



Doc. 5

Working paper for the 31th Study Session of the International Institute of
Differing Civilizations - Brussels 17-20 Sept. 1958.
(Non-corrected proof)

The Role of Women in the Development of Tropical and Sub-Tropical Countries : The Federation of the West Indies

by Philip SHERLOCK

Vice-Chancellor, University College of the West Indies

The title of this page embodies a 20th century concept and a 20th century aspiration. The feminist movement presupposes popular democracy and an expanding industrial economy with a high degree of popular education. George Eliot, for example, was an isolated individualist because she lived before the 1867 and 1870 bills democratizing education in Britain and liberalising the franchise. Sylvia Pankhurst was effective not only because she was a brilliant organiser with a flair for publicity who did not limit her activities to missionary effort like nursing, the only avenue open to Florence Nightingale, but derived a good deal of pleasure from harrying eminent elderly politicians. West Indian society was neither "liberal democratic" nor industrialised before our own time. Only since 1944 has the position changed radically, and only since the late 1930's have women begun to play a part in the development of the West Indies.

The remarks that follow amplify and develop this thesis. They apply to the great majority of the people and not the small minority who form an upper class and who have adopted the values of late Victorian British society. The social history of this class tends to follow that of the British middle class on which they model their behaviour.

Background of Geography and History

The newly established Federation of the West Indies consists of Jamaica in the group of the Greater Antilles, and those British islands of the Caribbean that form a part of the arching breakwater against the Atlantic from St. Kitts and Nevis in the north to Trinidad

at the mouth of the Orinoco. If they were drawn together to form one country it would have an area of 8,000 square miles, about that of Wales, with a population of three million people. Instead of living in one compact country, however, the people of the new Federation are widely dispersed in islands that, at the point of greatest distance, lie 1,000 miles apart. Trinidad and Jamaica, the two islands so far removed from each other, make up 83% of the total land area of the Federation and contain 77% of its population.

To understand the West Indies one must make a journey through time as well as space — across four and a half centuries. Its history begins abruptly with the discovery of the new world by Columbus in 1492. During the years that followed Spaniards, Dutch, French and British — soldiers of fortune, scholars, priests, pirates, buccaneers and pirates poured into the Caribbean, bringing with them their languages, customs, creeds.

Close on their heels came the Negro from West Africa. The story of that migration is an epic of courage and endurance. It is a story of brutality, bitter humiliation and suffering, but it is also a story of achievement, for it was negro labour that transformed the jungle and bush into plantations. Later came the East Indians, and in smaller numbers the Chinese, so that within the short space of four centuries people from three continents established themselves in the West Indies. This explains why there are Hindu temples and Muslim mosques in Trinidad, houses in the Georgian style in Grenada, the English parish system of local government in Barbados, Ashanti folktales in Jamaica, and the Yoruba Shango cult in Trinidad. The West Indies is a region of racial and cultural diversity, with the differences underlined in colour.

In this region dramatic and profound changes are taking place. In the short space of ten years the scattered island communities have moved from crown colony government and parochialism to federation and a large measure of political independence. The powerful dynamic of nationalism has speeded up the process of social integration and intensified the drive for economic development. With the help of grants from the United Kingdom and technical assistance from the United Nations and the International Co-operation Administration of the United States, civilised modern conditions are being created in the islands. In Jamaica, for example, up to quite recently the economy was based almost completely on agriculture. Today the bauxite industry, tourism and industrialisation account for some 30% of the annual revenue.



A brief analysis, in general terms, of three periods in West Indian history will throw some light on the role of women in the development of the West Indies.

The first period covers some two centuries, from the 1650's to 1834, the year of emancipation. It is characterised by the plantation system, negro slavery, and exploitation. The territories were not "home" to those who owned property in them in the sense that New England was "home" to its people.

The slave system involved the forced migration of hundreds of thousands of people from West Africa. It tore these men and women from the social setting of family and tribe, and put them down in a foreign land as part of a strange and rigid social structure. In a way it would be true to say that the man lost more than the woman in this process since he came from a culture in which he was responsible for protection, political control, and for the over-all direction of affairs. On the West Indian plantation he became "an animate tool". For him, as for the woman, the two criteria of value were utility and fertility.

