorate the condition of slaves on sugar estates.⁷

In his historical survey of the slave laws of Jamaica, Orlando Patterson finds that 'for almost three-quarters of the period of slavery Jamaica did not possess a proper slave-code. All that existed between 1655 and 1788 was a series of *ad hoc* laws, most of which were prompted by sheer necessity, and were largely confused, vague, in parts, even contradictory'. Codifying or consolidating the laws relating to slaves was undertaken after 1782, in response to pressure from the abolition movement in England to ameliorate the condition of the slaves and also the slave rebellion in Saint Domingue.⁸

Bryan Edwards had the Consolidated Act of Jamaica, passed 2 March 1792, printed in his *History of the British West Indies*, which was first published in 1793. Clause II provided that 'every master, owner, or possessor, of any plantation or plantations, pens, or other lands whatsoever', should allot a sufficient quantity of land for every slave in his possession, 'and allow such slave sufficient time to work the same, in order to provide him, her, or themselves, with sufficient provisions for his, her or their maintenance'. Furthermore, all such masters, owners or possessors were required to 'plant at least one acre of land for every ten negroes that he shall be possessed of on such plantation, pen, or other lands, over and above the negro-grounds aforesaid; which lands shall be kept up in a planter-like condition, under the penalty of fifty pounds'. A note attached to this clause said that in the former act of 1782 an acre of ground provisions was to be planted for every four Negroes, 'but it was found an exorbitant and unnecessary allowance'.⁹

Clause III of the 1792 slave act provided that slave-owners, masters, chief managers, and overseers should 'personally inspect into the condition of such negro-grounds once in every month at the least, in order to see that the same are cultivated and kept up in a proper manner, of which oath shall be made, as in this act is hereafter directed'. Where lands proper for growing provisions were not available to the masters, owners, or possessors, they were to 'make good and ample provision for all such slaves as they shall be possessed of, equal to the value of two shillings and six-pence currency per week for each slave, in order that they may be properly supported and maintained, under the penalty of fifty pounds'. Clause IV prohibited masters, owners, possessors, attorneys, guardians, and trustees from discarding or turning away 'any slave or slaves, on account of or by reason of such slave or slaves being rendered incapable of labour or service' because of 'sickness, age, or infirmity; but every such master, owner, or possessor, as aforesaid,

shall be, and he is hereby obliged . . . to find and provide them with wholesome necessaries of life . . . Owners who failed to provide for such slaves and allowed them 'to wander about, or become burthensome to others' suffered a penalty of ten pounds for every such offence.¹⁰

Several clauses in the act of 1792 specified the holidays allowed during the year, the days allowed to slaves to cultivate their provision grounds, and the hours of work and breaks for meals for field slaves. Clause XVIII allowed holidays to all slaves on Christmas-day and the day following, and a single day at Easter and Whitsuntide, provided that, apart from Christmas, no two holidays should be allowed 'to follow or succeed immediately one after the other', thus prohibiting long weekend holidays. Clause XIX made compulsory the 'usual and customary practice of allowing slaves one day in every fortnight to cultivate their own provision-grounds (exclusive of Sundays), except during the time of crop [or harvest]'. A penalty of £50 was levied for infractions of this clause. Clause XX stated that 'every field-slave on such plantation or settlement shall, on work days, be allowed, according to custom, half an hour for breakfast, and two hours for dinner'; and no slave be compelled to perform field-work 'before the hour of five in the morning, or after the hour of seven at night, except during the time of crop, under the penalty of fifty pounds, to be recovered against the overseer, or other person having the care of such slaves'.¹¹

The slave act of 1816 modified the act of 1792 in three particulars. It increased the time allowed to cultivate provision grounds to at least 26 days in the year other than Sundays and the season of harvesting the crop. It directed that slaves should not be compelled to perform estate labour on Sundays, even in crop time; it prohibited the sugar crushing mills from operating during the period from about 7 p.m. on Saturdays to 5 a.m. on Mondays. It also provided that slaves belonging to masters who were without land to serve as provision grounds should be served with 'good and ample' provisions to the value of three shillings and four-pence currency per week.¹²

Jamaicans resisted the Orders in Council issued by the Colonial Secretary in Whitehall during the decade of the 1820s. The island's Assembly protested strongly and enacted only a few of the amelioration measures they were pressured to adopt. Although the power of the planters was officially limited by the slave codes enacted by the Assembly, no machinery was in place to enforce the clauses designed to protect the slaves.

