BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS PLANTATION SOCIETY:
ASPECTS OF THE SOCIAL RELATIONS OF PRODUCTION

Presented at
VI Annual Caribbean Studies Association Conference
, St. Thomas, U.S.V.I.
27-30 May 1931

By

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The British Virgin Islands were happened upon by Christopher Columbus during his second voyage to the West Indies in 1493.

European settlement in the early years following the Columbus encounter appears to have been sporadic and insignificant, although the islands' peculiar geographic characteristics, with their many bays and coves, rendered them the ideal haunt of pirates and buccaneers of various nationalities. In 1565 a band of alleged English "adventurers" captured Tortola from a small group of Dutch nationals who had settled there. It was not until 1680, however, that sustained English settlement was begun, a few English planters having transferred from Anguilla.

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Shortly thereafter, the European presence was further increased by settlers "such as had fled from Barbados and the greater islands for debt or to avoid the punishment for their crimes and have since been increased by pirates who have come in upon acts of grace and are married and settled there, whose posterity not knowing the world remain there and cultivate the ground for a wretched subsistence? (Calendar of State Papers: Colonial Series, American and the West Indies, No. 260: cited in Harringan and Varlack 1975:8). Their "wretched subsistence" notwithstanding, the white settlers deemed it necessary and found it possible to avail themselves of black slave labor. Indeed, some of the settlers who had transferred to the Virgin Islands had brought slaves with them. Subsequently, slave inventories were supplemented through purchase from Danish St. Thomas, and after the 1730's, when cotton and subsistence farming began to be supplanted by relatively large scale sugar production for export, by importation of slaves from Africa (Dookhan 1975:71). Until 1759, however, the economy of the British Virgin Islands colony continued to be centered primarily on the production of cotton. 1 In that year, the export value of sugar for the first time exceeded that of cotton (Harrigan and Varlack 1975:58).

The gradual shift from cotton and subsistence farming to sugar production -- the production of the latter being considerably more labor-intensive than the former -- was dramatically reflected in the demographic statistics. The first Virgin Islands census, taken in 1717, reveals a population of 547 blacks and 795 whites; in 1720 the population stood at 1,509 blacks and 1,122 whites, the latter figure remaining fairly stable throughout the heyday of Virgin Islands plantation society. The next census, in 1756, at the dawn of the transformation of the Virgin Islands' economy from one based on cotton farming to one based on sugar
production, reveals a black population which had increased to 6,121.

The final quarter of the eighteenth century saw what might be termed the golden era of Virgin Islands plantation society, an era which produced a prosperity based in no small part on the energetic activities of Virgin Islands privateers during the War of American Independence. The Virgin Islands census of 1774, accordingly, reveals a black population which had risen to 9,000.

The early 1780's in particular were a pivotal period in the history of Virgin Islands plantation society. During this period, the transition from a society of small yeoman farmers and their slaves engaged in the cultivation of tobacco, cotton, and provisions, to one based on the production of sugar (and, incidentally, of rum) by relatively large estates was completed. The outcome of this process was the decline and virtual disappearance of the small cotton planter as a result of real estate consolidation precipitated by the expansionist pressures of the larger sugar planters. Thus in 1784, President Fahie, president of the Virgin Islands Council, reported in this regard that "it is here, as it is elsewhere, the large fish swallow up the small. The estates of the poor cotton planter which were contiguous to sugar estates have been swallowed up by them" (C.O. 152/53, cited in Goveia 1965:103; cf. Harrigan and Varlack 1975:59, 60). This expansionist period also saw considerable "expropriation" of slaves' allotted provision grounds.