Frazier's description of the nature and functions of family relationships among negro slaves on the plantations of the United States holds good, in large measure, for the West Indies. Since the slaves were brought over as a heterogeneous collection of individuals they could not develop a common formula of procedure for establishing marriages, and lacked the necessary means of fulfilling the cultural conditions of marriage in the society from which they came. In any event the conditions of slavery destroyed family units.

The functions of the father were discharged by the owner, who was responsible for the maintenance, protection and training of the child. The father had no externally sanctioned authority. He could at any time be removed from the family, and his role might indeed end with procreation. The mother was the effective parent, and acted as the sole permanent element in the slave family. Yet even the bearing of the child was for the enlargement of the owner's estate. Monk Lewis in his interesting and illuminating account of a visit to his Jamaica estate at the end of the eighteenth century describes the pride with which some of the mothers on the estate pointed to the children they had borne for the master, as additions not their family but to his property.

It was, nevertheless, a man's world in which such women lived. Authority and power rested with the slave owner or his agent as pater familias; and even the free woman was still under her husband's control. Mrs. Pankhurst had not yet been born. Myrdal points to

an interesting analogy between the status of women and children in the eighteenth century and that of the negro slave. There were profound differences in the status of the white wife or coloured concubine in the Great House and that of the slave mother in the plantation cabin, but all were under the power of the owner as the pater familias. "The ideological and economic forces behind the two movements — the emancipation of women and children and the emancipation of negroes — have much in common... Paternalism was a preindustrial scheme of life, and was gradually becoming broken in the nineteenth century..." (1)

There were moments of protest against the existing order. Throughout the two centuries of slavery there were risings and rumours of risings. Most of the leaders of these movements for freedom were men, like Tacky, Cudjoe and Daddy Sharpe. Nevertheless, the history of the Bush negroes of Guiana and of the Maroons of Jamaica is evidence of the active participation of women in the movement, and it is noteworthy that the name of a remote village in the Blue Mountains of Jamaica commemorates a determined resistance led by a woman whose camp was only taken after a difficult operation by regular soldiers equipped with artillery.

The second period of West Indian history begins with the abolition of slavery and ends with the abandonment of the colonial system in the 1940's. It was said of Emancipation that it freed a race but failed to create a society. As in the United States, emancipation was a crisis in the life of the Negro since "it tended to destroy all his traditional ways of thinking and acting" (2). One fundamental point of difference, however, was that in the United States ex-slaves were tied to the old plantations and to wage labour at rates and conditions fixed and prescribed by their previous owners. In the West Indies a large number of the newly freed people moved away from the estates, and established villages and cultivations of their own. The process was described by a Baptist missionary, Willim Knibb, one of the stoutest opponents of slavery and a pioneer in the foundation of "free villages". By 1843, he said, fully 19,000 persons in Jamaica, formerly enslaved, had bought land on which they were erecting their own houses. By the middle of the century there had come into existence throughout the islands a landed peasantry that was very largely self-supporting, getting the cash that it needed from the sale of the provisions it grew.

(1) Myrdal : *American Dilemma*, Appendice 5.

(2) Frazier : *Negro Family in the United States*.

The society which developed during this second period included a large number of East Indians who were brought to the Caribbean as indentured labourers. By 1883 so many had been taken to Trinidad that they formed one-third of the population. In social organisation, however, they have remained a quite separate group and the comments made in this paper do not apply to them.

To the emancipated negro land represented security and status. The family that moved from "rented" to "owned" land rose in the social scale. This explains the strength of the concept of "family land", which is described by Edith Clarke as inalienable, as passing into the ownership of all the children, and as being available for use whether one's right had previously been exercised or not (3)

Since a man could now own land, and sell the produce of his labour, he could assume the role of a father in a way that had been impossible under slavery. The household is the basic unit, for, as the West Indian folk-saying observes, "when crab does not have hole, he never gets fat". But the family pattern varies, the three main types being the married family, the common law or non legal union or concubinage, and the "single mother" who lives with one or more children by one or more fathers, none of whom resides with them.