The virtues of the provision ground system were first expounded by Bryan Edwards, the planter-historian and leader of the West Indian lobby in the House of Commons. His two-volume (1793) history supplied the public with the following 'idealized' picture of the provision ground and internal marketing system in Jamaica:

The practice which prevails in Jamaica of giving the Negroes lands to cultivate, from the produce of which they are expected to maintain themselves (except

in the times of scarcity, arising from hurricanes and droughts, when assistance is never denied them) is universally allowed to be judicious and beneficial; producing a happy coalition of interests between the master and the slave. The Negro who has acquired by his own labour a property in his master's land, has much to lose, and is therefore less inclined to desert his work. He earns a little money, by which he is enabled to indulge himself in fine clothes on holidays, and gratify his palate with salted meats and other provisions that otherwise he could not obtain; and the proprietor is eased, in a great measure, of the expense of feeding him . . . if the owner's territory is sufficiently extensive, the Negroes make it a practice to enlarge their own grounds, or exchange them for fresh land, every year. By these means, having quicker and better returns, they raise provisions in abundance, not only for their own use, but also a great surplus to sell.

The misfortune is, they trust more to plantain-groves, corn and other vegetables, that are liable to be destroyed by storms, than to what are called *ground provisions*; such as yams, eddoes, potatoes, cassada [cassava], and other esculent roots; all which are out of the reach of the hurricanes; but prudence is a term that has no place in the Negro-vocabulary. To obviate the mischiefs which fatal experience has proved to flow from this gross inattention, the *Slave Act* of Jamaica obliges, under a penalty, every proprietor of lands to keep, properly cultivated in ground provisions, one acre for every ten Negroes exclusive of the Negro grounds.

In Jamaica, the Negroes are allowed one day in a fortnight, except in time of crop, besides Sundays and holidays, for cultivating their grounds and carrying their provisions to market . . . The most industrious of the Negroes do not, I believe, employ more than sixteen hours in a month in the cultivation of their own provision grounds (leaving all further care of them to the beneficence of nature) and in favourable seasons, this is sufficient.

Sunday is their day of market, and it is wonderful what numbers are then seen, hastening from all parts of the country, towards the towns and shipping places, laden with fruits and vegetables, pigs, goats, and poultry, their own property. In Jamaica it is supposed that upwards of 10,000 assemble every Sunday morning in the market of Kingston . . . I do not believe that an instance can be produced of a master's interfering with his Negroes in their *peculium* thus acquired. They are permitted also to dispose at their deaths of what little property they possess; and even to bequeath their grounds or gardens to such of their fellow-slaves as they think proper. These principles are so well-established, that whenever it is found convenient for the owner to exchange the negro grounds for other lands, the Negroes must be satisfied, in money or otherwise, before the exchange takes place. It is universally the practice.¹³

My research on the demographic, medical, and economic history of Jamaica has led me to question what Edwards called the 'happy coalition of interests between the master and the slave' by which the bondsman laboured on his provision ground to feed himself and family and earn a little money at the market to indulge himself in 'fine clothes' and 'salted meats' he could not otherwise obtain, while his master was relieved in great measure of the cost of feeding him. In the following pages I will draw on contemporary evidence supplied by planters, plantation attorneys, overseers, missionaries, abolitionists and modern authorities to shed light on the following

questions concerned with the provision ground and internal marketing system in Jamaica. 1. Did the typical field hand have a large enough allotment of land to feed himself and his family? 2. Were the slaves given ample time away from plantation labour to cultivate their provision grounds? 3. Did they have the energy and will to grow food for themselves and their families? 4. How great a distance separated the slave quarters from outlying provision grounds and the Sunday markets where surplus produce was bartered and sold? 5. Were adequate reserves set aside for periods when food production and imports were interrupted by inclement weather, embargoes on trade and shipping, and other emergencies? 6. Were adequate measures taken to prevent theft, pilfering, and trespass of livestock on the provision grounds? 7. Was the provision ground and marketing system adapted to the needs of the young, infirm, and improvident slaves? 8. Did the typical field hand grow crops of sufficient variety and have access to foodstuffs that would provide a balanced and nutritious diet? 9. Did the typical field hand grow a surplus of foodstuffs for sale at the Sunday market?