The Virgin Islands census of 1805 reveals a population peaking at 10,520 persons, of which 9,220 were blacks and 1,300 were whites. In fact, however, the Virgin Islands plantation economy was by this time already well on its way along the path of economic decline. The economy had prospered and grown during a period encompassing two major wars--the Seven Years War
(1756-63) and the American War of Independence (1776-83)—during which time what amounted to a sellers' market existed. But the termination of the War in 1783, together with incipient realignments of the world economic system combined to bring about the demises of the Virgin Islands plantation economy. Among these interrelated factors were the shift in Britain from the protectionism of a mercantilist capitalism to the laissez faire thrust of a growing industrial capitalist economy; the increasing importance of British East India as an alternate source of sugar; and, as a consequence of all these factors, the increasing effectiveness of an humanitarian abolitionist-emancipationist argument (see Craton 1974:239; cf. Williams 1970; Goveia 1965). The Virgin Islands plantocracy had gotten caught up in the euphoria of a "bullish" market and had over-expanded. Thus, as early as 1790, Thomas Woolrich, a former resident of the Virgin Islands colony, could testify to the Select Committee of the House of Commons that "divers of the Virgin Islands planters' estates mortgaged in England to the merchants there have been sold at public vendue upon low terms by reason that there were very few able to buy and pay for them" (cited in Harrigan and Varlack 1975:60).

Clearly, then, the population peak revealed in the 1805 census was no longer indicative of a coincidence of prosperity. Indeed, "the problem", as Elsa Goveia has written of the British Leeward Islands generally, "was the very numerous slave population which had to be supported out of the proceeds of an economy which was no longer expanding" (Goveia 1965:126).

A useful approach to understanding the dialectics of slave-master relations in British Virgin Islands plantation society -- particularly during its period of decline -- might be through examination of excerpts from the not inconsiderable documentary evidence which was generated as a result
of a rebellion of sorts in 1823 by slaves on the Josiah's Bay Estate of the absentee planter, Isaac Pickering. This particular documentary material is especially significant for the insight that is afforded into the existential relationships of Virgin Islands slaves and an increasingly constrained master-class during the declining years of Virgin Islands plantation economy.

Consider, for example, the following deposition which formed a part of the record of the court hearings which followed the 1823 rebellion:

Virgin Islands, Tortola

Before His Honour the PRESIDENT, and the Honourable the Members hereinafter named, in Privy Council; viz

The Honourable M.D. FRENCH
------------- WILLIAM GEORGE CRABB
------------- WILLIAM GORDON, Esquire; -

APPEARED personally, Isaac Pearson of Tortola, planter, who being duly sworn, made oath and said, That he took charge of Mr. Pickering's East End estate in April last; that until six weeks ago, the Slaves belonging to that estate behaved very well, from which time they have occasionally absented themselves, to the numbers of ten, twenty, and even thirty, two or three times in a week; that on his ordering some of them to be flogged for such gross misconduct, they defied him, and told the driver it was at his peril to touch him, he would be the worse for it; in consequence of which, the driver gave up the attempt he made to take hold of one of them.

Deponent further saith, that Harry is, in his opinion, one of the principal ringleaders; that he has been absent a week together frequently; Mary Ann's John, Phoenix and Marian's Stephen, three brothers, are also ringleaders, and have committed the same offence, that Stephen was watchman in the yard one night in the last week, when deponent called him, and ordered him to go on his watch; he said, that it was customary for the manager to give the watch supper and grog, which deponent refused; whereupon the said Stephen quitted the door, and when he was at a short distance from the door, he said "I'll be damned, if I should meet Mr. Letsom, or Mr. Pearson (the deponent) in the night, I should not mind much breaking their heads with a stone." That on the same night, a calf, a sheep, and a hog, were taken out of the yard, and have not been heard of since; that he has reason to believe Stephen was concerned in the robbery, as in the middle of the night deponent called out, and could not discover any watchman in the yard. That Thomas, in the hearing of deponent made use of the following expression, "That if Mr. Letsom [Mr. Pickering's attorney/agent] did not put provisions on the estate, he must not show his face on the estate again."
That at this time the allowance to each negro was two quarts of corn meal, and two mackerel, and also had Saturdays to themselves; that soon after, when provisions were scarce on the property, deponent was obliged to reduce the allowance to three pints per week, and two mackerel, which the whole gang refused on that occasion, and thirty-five of them took the afternoon to themselves.

That since deponent has been on the estate, the dungeon has been twice broken open, and the prisoners liberated, but by whom deponent cannot say.

Deponent further saith, That Bristol, Abraham, Scipio and Jeffry, Sciah and Lankey has brother, as also Sessman, are among the most insubordinate of the gang; that upon Maryann's Stephen being absent for two or three days, on his return, deponent ordered him to be taken out of the field to be flogged, but upon Andrew, who was then the driver, attempting to bring him forward, he dared the said driver to lay hold of him, that he threw down his hoe; and said he could go to where he had been the day before, and went away; that on Friday night last, three hogs, two turkeys and eight fowls were stolen from deponent, and on his accusing Lankey, who watched that night, of the theft, he said he took them, and would continue to take his hogs and fowls when he pleased.