Concubinage is informal. It involves no legal ties, but as Smith points out "the subsistence and exchange economies which co-exist in our rural areas, and which are especially significant for the peasantry, necessitate cohabitation of male and female within common domestic units for economic reasons as well as for any other. In order to cultivate his home-plot and engage in cashearning activities, a man requires a help-mate who will look after him and his home, and who will also undertake the marketing of such provisions as are surplus to his domestic requirements. Simultaneously the woman, during her child-bearing period especially, requires a cash and kind income larger than she can normally realise solely by her own efforts» (4). Concubinage is a partnership in which both parties share responsibility in practical affairs. The concubine might not know what her mate's earnings are; in any case she has to be content with what he gives.

Marriage, on the other hand, is a prestige-giving institution, not to be entered into lightly or without adequate resources. A man, should, if possible, own a house and some land, for marriage is ex-

(3) Clarke : *My Mother who Fathered Me*, London.

(4) Smith, M.G. : *Sociological Manual for Extension Workers*.

pected to bring about a change of life; it transforms the wife "from a common woman to a lady" who often takes over the management of her husband's money.

The figures given in the most recent census indicate the position. The Jamaica census of 1943 shows that about one-third of the mothers were married; almost as many were single; while a fifth were living in concubinage. Only one-third of all mothers were living in a formal marriage relationship which guaranteed that there would be a man to act as breadwinner to the family at least until the children came of age (5).

Roberts, in his illuminating study of the Population of Jamaica, finds that in the case of females "the proportion returned as single is the highest (57 %)... the ever married appears as the second most numerous, (accounting for 28 % of all adult females). The proportion returned as common law (concubinage) 15 %... In the case of the single type the proportion decreases sharply from 93 % in the 15-19 age group to 34 % in the 35-44 group... the ever-married proportion increases continuously with advancing age... in the case of the common-law we are faced with an age distribution in which the maximum frequency occurs near the age interval of greatest fertility" (6). The analysis shows "a steady movement from the common-law to the married". This is in line with Smith's observation that country folk conceive of marriage as a status change marking maturity or ripeness, something appropriate to late middle age rather than to early womanhood or womanhood.

The importance of woman as a breadwinner and her struggle for economic security, are indicated in the occupational statistics of the region. According to the latest census of the Eastern Caribbean (1947) the branches of industry that are more prominent in the West Indies than in Britain are the distributive trades, construction, and the group of service industries. Among these personal and domestic service takes an important place, engaging 15 % of the gainfully occupied in Barbados, 11.4 % in Antigua, 17.4 % in Montserrat, and falling to 6 % in relatively more prosperous Trinidad. This "plenty of maids and cooks is doubly a sign of poverty; not only is the occupation generally ill-paid, but the wage paid... is lowest where the supply is greatest"... (7)

(5) Cumper : *Social Structure of Jamaica*.

(6) Roberts : *Population of Jamaica, Cambridge*.

(7) Cumper : *Social Structure of the Eastern Caribbean*.



Against the many burdens and penalizations, such as constant economic insecurity and the heavy burden of parental responsibility, there should be set a number of compensations.

One of these is the comparatively large measure of freedom and independence which our peasant women possess. She often owns her own patch of cultivation, bearing out the folk-saying that "Mother has, father has, happy the child that has his own".

Another is the strength of the mother-child relationship, which Kerr picks out for special comment. The mother stands for security to the child yet he is taught in many ways to respect and defer to the father, and the dichotomy of concepts over the parental roles is given as a cause of disturbance in personality formation. Even where there is no such dichotomy the mother-child relationship may be so strong and unchanging as to be obsessive.

The third factor to be noted is the importance of the grandmother, whom Frazier describes as the "guardian of the generations". She, if anyone, knows the traditions and folk-tales, and can tell from the knots in the umbilical cord how many children a woman is destined to have.