Jamaica, with its comparatively large land area and mixture of coastal plains and river deltas, interior valleys, savannas, and mountain areas, was considered ideal for combining staple production with the growing of provisions and the raising of livestock. The amount of land allotted to the typical field hand, according to contemporary accounts, ranged from as little as a quarter of an acre to as much as four or five acres or more. William Beckford, sugar planter and author of a descriptive account of Jamaica, asserted that a provision ground of a quarter of an acre was fully sufficient for the supply of a moderate family and with a small surplus to carry to market. But Beckford hedged his claim with qualifications that made its credibility highly suspect. The quarter-acre plot of ground, he said, 'must be of a productive quality, be in a situation that cannot fail of seasons, be sheltered from the wind, and protected from the trespass of cattle, and the theft of negroes'. Moreover, he said the land needed to be regularly planted, well cultivated, and kept clear of weeds.¹⁴

James Stephen, leading abolitionist and one-time barrister in the sugar island of St Kitts, believed that in Jamaica the case for subsisting slaves by providing provision grounds was, 'for the most part, much better than in any of our other sugar colonies'. It was not because the planters of Jamaica were more liberal, he said,

but there is, in most districts of that island, a much greater quantity than elsewhere of seasonable land fit for the growth of provisions, and unemployed in the culture of canes; so that few of the planters there comparatively, are under any great temptation to stint their slaves improperly in the quantity of their allotments, or to assign them in a barren soil, though they often lie at an oppressive distance from the home stall.

Stephen went on to caution that the best provision grounds would not suffice

to prevent want, unless time and strength enough were allowed for their cultivation.¹⁵

James Simpson, attorney for several absentee-owned estates in eastern Jamaica from 1804 to 1828, stated in 1832 that,

It is not customary in Jamaica to make any survey of the land cultivated by the negroes, and they generally cultivate it in a straggling way, here and there where they find the best soil; if they had land enough to go upon, they cultivate that which is most easily cultivated and most productive, so that it is impossible to form a judgment of the extent of it in the aggregate.

Simpson's reference to cultivation 'in a straggling way' can be construed as swidden, slash-and-burn, or shifting agriculture which was widely practised by the slaves on their provision grounds. This entailed the strenuous labour of clearing or partly clearing primary or secondary forest in hilly and mountainous land and burning it over before putting in a crop. High yields were limited to a few years, after which the nutrients in the soil and wood ashes were exhausted. Moreover, the growing crops required frequent weeding. 'In effect', writes Robert Dirks, 'time available for weeding imposes the primary constraint on the extent of production' by the swidden method of cultivation.¹⁶

Regarding the time allowed to cultivate the provision grounds, it is obvious that the best grounds would not suffice unless time and strength were allowed by the masters for their cultivation. That the time was frequently insufficient is the burden of testimony of numerous contemporaries. The Reverend John Thorpe, who testified before the House of Commons Select Committee on the Extinction of Slavery in 1832, had been Assistant Curate of the Anglican church in the parish of St Thomas-in-the-East. In reply to the question, 'Do you conceive the time allowed by law to be generally sufficient for the maintenance of the slaves?' he said, 'No, I think not'. His grounds for believing the time was insufficient were: 'Because they are compelled to work in their grounds on a Sunday, and the provisions which they cultivate on the other 26 days is not sufficient to maintain them as they ought to be maintained, in proportion to the severe labour they have to undergo; it would enable them to cultivate on land of fair quality a sufficiency of vegetable provisions, but not other things'.¹⁷

Labour demands were particularly onerous during the four to six months of the sugar harvest. Chiefly from testimony given to Select Committees of the Commons and Lords, it is evident that all available workers were pressed into the campaign and the pace accelerated to finish the crop before the onset of the May rains. Under instructions coming down from plantation attorneys and higher up, overseers generally ordered more canes cut in a given day than the crushing mill could process in the daylight hours, and because the cut canes fermented and spoiled within 24 to 48 hours, the work continued around the clock, six days out of seven, in the mill house and

boiling house. Robert Scott and other leading planters who testified before the Select Committee of the House of Commons in 1832, described this system of both day and night work in some detail. Scott said that some estates had all their able-bodied, non-specialist slaves divided into two spells or shifts and others into three spells, according to the size of their labour force. Daytime labour extended over six days from Monday through Saturday in crop time and for 12 hours daily, less a half-hour for breakfast and two hours for dinner (or lunch). Under the two spell system each spell was subdivided into two divisions. On day one, say, the first division of the first spell would work the night shift from eight to midnight, when it would be relieved by the first division of the second spell which would work from midnight to 6 a.m., when it would be relieved by daytime factory workers. Upon being relieved, these first division, second spell slaves would go to the field and work until sunset, taking time off for breakfast and dinner. They would then have the night off, work all the following day in the field, after which they would work the eight to midnight shift. By dividing the night workers into four groups, each slave worked and rested on alternate nights. In the aggregate, each slave laboured approximately 72 hours each week during crop time, after allowing two-and-one-half hours daily for meals. But even the dinner hour was not always free from labour, for, as Patterson has noted, 'If the provision grounds were not very far away some slaves attended them during the two-hour break at lunch; and a few of the very industrious even went to them at nights'.¹⁸