(signed) Isaac Pearson

It should be noted here that in the early 1820's when most of the riotous activity occurred, the Virgin Islands plantation system had recently suffered the effects of a devastating combination of severe drought (1815) and hurricane (1819). There can hardly be any question, therefore, but that the material conditions of the slaves' existence must have been adversely affected. Mr. Pearson's allegation regarding the slave, Thomas', threat that"... if Mr. Lettsome [the estate owner's attorney] did not put provisions on the estate, he must not show his face on the estate again," must be viewed in this context.

Given the facts of an economy in sharp decline, with a large resultant surplus of slave labor, many Virgin Islands planters sought to remove their slaves to other colonies--particularly to the newer Crown colonies of Trinidad and Guyana, where the demand for slave labor was then on the rise (cf. Craton 1974:258-71). In the case of the rebellious Josiah's Bay Estate slaves,
evidence introduced in the court record in the form of a deposition by Mr. George R. Porter, President of the Virgin Islands colony, reads as follows:

...Mr. Pickering, the proprietor of Josiah's Bay estate, having arranged to remove the whole of his negroes to Trinidad, the latter had, in the first instance, expressed their readiness to undergo the change, but afterwards objected to it; some disturbance took place in consequence, and twenty of the most refractory escaped in a boat from the Island. They have since been brought back, and by the sentence of a bench of magistrates banished the Island; and, on the 22nd November, were embarked for Trinidad (Parliamentary Papers 1825: Maxwell to Bathurst, 16th February 1824).

In fact, between 1808 and 1822 a total of 95 slaves were exported [from the Virgin Islands] to several Caribbean territories including St. John, St. Christopher, Nevis, Anguilla, Trinidad and Demarara... In 1825, 1055 slaves consisting of 492 males and 563 females were removed (Dookhan 1975:93, footnote).

Moreover, despite British Parliamentary regulations which attempted to curtail this inter-colonial slave trade, planters often "removed their slaves illicitly by taking advantage of the lax enforcement of the regulations and by having the slaves sentenced to transportation in the law courts" (ibid.).

The determination of the absentee Virgin Islands planter, Isaac Pickering, to remove his Josiah's Bay Estate slaves to Trinidad was, therefore, not without precedent. Indeed, one wonders whether the judicial gymnastics which followed the 1823 rebellion might not have been contrived in large measure to enable a member of the Virgin Islands plantocracy to effect the removal of his surplus slave labor to a colony where the returns on that species of property would be more lucrative.

None of this escaped the notice of the emancipationists in England. Earlier, in 1790, Thomas Woolrich, a former British resident of Tortola, had testified to a Select Committee of the House of Commons that he "never saw a gang of negroes that appeared anything like sufficiently fed; their appearance to the eye fully proves their want and hardships" (cited in Dookhan, op. cit: 80). In the intervening war years, however, the interest of the
British public in the condition of slaves in the colonies had waned considerably. Thus,

as early as 1809 Wilberforce was expressing disappointment with the effects of abolition on slave conditions, and in 1811 the publicizing by Brougham and others of the Huggins and Hodge cruelty cases in Nevis and Tortola indicated serious attempts to arouse the public (Craton 1975:270).

The case of the Pickering slaves thus provided welcome ammunition to the emancipationists.

In this regard, an emancipationist writer -- in commenting on the Tortola planters' contention that the Pickering slaves had always been "turbulent characters" -- made the observation that

[the Pickering slaves] were almost all Creoles, natives of the island, who had near connections on all the neighbouring estates, and who had, according to Dr. Stobo, one of the Judges who afterwards tried them, amassed some property, but nearly the whole of which they would now be obliged to sacrifice (The Slave Colonies of Great Britain..., 1825).

In this light, it should be small wonder that the Pickering slaves reacted in a rebellious manner to their predicament of virtual starvation and impending separation from kin and property.

