EMANCIPATION IN TRINIDAD

First, I'm going to discuss the Trinidad experience of slavery, in the context of Caribbean systems of enslaved labour generally. As a system of coerced labour involving Africans or people of African descent, slavery in Trinidad was similar in essential respects to the 'peculiar institution' throughout the Americas, and especially in the Caribbean. But there were significant differences too, which will be explored further in my talk. Second, I will discuss the process of emancipation as it took shape here.

SLAVERY IN TRINIDAD: AN HISTORICAL SURVEY

We will never know when the first enslaved Africans came to Trinidad, but there were certainly a few present during the period of Spanish colonisation up to the late 1770s. Spain was not at this time directly involved in the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans, and since Trinidad lacked flourishing plantations, mines or ranches, there was very little demand for them, and few of the impoverished Spanish settlers had the means to purchase them. Nevertheless, a few enslaved Africans, and a probably slightly larger group of free persons of African, African-Spanish or African-Amerindian descent, formed part of the small population of Spanish Trinidad in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

It was the arrival of French immigrants, lured to the island by generous offers of free land, tax concessions and other advantages, which transformed the island into a slave society. Starting in 1777, but accelerating in the 1780s and 1790s, hundreds of planters from the French Caribbean colonies, from Grenada (British since 1763 but with many French settlers), and from France, emigrated to Trinidad; most were white, but a significant group were 'free coloureds', people of mixed African/European descent who were free and, in many cases, quite wealthy. Both groups

brought with them their human 'property', their enslaved labourers, for the land grants offered by the Spanish government were proportionate to the number they introduced to the island. These immigrants, with their enslaved labour, created flourishing cotton, sugar, coffee and cocoa plantations, and made Trinidad what it had never been: a plantation economy based on the coerced labour of enslaved Africans. It was the toil of these men and women which opened up the island to settlement and cultivation, and made fortunes for their enslavers.

The majority of Trinidad's enslaved people in the last quarter of the eighteenth century were 'Creoles': people born in the French Caribbean colonies, or Grenada, and brought with their owners to the island. They spoke patois, a French-based Creole language, they were at least nominally Roman Catholics, and they shared a cultural complex of music, dance, and folklore which can be described as an African-French 'Creole' fusion. But after 1790, many enslaved people kidnapped in Africa and brought over on the infamous slave ships arrived, carried mainly by British slavers, and responding to the new demand for labour as the island began its rapid development as a plantation economy.

By the time Britain captured the colony in 1797, there were just over 10,000 enslaved people in Trinidad (56% of the total population). Because Britain was then by far the largest slave-trading nation, its seizure of Trinidad stimulated a very large influx, mainly from Africa: the enslaved population doubled in just five years (1797-1802) to reach about 20,000. Imports from Africa remained high right up to the abolition of the British trade in 1806-07. While an estimated 3,800 arrived from Africa between 1784 and 1792, the total was around 20,000 between 1798 and 1807. As a result, Trinidad now had a far higher proportion of African-born people than an older, 'mature' slave society like Barbados: in 1813, about 60% were Africans, reversing the earlier 'Creole' majority.

Britain's abolition of the transatlantic trade cut off imports from Africa, but a flourishing inter-colonial slave trade developed. Because enslaved workers were relatively few in Trinidad after 1807, while the plantations were still expanding, human property fetched much higher prices there than in the older colonies like Barbados. Thousands were brought to Trinidad between 1807 and 1834, some legally—coming with their owners who were settling there—and many illegally, arriving ostensibly as 'domestics' with their owners but actually to be sold as field labourers in violation of laws enacted by the British government in the 1820s. These arrivals helped to boost the enslaved population after the end of the transatlantic trade, but high mortality and low birth rates ensured that its overall size in fact declined between 1807 and 1834, clear evidence of the brutality of the system.

As an institution, slavery in Trinidad was essentially the same as in the other Caribbean colonies, especially those belonging to France and Britain. Enslaved people were legally chattels who were bought and sold like any other type of property, advertised for sale in the Trinidad newspapers, and listed on estate inventories along with the livestock and the equipment. Slavery was hereditary, inherited through the mother (so the child of an enslaved mother and a free man was born a slave), and life-long. Manumission was quite rare even in the last years of slavery when Britain was supposedly trying to encourage it. Harsh laws determined how the enslaved were controlled and punished. Enslaved people had no legally respected rights to marriage or family, and were (before 1824 in Trinidad) more or less at the mercy of their owners, just short of the power of life and death.