Planters frequently remarked that their slaves were cheerful and robust during harvest, chiefly because they consumed unrestricted quantities of raw cane juice and chewed ripe canes in the field. But the Reverend Hope Masterton Waddell, a Presbyterian missionary in Jamaica, observed that the slaves were lively at the beginning of the crop and seemed to thrive on the sweet cane juice, of which they had a plentiful supply. 'But 'ere the season closed they began to suffer, were fagged and sickly from excessive toil and want of proper food'.¹⁹

Sunday labour was common for the slaves, especially during the sugar harvest season when it was the only day they had to tend their provision grounds, take produce to market, and supply their family needs. Writing in 1774 the Jamaica planter-historian Edward Long complained 'that the sabbath-day, as at present it is passed, is by no means a respite from labour; on the contrary, the Negroes, either employing it on their grounds, or in travelling a great distance to some market, fatigue themselves much more on that day, than on any other in the week'. The Reverend Peter Duncan, a Methodist missionary, said he believed it was 'indispensably necessary for the Negroes to labour on Sunday'. He never expected to see slaves at any of the chapels where he conducted services more than once a month, even when their masters and owners favoured missionary endeavour among their slaves.²⁰

William Taylor, a merchant and plantation attorney in Jamaica, was asked by the House of Commons Committee, 'Do you think that if a Negro were to devote the whole of Sunday to repose, he could maintain himself and his family upon the surplus time given him in the 26 weeks?'

Certainly not [he replied]. I should think not on the 26 days, seeing that the 52 Sundays and the 26 days are for the great majority of them, generally consumed in marketing and in their grounds; I certainly should infer that if they strictly observed the Sunday and only had the 26 days, it would not be sufficient, because in the mission stations, I remember that, on Sundays when they had not [been allowed to work for themselves the previous day], the people never would attend service, and I have heard the clergymen complain that on those Sundays they could not get congregations generally.

Mary Turner notes that 'when drought affected the provision grounds, as in 1825, the people were left short of food and money and were too depressed to show any enthusiasm for church going'.²¹

Gilbert Mathison, an estate owner, returned to Jamaica in 1808 after an absence of 13 years in England. Although he saw improvement in the tone of colonial life, he deplored the mismanagement of sugar estates and the harsh treatment of slaves. The degree of labour required of slaves was, he believed, generally kept within the limits of fair and good regulation; however, he complained that cane hole digging and keeping spell (or night work) during crop were the most laborious and depressing duties on a sugar estate. Elderly and 'weakly' people were said to be exposed to the pressure of unsuitable hardship and fatigue during the crop season. Moreover, Mathison railed against the 'prevailing disposition on the part of overseers to squeeze every possible degree of labour from the Negroes; no tenderness is felt for them, and no relaxation admitted of. If they are not working for themselves, they must work for their masters'. Similarly, Benjamin McMahon, an overseer and bookkeeper in Jamaica, wrote that he knew of plantations where the labourers' provision grounds were 'almost entirely neglected, from their being unable, after the toil and barbarity to which they had been subjected by their task-masters for six days out of seven, to cultivate them'.²²

It would be wrong to assume that labour on the provision grounds was consistently less arduous than that on sugar estates and coffee plantations. In fact, Beckford wrote, 'The manner in which the Negroes occupy themselves in their grounds is rather an employment than a toil, particularly if the wood be felled, and the land is cleared: but if they have heavy timber to cut down, the labour will be much, and the danger will be great; for they often get maimed or killed in this precarious operation, in which are required not only strength but likewise foresight'.²³

The distances walked by slaves to their provision grounds and the Sunday markets varied widely. James Stephen remarked, 'Even the laborious walk to and from the provision grounds must, in many cases, suffice to deter the poor slave from going to them, and make him or her truant to the Sunday

task. In Jamaica they are very commonly distant several miles from the homestall, and on hills of steep ascent'. In the infancy of a plantation the provision ground was generally near the slave quarters and sugar works. However, the extension of a plantation often made it necessary to open new grounds farther away. Barry Higman writes that some planters purchased separate areas for such grounds, 'requiring the slaves to travel distances up to 15 miles to tend their crops. In some cases the provision grounds comprised marginal, unproductive land; in others the soil was ideal for food crops'.²⁴