While the harsh reality of starvation and the threat of separation from kin and property constituted the immediate causes of the 1823 rebellion of the Pickering slaves, the underlying causes must be sought in certain contradictions which had developed in the Virgin Islands plantation economy during its phase of decline.

In the first place, the very fact of ownership of property by chattel-slaves was a logical incongruity, and the evidence indicates that by 1823, the property owned by British Virgin Islands slaves was not inconsiderable. Slave property estimates at that time were as follows:
38 horses at £7.10s. each ........................................ £285. 0s
938 horned cattle at £5. each .............................. 4690. 0
2125 goats at 10/- each ..................................... 1062. 10
1208 pigs at 10/- each ..................................... 604. 0
33120 poultry at 1/6 ........................................... 2484. 0
23 boats at £5 each ........................................... 115. 0
Fishpots and Fishing Tackle ................................... 123. 10
Property in building chiefly in town ................... 700. 0
Furniture and utensils at 15/- per head ................. 4698. 8
£14,762. 8s

These estimates did not include the disposable portion of esculents and fruits, and cotton produced by the slaves on about 1,675 acres of land whose estimated yield annually totalled £5,862. (Dookhan 1975:84).

But such relatively extensive slave ownership of property was more than simply incongruous; in fact, it reflected the degenerative state of the Virgin Islands plantation economy itself.

As has been previously observed, by the 1820's the combination of adverse economic and environmental factors had drastically reduced the viability of the Virgin Islands plantation system. Thus, the contemporary writer, Trelawney Wentworth, observed (ca. 1820) that on Tortola,

The extensive ranges of waste land and pasturage, afford the negroes an opportunity of cultivating provisions to an almost unlimited extent, and they are not generally restricted, as in most of the islands where cultivation is more extended, in the rearing of any particular description of live stock. Some of them possess several head of horned cattle, as well as goats and sheep, which range over the mountain wastes, or herd with the stock belonging to the estates (Wentworth 1834:178).

It might further be noted in this connection that where provision-gardening by slaves was encouraged, or evolved out of necessity, there often developed among the slaves, notions of customary ownership of the particular grounds worked by the slaves concerned, to the extent that slaves would "bequeath their grounds or gardens to such of their fellow-slaves as they think proper" (Edwards 1793, II:133).

In agriculturally marginal economies such as that of the Virgin Islands plantation system, the acquiescence of the planter-class to the slaves' customary land rights was, in any case, largely academic. And
therein lay another far-reaching contradiction within the social relations of production in Virgin Islands society, for, as Karen Olwig has observed in a similar context,

through the planters had to grant the slaves the right to use the land, they could not in effect deny the slaves this right, because the planters were not able to provide for the slaves except by letting them grow their own food (Olwig 1977:103).

Mintz and Price, moreover, argue persuasively that a strong relationship between kinship and slaves' customary land rights very probably emerged quite early in the process of creolization or cultural synthesis.

Let us begin, once again, with a hypothetical aggregate of recently-enslaved Africans on a new plantation in the Americas. What, if anything, might have constituted a set of broadly shared ideas brought from Africa in the realm of kinship? Tentatively and provisionally, we would suggest that there may have been certain widespread fundamental ideas and assumptions about kinship in West Africa. Among these, we might single out the sheer importance of kinship in structuring inter-personal relations and in defining an individual's place in his society; the emphasis on unilinear descent, and the importance to each individual of the resulting lines of kinsmen, living and dead, stretching backward and forward through time; or, on a more abstract level, the use of land as a means of defining both time and descent, with ancestors venerated locally, and with history and genealogy both being particularized in specific pieces of ground. The aggregate of newly-arrived slaves, though they had been torn from their own local kinship networks, would have continued to view kinship as the normal idiom of social relations (Mintz and Price 1976:34).

It would seem plausible to infer, therefore, that even prior to emancipation, and apart from land deeded to them by more or less benevolent masters, Virgin Islands slaves would have developed individual and/or corporate interests in specific plots of land (cf. Mintz and Price 1976:38).