The powerful conservative influence of the woman, whether mother or grandmother, extends throughout the extended family which is so marked a feature of the society of this period. The members of the household are not necessarily kinsfolk, for it may include those tied to each other by proximity and not by blood. An interesting example is given by Madeline Kerr who found that Miss May's 2-roomed house gave shelter to Miss May and her thirty year old son, his daughter Ethlyn and her common-law husband, their three children, Miss May's four grandchildren whose mother lived in the city, one great niece and, on occasions, Miss May's outside daughter's daughter. A grouping of this kind illustrates the importance of the concept of family land, which may often be one of the strongest bonds for keeping the family together; it is a characteristic of the subsistence economy of the period. It is of interest that a current study of subsistence farming in Jamaica indicates that in tropical countries where land is available the total area devoted to subsistence farming increases in direct proportion to the population. When land is no longer available and people begin to press against the limits of the available resources fragmentation follows, with a more intensive "mining" of the land and an acceleration in the process of erosion, as has been the case in Haïti.

Throughout these two first periods of West Indian history the woman exercises a powerful and permanent influence in the home. The world of public affairs is closed to her, for she lives in a man-made world, in which the management of affairs and entry into the professions is reserved for men. The structure is paternalist, in some cases patriarchal, with all the tabus and myths that distinguish such a society. The occasional rebel only underlines the prevalence of conformity and the preoccupation of the woman — so necessary for the survival of the family — with the immediate realities; food, shelter and clothing. In the second period the parallel to the Maroon chieftainess of the first period is Mary Seacole, a remarkable Jamaican brown woman, a self-made nurse who made her way to the Crimea as a sutler in spite of the War Office and the Top Brass. Known as "the yellow woman who cured the cholera" she travelled widely in Central America, had tea with Queen Victoria, and was decorated by her for her services.

The West Indies has now entered a third period in its history. The riots of 1937 and 1938 that ran through the West Indies like a bush fire marked the destruction of the Colonial system, the beginning of representative government and political independence. The sign of this change was the introduction of adult suffrage, to the dismay of many philanthropic persons who thought that the people of the region were not yet ready for this since some of them could not read and write. Experience indicates that in political matters at any rate literacy may be a desirable tool of knowledge but that it is not a symbol of wisdom. The creative power generated by active participation and shared responsibility in political affairs has given strength to the serious attempts now being made to build a self-supporting and self-respecting society. Also, adult suffrage makes the mass of the people the repository for the ultimate powers of government, and since in the West Indies these people are predominantly negro or East Indian it ensures the disappearance of barriers against people of colour, without, one must hope, the growth of similar discrimination against non-West Indians.

For the first time in the history of this society women have begun to play an active part in its development. The signs are clear to see. At the newly established University College of the West Indies women make up one-third of the number of students and the tendency is for the number to increase. Associations such as the Federation of Women flourish. The entry of women into public affairs illustrated by the fact that a woman holds a Ministry in the newly esta-



blished Federation, a woman is for the first time Mayor of the city of Kingston, women are on a number of the island legislatures, and a woman is one of the most powerful political leaders in British Guiana.

The society of the second period still exists, but it is changing swiftly. The economic development which is now in process in some islands has transferred a number of jobs from women to external agencies. The pipe-line brings the water, not the woman. Electricity does some of the house work, not the woman. At the same time more opportunities for jobs for women are created outside of the home, resulting in more freedom and responsibility. The extended family of the subsistence economy begins to disappear since more individuals can find employment and save up against the day of need. Domestic service becomes more difficult to obtain. The importance of these changes is emphasised by Arthur Lewis : "Growth is restricted if custom requires that women may work only at home; or that if they work outside their homes they may only be domestic servants or typists, or crowded into some other narrow range of jobs. Often one of the quickest ways of increasing the national output is to open factories offering light jobs of the kind which women do most easily... To create more paid jobs for women is the surest way simultaneously to raise their status, to reduce the drudgery, and to raise the national output" (8). And again : "Economic growth emancipates women from the household". Certainly a changing and developing society like that of the West Indies needs to have the full benefit of the work and thinking of the total community, and not of the male half only. This in turn will raise other problems such as have been posed by Alva Myrdal in her discussion of "One Sex a Social Problem".