Regarding the Sunday markets, William Beckford regarded a distance of 'five or seven miles, or more' as making the journey backwards and forwards to the market 'a day of labour and fatigue', but if, on the contrary, the market was within 'any tolerable reach', it was a day of both enjoyment and rest. Reverend Thomas Cooper, former missionary to slaves in Jamaica, was asked by the House of Commons Committee, 'Were the Negroes in the habit of carrying the provisions which they cultivated to market upon a Sunday?' 'Yes they were,' he replied, 'all the surplus provisions, and frequently provisions which they ought not to have sold, they constantly took to market on the Sunday'. To the question, 'What number of miles have you ever known them to travel with their provisions upon a Sunday?' he replied, 'I think 13 or 14 and back again'. Methodist missionary John Barry testified before the same committee that he knew slaves who travelled 25 or more miles to market, travelling overnight to reach the Sunday market, and taking the greater part of the Sabbath to return home.²⁵

Providing reserve stocks of foodstuffs was difficult because of spoilage in a tropical climate, weevil and other vermin and theft. To Mathison it was a humane deed for the Assembly of Jamaica to pass the act of 1792 requiring slaveowners to have 'land planted in ground provisions, and kept in good condition, in the proportion of one acre for every ten Negroes, upon all plantations'. He said the law was intended to serve as a precaution against famine resulting from hurricanes, 'but as no hurricanes have happened for a long course of years, the law is universally disregarded, and is now no better than mere waste paper'. Higman says that 'one of the arguments presented by the planters of Barbados and the Leeward Islands in favour of the system of estate cultivation of food crops and rationed allowances was that it reduced the possibility of famine resulting from drought, hurricanes, or interruptions to trade'.²⁶

We have seen that the slave act of 1792 required monthly personal inspections of Negro-grounds. One purpose of the inspections was to ascertain the extent of and take measures against theft. Theft was an especially acute problem owing chiefly to seasonal, if not chronic hunger and the attitude of slaves toward the property of their masters. Roderick McDonald writes that slaves were consistent in their rationalization of 'stealing' from the plantation or the planter. 'Their common attitude argued "What I take

from my master, being for my use, who am his slave, or property, he loses nothing by its transfer”’. Slave watchmen on sugar estates were intended by their masters to guard export crops, livestock, pastures, orchards, kitchen gardens, and provision grounds from theft, arson, or the depredations of livestock. But Beckford complained that the watchman was often a slave who had become an invalid from age, accident, or other infirmity, and that ‘much was expected from his vigilance, and more from those exertions, which, in fact, from bodily infirmity, he is not able to make’.²⁷

Inspection of provision grounds was also undertaken to see that the slaves were providing adequately for their own sustenance. Whereas the slave act of 1788 contained a clause requiring such inspection on a monthly basis, Robert Hibbert, Jr, a planter wrote in 1825 that the overseer or his deputy, a bookkeeper,

Should never omit a single week to examine accurately the Negro grounds, which may not only prevent neglect, but will also give the overseer the earliest notice of any failure of crop, which may entitle any Negro to the indulgent support of his master; for with all care, such support will occasionally be necessary, and unless the overseer fully inform himself, he will be apt to give to the undeserving what he should deliver with a less sparing hand to the unfortunate.

That Hibbert’s advice often went unheeded is suggested by John Ward who writes that ‘the overseers on some estates claimed at the time of emancipation that the provision grounds were regularly inspected, as required by law, but many admitted their ignorance of what they clearly regarded as the slaves’ private arrangements’.²⁸

Writers of various persuasions and experience were convinced that the provision ground and marketing system were not well adapted to the needs of young, aged, infirm, and improvident slaves. Mathison asserted that the slaves were exposed to a thousand hazards. ‘If it should happen that, through idleness, or sickness, or old age, or in consequence of too numerous a family of children, the provision-ground should be neglected, or become unproductive or insufficient’, he wrote, ‘the Negro is not allowed to expect, nor, in point of fact, does he obtain, assistance from the stores of the plantation’. He added that while there were many exceptions to this state of affairs, he felt compelled ‘to state it *broadly* that such is the *general* practice from one end of the island to the other’. James Stephen wrote that he could not see ‘how the weaklier slaves in Jamaica, or in colonial language, the less industrious, can be exempted from often suffering under a scarcity of food, though in a less degree, perhaps, than those in other colonies’.²⁹

Hibbert claimed that ‘good Negroes’ provided for themselves except ‘in the day of calamity’, but he had known instances ‘where the indolence of the Negroes was so great as to make it necessary for the overseer to put

the idlers into the regular gangs, and make them cultivate their own grounds, as they were the work of the estate'. It was customary on many plantations to issue weekly rations of salt and pickled fish and herrings. But these and other allowances, such as rum, were made to head slaves in larger portions than to ordinary field slaves. 'Special allowances other than those given on holidays were distributed chiefly to head people on sugar estates,' writes Higman, 'further buttressing the hierarchy of status and increasing the potential nutrition of those performing the smallest amounts of heavy manual labour'.³⁰

