

JAMAICAN ENSLAVED AFRICANS AS ECONOMIC PRODUCERS

Historians of Jamaican history often portray enslaved Africans as revolutionaries who resisted their enslavement. But this is only a small part of the story. Slaves in Jamaica were also industrious producers who traded in agricultural goods.

During enslavement owners and managers of estates in the British Caribbean realized that creative measures were needed to feed the slave population (Mintz, 2003). It was argued that allowing enslaved Africans to grow their own produce would reduce the island's dependence on imports. The enslaved however used this opportunity to sell their produce in the market place. Despite being enslaved, black people in Jamaica were allowed as early as the 18th century to partake in the selling of various produce (Ibid). Provisions were also made in law to enable the enslaved Africans to become agricultural producers. The Consolidated Slave Act of 1792, for example, required slave masters to ensure that lots were allotted to slaves for cultivation for one day every fortnight, exclusive of Sunday, except in crop time (Edwards, 1793). This arrangement created the conditions for an internal marketing system dominated by the enslaved. Slave markets were usually organized on the weekend. Sunday was a popular day for economic activities much to the dismay of the Anglican ruling class; but unlike in Barbados, there was no consistent legislation to undermine huckstering (selling of goods in the market place) (Beckles, 2003). Enslaved Africans in the Jamaican economy functioned as distributors and producers of a range of goods. Their sale of goods and trading would often take place in major urban centres such as Kingston and Spanish Town. Agricultural produce sold by the enslaved Africans in these spaces were usually bought by retailers of all races. By the end of the eighteenth century, the enslaved Africans were contributing to the export economy. Merchants in urban areas frequently purchased the produce of slaves and exported them to foreign territories. Coffee, ginger, pimento, cotton and arrowroot were major export items in the late eighteenth century. Therefore it is not surprising that on the eve of Emancipation, enslaved Africans in Jamaica were in control of close to fifty percent of the cash circulating on the island (Farley, 1954).

The resources accumulated by the enslaved Africans during slavery, allowed them as freemen to pool together and purchase land in the post slavery era. In spite of the oppressive nature of slavery, the enslaved Africans managed to have productive economic lives. This is a testament to the indomitable spirit of our ancestors.

References

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