I want to emphasise, as I've done on many previous occasions, that it is a myth that slavery in Trinidad was somehow more 'benevolent' than elsewhere in the Caribbean. It is true that Spain had a reputation for being a more benign slave-holding power than Britain or France, and Trinidad was Spanish to 1797. But the traditions and conventions of managing the enslaved

which prevailed in Trinidad were those of the French immigrant planters, not the Spanish, and they brought with them some brutal practices of punishment and terror.

Fear of poisoning by slave Obeahmen, and the frightening memory of what had happened in French Ste Domingue (Haiti) after 1791, were especially salient among the French planters who set the tone for the new slave society that emerged in Trinidad in the 1780s and 1790s. The British, after 1797, followed suit. Severe punishments and brutal reprisals for those accused of resistance, conspiracy to rebel, or poisoning were meted out in the 1790s and early 1800s. The harsh frontier conditions endured by the enslaved in these decades, when tropical forests were cleared by hand and new plantations carved out of the bush, resulted in very high mortality and morbidity rates among them. Once the transatlantic trade was ended, Trinidad's enslaved population declined steadily. There were about 20,000 enslaved in 1802; by 1838, roughly the same number were emancipated, despite the arrival of many thousands from Africa up to 1807, and from the Caribbean islands thereafter.

Though more men than women came to the Caribbean from Africa, enslaved females were an important part of the labour force. At least until the abolition of the African trade, women were seen primarily as units of labour rather than as reproducers. They worked mainly in the fields alongside men, doing all the hardest tasks of cultivation, harvesting and, on the sugar estates, labour in the factories which processed the canes. As a result of these very demanding work regimes, more severe on the sugar plantations than on the cotton, coffee and cocoa estates, along with poor diet and widely prevalent ill health, fertility rates were very low, while miscarriage and infant mortality rates were correspondingly high. Concessions to pregnant and nursing women were gradually introduced after 1807, and especially in the 1820s and early 1830s, but they were too little, too late. Motherhood, and family life, were tragically difficult for the enslaved; and the women enjoyed very few privileges on grounds of their sex. Indeed, it was

the reverse, for while many men filled skilled and supervisory positions on the estates, most women were condemned to a life of drudgery as field slaves. Only a small minority were domestics, and an even smaller group held positions defined as prestigious within the slave community.

So the main lines of slavery as an institution of labour coercion and social control were the same as elsewhere in the Caribbean. But there were some significant differences in the Trinidad experience. First, Trinidad was a slave society—that is, a society in which slavery was the dominant labour system and social institution—for a fairly short period, about fifty years, from the 1780s to the 1830s. This, perhaps, was the shortest such experience of any major Caribbean territory, and contrasts sharply with Barbados or Martinique, for example, with their 200 years of slavery.

Second, Trinidad never did become a classic or mature slave society, with huge majorities of enslaved people, often well over 90% in islands like Jamaica, or Tobago. In 1797, when the British captured the island, just over 50% of the population were enslaved, in 1810 it was 67%, and this was probably the highest percentage up to emancipation. From the 1780s on, Trinidad had an unusually large free coloured and free black group, so that the demography of the mature slave societies—huge enslaved majorities and very small white and free coloured/free black groups—never appeared there.

Third, in Trinidad the core group, the original cohort of enslaved Africans, were Creoles, people born in the French West Indies and Grenada, brought with their owners in the 1770s to the early 1800s. They spoke patois, had gone through mass baptisms in the Catholic faith, and brought an Afro-French Creole culture with them. Captives from Africa came later, after 1790, with a

peak in the decade following 1797. This meant that Trinidad had a high proportion of African-born people well into the 1820s-1830s, unlike say Barbados.

Finally, a high proportion of slave-owners in Trinidad were small or medium estate owners, so the enslaved tended to live in smaller units (under 50) than in Jamaica or Barbados. A significant number were urban: nearly 25% lived in Port of Spain in 1813. Few lived on really large plantations and many lived on coffee, cotton and cocoa estates. This meant that Trinidad was different from many of the Caribbean islands where the great majority of the enslaved lived and worked on large sugar plantations, as in Tobago. Moreover, many were owned by free coloured/free black people.

These differences did shape a somewhat different legacy for post-emancipation Trinidad, even though slavery itself was as brutal and as dehumanising there as anywhere else.