We have seen that salt fish and herrings were highly valued by the slaves and were often purchased at the Sunday markets. According to the *Journal of the Assembly of Jamaica* for 11 March 1801, a committee appointed to inquire into the situation of the trade of the island called attention to 'the alarming situation the island is placed in with regard to salt provisions, whereby our slaves will be deprived of a food absolutely necessary to correct the ill effects of a diet entirely vegetable'; it was recommended that a committee be appointed 'to prepare an address to his honour the lieutenant-governor on a subject of so much importance'. Again, on 10 July 1805, at a time when the herring fishery on the coasts of the British Isles had failed, the Assembly sent a representation to Lieutenant-Governor George Nugent, part of which follows:

Salted provisions are the chief corrective of the vegetable diet of the Negroes, and a want of them inevitably brings on dysentery and disorders of that class, which, whenever prevalent, never fail to carry off great numbers. By being deprived of what they know to be absolutely necessary, and have been accustomed to consider their right, discontents are excited, and there have already been instances of gangs of negroes leaving the plantations, to complain to the civil magistrates of the usual allowance being withheld.

But such 'allowances' were not only withheld in periods of war, as above, but as I have demonstrated in *Doctors and Slaves*, herrings and salt fish were considered an 'indulgence' and not an 'allowance' by the planters of Jamaica in both war and peace, and 'the whole system of indulgences operated upon the Negro population as a stimulus to good conduct, because they were withheld whenever their conduct was not good'. Although slaves raised poultry, pigs, goats, and occasionally had cows, the evidence suggests that most of their livestock was sold to the white inhabitants and transients. All-in-all there was marked dietary imbalance for the slaves of Jamaica, one that was deficient in protein and fat, on the one hand, and weighted heavily on the side of vegetable carbohydrates on the other.³¹

Notwithstanding the colourful and functional aspects of the Sunday markets, it may be questioned to what extent the average field hand was involved in market transactions. William Shand was a plantation attorney who had charge of estates in almost every parish and from 18,000 to 20,000 slaves in the years from 1791 to 1823. He was asked by the Select

Committee of 1832, 'Do not the larger proportion of the Negroes, having provision grounds, raise surplus provisions and carry them to market?' He replied, 'The larger proportion of the Negroes do not, but they may do it; they all have the same means upon an estate'. In reply to a follow-up question, 'Did the greater number of the Negroes under your charge raise surplus produce for sale or not?' Shand replied, 'I should say that a larger proportion raise surplus produce but as to the quantity it is difficult to speak; more than a moiety [about a half] of the adult part of the Negroes raised more than was sufficient for their own consumption.' From a wide reading of the literature on the internal marketing system it seems evident that much the greater part of the 'surplus' from the provision grounds went to purchase pickled and salt fish that should have been supplied to the slaves as allowances from their masters. Patterson says that most slaves carried a load weighing between 30 and 50 pounds on their heads; but a few of the more prosperous had asses to assist them. He finds the assertion of a pro-slavery writer that an industrious couple could earn between ten and eleven shillings per week (or from £26 to £29 currency per annum) as clearly a preposterous overstatement. Moreover, he finds a general consensus among many writers that 'the slave earned just enough to enable him to buy his salt for a week, i.e. salt, fish and beef, and on a few occasions, some pieces of cloth and a few trinkets'. In fact, Patterson asserts that very few slaves managed to save anything.³²

From the testimony and writings presented above, 'the happy coalition of interests between the master and the slave' that Bryan Edwards regarded as judicious and beneficial was, in fact, far from a happy arrangement for great numbers of slaves in Jamaica. With relatively few exceptions, it was the duty of the slave to feed himself and his family. During the long crop season he was burdened with day and night work and allowed no week days to tend his provision ground and market his produce. Hence, Sunday was the only day he had to work for himself and family. The evidence suggests that slaves frequently lacked the energy and will to feed themselves, that they were removed from their provision grounds and the markets by considerable distances, had limited reserves of foodstuffs to fall back upon in periods of scarcity, and were plagued by theft, pilfering, and the trespass of livestock. Moreover, while industrious, able-bodied slaves could withstand the rigours of life and labour on sugar estates, the young and old, infirm and improvident were often neglected. Malnutrition, disease and death often followed, in part because of dietary imbalance resulting from defects in the system of food production and distribution. Finally, the typical field slave seems to have had only a small surplus to take to market, the greater part of which he laid out for salt fish which he should have received as a rationed allowance from his master. In the final analysis it is clear that insufficient time and energy for the slaves to properly cultivate and market their provisions were criticisms most often cited in the literature on sugar slavery in Jamaica.