In aggregate, these contradictions which had developed within Virgin Islands plantation society were ultimately incompatible with the perpetuation of "normal" slave-master relations. The Blacks, while still in bondage, had begun to acquire many of the attributes normally associated with freedmen, particularly as regards land rights and property ownership. At the same time,
in a moribund economy with a declining white presence, there was a correspondingly declining capacity on the part of the planter-class to effectively constrict the increasingly independent existence of the slaves. Trelawney Wentworth's surprise at this phenomenon is understandable:

At an auction we witnessed in the Road Town the number of negroes perhaps exceeded that of the white and coloured portion of the assemblage, and we were naturally led to inquire into that apparent independence in the use of their time, which their attendance seemed to bespeak. (Wenthworth 1834:219).

In fact, however, this was merely yet another manifestation of the shift in the social relations of production which necessarily accompanied the decline of the plantation mode of production. The old order was dying and a new social order was struggling to be born. The planter-class, however, was determined to maintain the status quo ante, and this inevitably exacerbated the inherent antagonism of the slave-master relationship.

In the plantation system,

two cultures were juxtaposed: a dominating one (the ... whites) and a subordinate one (the ... blacks). The racism of the former, with its differentiating privileges, helped the latter to become aware of the culturally explosive content of the opposition and to define itself by the conflicting character of the relationship (Manigat 1977:431).

In the case of the 1823 rebellion of the Pickering slaves, it would seem fairly clear that they were acutely cognizant of the existing differential access to the means of subsistence. In an economy which was then generally suffering the effects of drought and hurricane and in which, consequently, the slaves' provision grounds and cultigens must have accordingly suffered, this differential access became, as we have seen, a source of overt conflict.

Apart from the distributive appropriation of food from the plantation stores and engagement in certain retributive "predatory acts against property",...
many of the Pickering slaves defiantly left the plantation, their act of flight or marronage thus constituting "the extreme form of reacting negatively against the conditions of work, ... a stopping dead of work and running away", or as Leslie Manigat dubs it, "the marronage strike" (Manigat 1977: 428-9).

The act of flight dramatically exemplified, moreover, "the rejection (momentary, lasting, or even final) of the institutional orthodoxy and of the cultural norms of the existing social order" (ibid:422). Indeed, the slaves's deliberate and -- from the standpoint of the planter-class -- illegal removal of himself from the subjugation of the plantation system constituted an effective negation of the planter's claim to rights of ownership in the slave. It should hardly be surprising, therefore, that some of the harshest punishments prescribed by the 1783 Virgin Islands Slave Act"... for the good government of negro and other slaves ..." were reserved for apprehended runaways.

The case of the Pickering slaves also illustrates quite clearly the slaves' recognition of the degree of bargaining power which their labor represented within the context of the social relations of production of a declining plantation economy.

In the final analysis, however, the relative impunity with which Virgin Islands slaves were able to defy the established authority of the planter-class rested in the paucity of the latter and the considerable distance of the Virgin Islands colony from the nearest major British military bastion.
To recapitulate, then, the collapse of British Virgin Islands plantation economy was largely reflective of shifts which were occurring in what Immanuel Wallerstein (1974) has called "the European world-economy", and which produced an attenuation of British mercantilist interest in the Caribbean sugar islands in general and especially in marginal producers such as the British Virgin Islands plantation system. Agriculturally marginal plantation systems such as that of the British colony in the Virgin Islands were, in any case, economically viable only when profits had been high and costs low. Finally, a combination of adverse environmental conditions (drought and hurricane) dealt the mortal blow to the Virgin Islands plantation economy.

The Virgin Islands sugar-plantation economy was a highly specialized, monocrop system of production, one which, moreover, was almost totally externally oriented. The raison d'etre of the plantation system was the local production of sugar for export to the metropolitan markets. Similarly, the presence of the white planter-class in the Virgin Islands colony was predicated upon the profit potential/realization of the plantation economy. With the advent of economic decline, the planter-class lost the basis of its social reproductive ability; its economic base had disintegrated and it was consequently no longer viable as a social class. In 1864, therefore, the Virgin Islands Legislature was forced to take steps to effect the sale of encumbered estates. At that point, the British Virgin Islands planter-class was left with little choice but to physically abandon the colony. Thus, whereas census data indicate some 1,300 whites in the colony in 1805, by the final decade of the nineteenth century (1891) there were only 32 whites in the colony.
The British Virgin Islands slaves (or, latterly, ex-slaves), of course, did not have the option of abandoning the colony upon the demise of the plantation economy. Perhaps, though, there is, as Karl Marx avers,

...something in human history like retribution and it is a rule of historical retribution that its instrument be forged not by the offended but by the offender himself. Nothing else during the history of slavery was so important as marketing and provision cultivation in making it possible for the free man... to adapt himself to freedom without the blessings of his former master (cited in Mintz 1977:19).