THE EMANCIPATION PROCESS IN TRINIDAD

I think everyone here understands that emancipation in Trinidad as elsewhere was mainly the result of the efforts by the enslaved to resist, to undermine or destroy the institution of slavery, and to make slave-owning dangerous and unprofitable. They had allies in the abolitionists and the missionaries but the prime mover was the enslaved themselves.

The Haitian Revolution was a tremendous shock to the whole system of slavery, and the heroic struggles of the Haitians between 1791 and 1804 can be said to have begun the real struggle for freedom. Partly inspired by the Haitian example, the enslaved in the British colonies rose up in revolt—Tobago 1802, Barbados 1816, Demerara (Guyana) 1823, and Jamaica 1831. These

great rebellions, and the terrible reprisals which followed, helped to convince the authorities in Britain that it was simply too dangerous to maintain slavery in the colonies.

And it was not only the great rebellions. Everywhere, every day, every way, the enslaved resisted the system. They ran away, repeatedly, and created Maroon settlements wherever they could, especially in hilly or remote areas. In Trinidad these included Diego Martin, and around the isolated East Coast—hence Brigand Hill near Manzanilla, for instance. They disobeyed orders, harassed overseers, refused tasks, broke estate equipment and machinery, went on strike, answered back. They risked floggings but they ensured that the slave system was chipped away and undermined bit by bit.

So the resistance of the enslaved was the first reason for emancipation. Also important were changes in the British economy. By the early 1800s Britain was industrialising rapidly, and the sugar producers of the Caribbean colonies were far less important to her economic progress than they had been before. So the slave-owners had fewer powerful allies at home. The new manufacturers and the middle classes generally had no interest in propping up Caribbean slavery.

There were also shifts in the thinking of many people in Britain. Some came to believe on religious grounds that slavery was un-Christian. (Remember back in the 1700s good Christian Brits had had no problem at all with slavery, so it took a change in thinking fuelled partly by an evangelical movement at home). Others were less moved by the religious argument but were persuaded by economists and other writers that slavery was inefficient and quite incompatible with a modern, industrial economy such as Britain was now developing.

Finally, thousands of men and women, in Britain and the colonies, who wanted to see the end of slavery, mobilised politically and put huge pressure on the British parliament and government. This culminated in intense and broad-based campaigns in 1830-33 which saw the passage of the Emancipation Act in 1833.

Before this climax of the abolitionist campaign, the emancipation process had begun in Trinidad with the so-called amelioration policy—attempting to give the enslaved some legal rights and protections while not altering their status as human property. Trinidad, as a crown colony where the authorities in London could impose laws directly on the slave-owners, was chosen as the place to try out the new policy, with the 1824 slave law. This did offer some advantages to the enslaved, especially the ban on flogging of women and limitations on corporal punishment of men, but it was very inadequately enforced. In any case any attempt to reform conditions for the enslaved while not touching their status as chattel property was doomed to failure. A tougher amelioration law in 1831, which was bitterly resisted by Trinidad's slave-owners, came too late in the day. By the time it came into effect in 1832, the abolitionists in Britain (not to mention the enslaved themselves) were agitating for emancipation, not amelioration.

We need to know that there were groups of Africans in Trinidad who were free men and women long before the Emancipation Act became law. One of the most interesting is the Mandingo community. They were people born in the area of West Africa known as the Senegambia, Muslims, who had mostly been enslaved and taken to the Caribbean in the early 1800s (just before the abolition of the trade). In Trinidad they formed a remarkable cohesive community, whose members retained their Islamic faith, and worked and saved money in order to purchase the freedom of their 'countrymen' (fellow Muslims from this part of Africa). Eventually they owned land and houses, grew cocoa and food crops, and they boasted that when the Emancipation Act came into effect in 1834, virtually all members of the group were already

free—emancipated by their own efforts. Their leaders included men who'd been well educated as boys in Africa, were literate in Arabic, and came from high-status families. The first leader was called Jonas Mohammed Bath, and after he died it was Samba Makumba, who bore the proud title of Emir (spiritual leader). Despite all the pressures towards Christian conversion, this group held onto their Islamic faith well into the 1840s, when they disappear from the record; and they never forgot Africa. This we know because they petitioned more than once for help from Britain to get back there, and though the group as a whole could not return, a few individual members did beat all the odds and manage to go back to West Africa.