If the provision ground and internal marketing system is viewed from the standpoint of the slaves attached to sugar estates where their condition had been ameliorated, there are grounds for believing the system had certain positive aspects. Matthew Gregory ('Monk') Lewis who visited his estates in Jamaica in 1815-17, told of an evening drive when he met his slaves returning from their grounds in the mountains carrying baskets of provisions sufficient to last them for a week. Noting that he had given them extra time to tend their grounds, he wrote, 'it enables them to perform their task with so much ease as almost converts it into an amusement; and the frequent visiting [of] their grounds makes them grow habitually as much attached to them as they are to their houses and gardens'. Provision grounds, kitchen gardens, houses and yards were areas of relative freedom, privacy, and social interaction for the slaves. They were spaces where they could relax from the rigours of plantation labour. On these spaces they worked without compulsion, often in family units or with friends. Here they reportedly worked more diligently than in the canefields, expending an amazing amount of energy. Moreover, they enjoyed pride of workmanship in traditional handicrafts and quasi-ownership of land which helped to build their self-esteem. 'Before emancipation', writes Higman, 'slaves on large plantations generally lived in separate household units surrounded by small garden plots and formed into villages, with populations typically in excess of 200 persons. The community life and kinship networks of plantation villages created strong ties of attachment to these locations. . . .'³³

According to Barbara Bush, the establishment of provision grounds stemmed from the reluctance of West Indian planters to provide their slaves with sufficient food. 'Paradoxically', she writes, 'this failure on the part of West Indian planters to supply their slaves with the basic material necessities of life was instrumental in the development of a resilience and independence among the slaves which gave their otherwise depressing lives meaning and purpose'. Mary Turner contends that the provision grounds vitally influenced the slaves' family organization and their relation to the slave system itself. The slaves customarily cultivated their grounds in household groups which were usually represented by families. 'The focus for family life was the provision grounds, which the families worked in common . . . Family households with their common property interest in the grounds and houses enabled the slaves to establish a nucleus of family solidarities to sustain them in the vicissitudes of life'.³⁴

The role of slave women in plantation agriculture, which has become a topic of increasing scholarly interest, in itself was an obstacle to the creation of family units. The condition of Black women probably deteriorated during the last quarter-century of slavery in Jamaica. Lucille Mathurin Mair finds that the negative rate of natural increase of the Jamaican slave population, coupled with closure of the Atlantic slave trade, led to an increased proportion of women concentrated in unskilled areas of agriculture where their work output was expected to equal that

of men. Mair contends that the treatment of women did not improve in the later period of slavery; in fact, conditions may have worsened. 'Sexual exploitation and violence were inescapable features of the Black woman's condition'. Furthermore, 'the degree of sustained manual output required by the plantation of its labour force was inconsistent with the physical demands made on women by menstruation, pregnancy, lactation, infant and child care'. The Black woman was not without bargaining power, however; in the period of pro-natalist 'amelioration' policies she was strategically placed as a costly work-unit to 'hold the estate to ransom by not working, or not breeding'.³⁵

Marietta Morrissey in her study of *Slave Women in the New World* finds that Caribbean slave women were gradually deprived of their role in the household economy domain of family life and horticulture, becoming more nearly units of agricultural labour, like men. Their lack of access to skilled agricultural work diminished their social status and authority. Morrissey suggests that it was not the inefficiency of slave production that brought slavery's end, but the near impossibility of sustaining the slave population and increasing productivity. She contends that women made a disproportionate proportion of an aging population of slaves, and that they were forced to bear too many burdens in domestic, subsistence, and commodity production.³⁶

The research of Barry Higman and Michael Craton tends to support the findings of Mair and Morrissey. Higman shows that while the Jamaican economy was dominated by sugar on the eve of emancipation, the slaves also produced coffee, pimento and other minor staples, and they worked on livestock pens. Variations in the rate of natural increase were related to crop types, size of estates, and the work performed by slaves. While the slaves on small non-sugar properties tended to increase by natural means, those on sugar estates with about 250 slaves had the highest mortality. Conversely, the birth-rate was higher on small properties than it was on large sugar estates. The ratio of female to male slaves in Jamaica increased after 1807 and females came to dominate the field gangs on sugar estates where they were expected to perform the same tasks as males. Higman says that 'masters found it necessary to indulge females who became pregnant once they had to depend on natural increase to maintain their slave labour force'. Craton's study of Worthy Park estate in Jamaica reveals that while slave mortality rates declined, fertility rates remained abnormally low despite efforts by the proprietor and overseer to encourage family life and reproduction. A major reason for increasing the proportion of women in the field labour force from 58 per cent in the 1790s to 65 per cent in the 1830s was the monopolization by men of the elite jobs of drivers, headmen, craftsmen, and other specialized occupations. Women were normally expected to perform the arduous tasks of digging and cutting, writes Craton, 'as well as the lesser jobs of weeding and carrying that books on slave husbandry advised as most suitable for their limited strength'.³⁷