The process of transition from a European-dominated Virgin Islands plantation society to a society of free, black peasant proprietors could hardly be more appropriately aphorized. With the forced sale in 1864 of the encumbered properties of the erstwhile planters at an average price of £1.5s per acre falling well within the purchasing power of many of the former slaves, the era of Virgin Islands plantation society was effectively ended.

As might be expected, similar conditions of agricultural marginality produced similar effects elsewhere in the Caribbean (cf. Lowenthal and Clarke 1977:516). Collectively, these agriculturally marginal imperial territories today constitute what Ulf Hannerz has referred to as the "other Caribbean":

It has intimate links to plantation America and shares much of its traditions, but it has no large plantations and is oriented instead toward the sea. Scattered islands in the eastern Caribbean could be considered representative of it, and in the past the Bahamas and Bermuda further to the north shared several of its characteristics. In the western Caribbean, it may be seen in a historical network of English-speaking societies, constructed between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries, with economies which have involved piracy, wrecking, fishing, turtling, seamanship, logcutting, smuggling and small-scale agriculture in mixes which have varied over time and between different territories (Hannerz 1974:20).

With the virtual obliteration of the British Virgin Islands plantation system by the end of the nineteenth century, the erstwhile slaves were left
to eke out an existence for themselves within the framework of a petty commodity mode of production, a situation which would obtain until the fairly recent past. The British Virgin Islands economy -- like that of the rest of the "other Caribbean" -- had simply become too marginal to generate any sustained exploitative interest from the imperial center. Almost a century would pass and a new "monocrop" -- tourism -- would gain regional predominance before such interest would be revived.

This resuscitated metropolitan interest might well be viewed with some ambivalence. Clearly, there is a danger that marginal territories such as the Cayman Islands, Anguilla, the British Virgin Islands, and so on, having more or less fortuitously avoided some of the more invidious aspects of the perpetuation of plantation economy might now be heading almost ineluctably toward the re-institution of a latter-day, transmogrified plantation economy. This new economy is based, not upon the cultivation and exportation of sugar-cane, but upon the attraction and processing of what might more or less facetiously be called a North Atlantic variety of homo "touristicus". In commenting on this phenomenon -- with specific reference to the Cayman Islands, but with fairly obvious implications for the rest of the "other Caribbean", including the British Virgin Islands -- Professor Hannerz observes that

[in] tracing the history of the islands from their days as a frontier society, different from much of the rest of the Caribbean, it may seem as if the tourist economy is finally forcing...[them] into a mold which [they share] with many other parts of the region. And the difficult questions [they] may have to face are thus also familiar from elsewhere. There are observers of tourist economies who point out that these are highly sensitive to international recessions, and that a reputation for political instability is so damaging that repression may be allowed to grow instead. There is also the question what happens in the long run in a successful tourist economy. When [native] families have sold all that land which is attractive to outsiders, and when their men have built the houses which the new owners want on their land, what will they do next? What jobs will be open to [indigenes] in the new economy
in the long run? Will they become a proletarist of beach hustlers, bar tenders, and hotel maids, with a few entrepreneurs in those crevices of the local economy left unattended by foreign business? Will the men start going back to sea, feeling the salt water beating their faces again? (Hannerz 1974:184).

The British Virgin Islands have now reached the point in their socio-historical evolution where the provision of adequate answers to such questions is a matter of considerable urgency and ought, of necessity, to occupy a central place in the Territory's agenda for the 1980's.
Notes

1 Harrigan and Varlack (1975:58) state that "in 1743 the islands produced 1,000 hogsheads of sugar and 1,000,000 pounds of cotton.... In 1752 it was noted in England that 'we have little cotton from the West Indies and that chiefly from the Virgin Islands'".

2 By way of comparison, it might be noted that the demographic figures of the 1805 Virgin Islands census (total population, 10,520) were not to be approximated until the later 1960s /early 1970s, when the 1970 census revealed a total population of 10,484 persons (source: Harrigan and Varlack 1975:193-4).