A second group of free Africans were the 'Merikens", people who were formerly enslaved in the southern states of the USA. The men had fought with British armed forces in the War of 1812 between Britain and America, and when the war ended in 1814, most of them, along with their families, were settled as free persons in Trinidad. They began to arrive in 1819 and they were settled in their original military companies, hence Fifth Company etc. It was decided to locate them in the area around Princes Town and further south, because these were pretty remote and wild areas at the time, and the last thing the planters wanted was for these proud African-Americans, with a military past, to be in close contact with the enslaved people on the plantations. The Company Villages developed as self-contained communities of families who were very proud of their American origins and their army history, and also of their faith—the Baptist faith so typical of southern African-Americans. One of their first leaders was William Hamilton, after whom the Cowen-Hamilton Secondary School in Princes Town is named (Cowen was an English Baptist missionary).

And a third group of free Africans were men who'd served in the West India Regiments created by the British to defend the colonies during the long period when Britain and France were at war (1793-1815). After the wars ended, many of them (along with their families) were given land and

settled in villages in the area between Cumuto, Valencia and Manzanilla. Again, this area was more or less uninhabited ‘bush’ at this time, so these former soldiers with a reputation of being skilled and fierce fighters would not be too close to the plantation people. Many, perhaps most, of these former soldiers had been born in Africa and recruited into the Regiments after being kidnapped and enslaved. Some were Muslims and a few acted as imams leading their fellow-Muslims in the new settlements; one, the Hondo River settlement, contains an Islamic burial-place which is currently being investigated.

So it is wrong to think that everyone of African birth or descent living in Trinidad in 1834 was enslaved until the Emancipation Act came into effect. And, in addition to the three special groups of free Africans I’ve just mentioned, there were also many other free black or mixed-race people living in the island. They ranged from very poor and illiterate, to well-off and well educated. Some owned land and houses. Some, especially mixed-race families, owned significant estates, grew sugar, cocoa and coffee, and owned enslaved labourers.

As we saw, the Act of Emancipation was passed by the British Parliament in 1833 and it became law on August 1, 1834—Emancipation Day. But while this did technically mark the abolition of slavery, all the formerly enslaved, except children under the age of 6 on August 1, were declared to be ‘apprentices’ obliged to work for their former owners without wages for three-quarters of the defined working week. This so-called apprenticeship, which the Act said would last for 6 years, really postponed freedom for a few more years. Although the apprentices did have some rights not enjoyed by the enslaved, the system had much more in common with slavery than with freedom.

This is why that first so-called Emancipation Day (August 1, 1834) was such a bitter disappointment to the formerly enslaved. There was a near-riot on that day in Port of Spain, as

the apprentices gathered to express their fury that they had not been truly emancipated. According to the leading newspaper of the time, the attempts to explain the new system were all 'laughed at and rejected by the very people for whose benefit they were so humanely concocted. It was decided by the slaves that the King had freed them right out, and that the apprenticeship was a job got up by their masters and the Governor. Their masters were dam tief and the Governor an old rogue, and the King was not such a fool as to buy them half-free when he was rich enough to pay for them altogether. These were the feelings universally and unequivocally expressed by the slaves whenever the topic of apprenticeship was ventured…'
So when hundreds of new apprentices gathered in the area of Woodford Square on August 1, they were in an angry mood. 'Point de six ans! (Not six more years!)', they shouted, complaining loudly that they were not given 'full free'. The militia was called out, the soldiers were called from the barracks, over 50 of the 'ringleaders' were sentenced to floggings and in some cases jail.

Partly because of the resistance by the people all over the Caribbean to this disastrous apprenticeship scheme, partly through pressure from abolitionists in Britain and in the colonies, it was ended by the government in London two years early, in 1838. On August 1, 1838—the real Emancipation Day—apprenticeship ended and the former apprentices gained 'full free' status. In Trinidad, 20,656 apprentices were freed on that day.

But they were freed with nothing. Everyone knows that Britain sweetened the pill of emancipation by awarding an outright grant—not a loan—of 20 million pounds (a huge sum in 1834) to the former owners as compensation for the loss of their property—just as the state must pay you if it takes your land to build a road (or a sports facility). Except for a tiny handful of abolitionists, no-one suggested that the freed people deserved any compensation in cash or land. They should just be grateful for the 'boon' of freedom. So emancipation came with no money, no land, no loans, no education. And the structures of planter control and white power

remained intact. These facts guaranteed that the road for the formerly enslaved would be long and hard after the formal end of slavery.

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August 2007