It has been the purpose of this paper to show how important and effective a part women played in salvaging and stabilising family relationships in the first two periods of West Indian history. The opportunities now exist for them to contribute in every sphere of West Indian life. The remarkable sculpture of Edna Manley, the sociological work of Edith Clarke, the political skill of Janet Jagan and Rose Leon, the creative artistry of Beryl McBurnie and Louise Bennet, the community development work of Mrs. Allfrey and Leila Tomlinson, and a host of other examples show with what willingness and skill women are responding to the challenge.

(8) Lewis, A. W. : *Theory of Economic Growth* : London.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BRAITHWAITE (L.), « Social Stratification in Trinidad », *Social and Economic Studies*, 1953, University College of the West Indies, Vol. 2, nºs 2 & 3, pp. 5-175.
- IDEM, « Cultural Integration in Trinidad », *Social and Economic Studies*, 1957, Vol. 3, nº 1, pp. 82-96.
- CLARKE (Edith), « Land Tenure and the Family in Communities in Jamaica », 1953, *Social and Economic Studies*, Vol. 1, nº 4, pp. 81-117.
- IDEM, *My Mother Who Fathered Me*, London, 1957, Allen & Unwin.
- COHEN, Yehudi, « The Social Organisation of a Selected Community in Jamaica », *Social and Economic Studies*, 1954, Vol. 2, nº 4, pp. 104-137.
- IDEM, « Four Categories of Interpersonal Relationships in the Family & Community in a Jamaican Village », *Anthropological Quarterly*, 1955, Vol. 28, New Series, nº 3.
- IDEM, « Structure and Function Organisation and Socialisation in a Jamaican community », *American Anthropologist*, 1956, Vol. 58, nº 4, Aug. 1956.
- IDEM, « Character Formation and Social Structure in a Jamaican Community », 1956, *Psychiatry*.
- CUMPER (G.E.), « The Social Structure of Jamaica », Extra-Mural Dept., U.C.W.I. 1949.
- FRAZIER (Franklin), *The Negro Family in the U.S.A.*, 1954 (new Ed.), Chicago, U.S.A.
- HERSKOVITS (M.J. & F.S.), *Trinidad Village*, New-York, 1947 (Knopf).
- KERR (Madeline), *Personality and Conflict in Jamaica*, Liverpool U.P., 1952.
- MATHEWS (Dom B), *The Crisis in the West Indian Family*, Extra-Mural Dept., 1953, U.C.W.I.
- PARRY, (H.) et SHERLOCK, (P.M.), *A Short History of the West Indies*, MacMillan, London, 1956.
- ROBERTS (George), *The Population of Jamaica*, London, Cambridge U. Press, 1956.
- SMITH, (M.G.), « Some Aspects of Social Structure in the British Caribbean about 1820 », *Social and Economic Studies*, 1953, Vol. 1, nº 4, pp. 55-80.
- SMITH (M.G.), *A Framework for Caribbean Studies*, Extra-Mural Dept., 1955, U.C.W.I.
- IDEM, « Community Organisation in Rural Jamaica », *Social and Economic Studies*, 1956, Vol. 5, nº 3, pp. 295-312.
- SMITH (M.G.) et KRUIJER (G.J.), *A Sociological Manual for Extension Workers in the Caribbean*, Extra-Mural Dept., 1957, U.C.W.I.
- SMITH (R.T.), « Family Organisation in British Guiana », *Social and Economic Studies*, 1953, Vol. 1, nº 1, pp. 87-112.
- IDEM, *The Negro Family in British Guiana*, London, 1956, Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- WILLIAMS (Eric), *Capitalism and Slavery*, Chapel Hill, U. of N. Carolina Press. 1944.