Much light can be shed on the merits and demerits of the provision ground system by comparing the radically different systems of subsisting the slaves in Barbados and Jamaica. Barbados, after the destructive hurricanes of the 1780s, turned away from dependence on imported foodstuffs and slave provision grounds and gardens. In the course of a few decades the planters adopted the ration-allotment system, whereby the slaves were subsisted chiefly on food rations, both estate grown and imported, and distributed by estate owners and managers. These rations were supplemented by foodstuffs grown by slaves in garden plots. The system called for the supervised labour of slaves on both the fields that grew canes and those planted in food crops. Since very small plots of land were allotted to the slaves to grow their own produce, they provided only a fraction of the average diet and little or no surplus to market and earn a cash income. The Barbadian system was described by the plantation attorney of the Codrington plantations to one of his principals in England. He wrote that the system of feeding the slaves differed from that in every other West Indian colony. In fact, the cultivation of provisions formed a considerable part of the system of management on every plantation. In raising provisions, 'at least one-third of the labour of all the slaves on every estate is expended, producing a sufficient quantity of corn, yams, potatoes, &c. for the year's consumption, which is carefully stored, and afterwards dealt out to them in daily rations, and when the crop is short, an additional quantity is purchased'.³⁸

It is interesting that Barbados and Jamaica experienced contrasting trends in their slave populations after 1807. 'Of the sugar colonies', writes Higman, 'only Barbados managed to maintain a positive natural increase, a position it probably achieved by about 1810'. The island's slave population had a positive natural increase of +4.8 per thousand in 1817-20, and +14.4 per thousand in 1832-4. Jamaica, by contrast, had a negative net increase of -0.7 per thousand in 1817-20, and -4.8 per thousand in 1829-32. Another comparison indicating a less rigorous labour regimen in Barbados than in Jamaica is Higman's rough calculation of total hours worked by first-gang field slaves. 'This results in an average annual 3,200 hours for the Barbadian slave, and 4,000 for the Jamaican. The Barbadian slave spent less time than the Jamaican in estate labour out of crop, and the contrast was even greater during crop. Thus, the provision ground system was simply an added imposition for the Jamaican slave, in no way compensated by extra "free days", ' Higman asserts.³⁹

Another interesting comparison is that between the parish of Vere, Jamaica, and the island as a whole. Whereas Jamaican slaves as a whole had a negative natural increase, sugar estate slaves in Vere moved from a position of negative natural increase to one of consistent positive increase between 1817 and 1832. Here the slaves were generally required to grow food crops as part of estate labour, and they received rationed allowances from their masters. They had little or no cane hole digging and their

work loads were generally lighter than those of other slaves in Jamaica. Moreover, as Higman points out, 'In Vere the slaves did not have provision grounds but were provided with Guinea corn and salt fish and pork, and they used their corn to raise poultry which they sold in Spanish Town or to hucksters who came from Kingston by boat. They were said to be "exceeding well off"'.⁴⁰

The provision ground system emerges from this analysis as an essentially uncertain method of slave subsistence. Its successful operation was always contingent on many physical variables: drought and hurricane, quality and quantity of land, distance from the slave village. It was no less contingent on plantation management practices such as the time allowed for work on the grounds and on the circumstances of individual slaves in terms of age, health and household labour power. All these factors affected the production of both subsistence and surplus for marketing. Opportunities, even, to market surplus were also contingent on geographical and personal circumstances and the participation of the average field hand in these processes has yet to be demonstrated. The demographic contrast between Jamaica and Barbados, between Vere as a ration-allotment parish and the provision ground parishes of Jamaica casts strong doubt, in itself, on the system as a 'judicious and beneficial' method of slave subsistence. Subsistence crises continued to afflict individual estates throughout the slavery period and drought and hurricane induced regional subsistence crises - one of which, in the particular political circumstances of 1831, precipitated rebellion. It is interesting to note, moreover, that the slaves themselves did not intend that rebellion to make them simply peasant proprietors. Their first hand, practical experience of the uncertainties and limited benefits of provision ground production led them to claim freedom in the form of wages for work on the estates. Regular cash earnings at reasonable rates were perceived as the only certain route to improve the material standard of living represented by the provision grounds.

Notes

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