3 The trial of the Tortolian planter, Arthur Hodge, for the murder of his slave, Prosper, was a precedent-setting case. In the words of a contemporary observer:

Great things were at stake as to the issue: If the killing were proved and the murderer were to escape because of his complexion, wealth and standing, alas for the poor slaves in that and other islands! If on the other hand he should be found guilty and be executed for the murder of a slave, the fact would be established far and wide that the blacks, though in bondage, were regarded as human beings; and if killing a human being maliciously was murder, then killing a slave was murder also (Kidder 1852:92; cited in Harrigan and Varlack 1975:33).

Such high principles notwithstanding, as Governor Ellis -- an avowed abolitionist who invoked martial law and saw that the sentence to capital
punishment was carried out -- wryly observed, Hodge's "enormities were not likely to have ever been subjected to public investigation, had it not been for the accidental and personal quarrels of this guilty being with some of his former associates and friends" (Goveia 1965:201; citing C.O. 152/97, Elliot to Liverpool, no. 44, 18 May 1811).

Perspective on the phenomenon of slave resistance and rebellion in Virgin Islands plantation society may be further gained by consideration of the following items:

(1) A petition from the Virgin Islands Legislature to the Governor of the Leeward Islands bemoaned the fact that large numbers of Virgin Island slaves are escaping to Puerto Rico where the Spanish Government refuses to return them to the masters on the ground that they have converted to Roman Catholicism (C.O. 152/60: Leeward Islands; enclosed in Burt to Germaine, 26 September 1780. Cited in Tyson and Tyson 1974:31).

An Act of 1787, however, closed this avenue of escape to slaves by making it mandatory that a white man be aboard every boat not hauled ashore and properly secured (Dookhan 1975:82).

(2) In 1789 and 1790 "attempts at arson for the purpose of pillage were so frequent that in the absence of a regular system of policy, the young [white] men of Road Town were constrained to form an association to watch by night to prevent them" (Dookhan 1975:83; citing C.O. 239/11).

(3) Records show that in 1793 "eight slaves, two of them women, cut off their arms with their bills" (Dookhan 1975:83; citing C.O. 239/11).

Writing from his Jamaican experience, the plantocrat, Edward Long observed that
... the black grandfather, or father (as they are called) directs in what manner his money, his hogs, poultry, furniture, cloaths, and other effects and acquisitions shall descend, or be disposed of, after his decease. He nominates a sort of trustees, or executors, from the nearest of kin, who distribute them among the legatees, according to the will of the testator, without any molestation or interruption, most often without the enquire of their master (Long 1774, Vol. II:410: cited in Mullin 1977:486).

This phenomenon would appear to have been fairly generalized throughout British Caribbean plantation society (cf. Mintz and Price 1976).

6 Working with various sources, Richard Price (1973) has synthesized the following etymology of the term "maroon":

The English word "maroon", like the French marron, derives from Spanish cimarron. As used in the New World, cimarron originally referred to domestic cattle that had taken to the hills in Hispaniola (Parry and Sherlock 1965:14) and soon after to Indian slaves who had escaped from the Spaniards as well (Franco 1968:92). By the end of the 1530s, it was already beginning to refer primarily to Afro-American runaways...and had strong connotations of "fierceness", of being "wild" and "unbroken"....

7 Besides the offences considered capital if committed by whites or free coloured persons, there are others which will subject a slave (exclusively) to capital punishment: such are "absence from his owner's service for three months, in one continued space of time, or for six months in two years." "The ringleader of slaves, above sixteen years of age, running away in gangs of ten or more, and remaining out for ten days," is also liable to be punished capitally, as are slaves - for "mutinous or rebellious conduct:" for "procuring arms and meditating their escape to different countries:" for "any acts committed, contrary to the safety of these islands;" and, in some cases, "for striking a white person;" though it is for each of these offences discretionary with the justices, whether the punishment of death shall be indicated or not (Parliamentary Papers: 1824).

8 St. Christopher (St. Kitts) and/or Antigua, both several hundred miles and two full days' sail from the Virgin Islands.

9 Deemed agriculturally marginal for a variety of environmental/ecological reasons -- such as, the rugged nature of the topography, relatively poor soil conditions and so on.
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