

Caribbean Migrants in Panama and Cuba, 1851-1927: The Struggles, Opposition and Resistance of Jamaicans of African Ancestry

by

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Abstract

Afro-Caribbean radicalism is very much intertwined with the waves of migrations that drove people from various Caribbean islands to North America, South America and other Latin American Societies. In this paper I revisit the immediate years after emancipation into the early twentieth century to discuss in particular the Caribbean peoples of Jamaica of African ancestry, the racial and political climate that propelled their trek to Panama and Cuba and the dynamics they met while working in the American industries of those societies that provoked militant consciousness that gave rise to a Marcus Garvey, Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and Garveyites of various stripes.

Introduction

Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) that propagated programs of advancement for Africans in the Americas was organized in 1914 in Jamaica and later in 1916 in Harlem, USA. It is from the new headquarters in Harlem that the UNIA would mushroom into a worldwide organization fighting for the rights of Africans in the Diaspora and Africa to define, decide and control their destiny. Tony Martin, John Hendrick Clark, Amy Jacques-Garvey, Rupert Lewis and several other Garvey scholars highlight in their numerous studies that the problems of unemployment, discrimination, white terrorism and other oppressive conditions that confronted Blacks throughout the Americas helped to stimulate an interest in the programs of the UNIA among Africans across the Diaspora who were in search of protection against exploitation and terrorist acts that were fixtures of capitalist enterprises. In Latin America the UNIA appealed to Black migrant workers from British Caribbean colonial societies. Like Blacks in the United States, Afro-Caribbean (people of African heritage from or living in or around the Caribbean) workers were bested by discriminatory, terrorist and exploitive acts committed by white persons in pursuit of capital.

Therefore, they found solace in the message of Marcus Garvey and in the programs of the UNIA, and like the African-American labor force, the Afro-Caribbean workers of Latin America were formally enslaved persons or persons born in the immediate years following the acts of emancipation. In the British Caribbean two emancipations occurred, the first in 1834 that ended slavery and the second in 1838 which ended apprenticeship.

Hence, Caribbean peoples of African ancestry shared a commonality with African-Americans in that after emancipation they continued to experience exploitation of their persons by capital and industry. To confront the abuse they faced, Afro-Caribbean persons resisted in several fashions, and migration was used in conjunction with political agitation. And thus, in the context of this discourse, migration will be assessed as an option opted by Afro-Caribbean persons to escape the oppression of a post-emancipated society. Also, it will be argued that in favor of leaving the Caribbean to labor in American industries in the Spanish speaking Americas, Afro-Caribbean persons were leaving a bad situation to find a better situation, but instead they found themselves in a worst position. Hence, they were ‘jumping out of the frying pan’ and into the fire. This paper will discuss the migration of person of African ancestry from the Caribbean with an emphasis on the Jamaican migrants to the Latin American in the countries of Panama and Cuba. In addition, the study will examine the development of the Afro-Jamaican (Jamaicans of African ancestry) into radical workers under the auspices of the UNIA, and in order to fully understand the migrant reality of Afro-Jamaicans, the socio-economic factors provoking the stream of migrations from Jamaica is discussed.

Afro-Jamaican Migration to Latin America: Contributory Factors

At the root of the reasons for migration was the Afro-Jamaican perception that earning a living wage was more possible in Latin America and that the social and economic complexities in Panama and Cuba were new grounds for at least the first wave of Afro-Jamaican migrants. Still, when knowledge of the reality of these locations filtered into Jamaica through letters and returnees, people continued to trek to Latin America in droves. But why did Afro-Jamaicans continue to relocate after learning of the racial oppression and exploitation in Latin America? In grappling with answers for this question it is reasonable to speculate that many could not imagine anything worst or comparable to Jamaica’s post-emancipation reality that possessed limited avenues of social advancement, and more importantly, most Afro-Jamaicans consciously realized that chances of surviving Jamaica’s harsh economic and social order was pegged heavily to working outside of the island. Thus, many Afro-Jamaican migrants settled permanently in the Latin American spaces of Panama and Cuba with the intention to use Latin America as Erna Brodber points out “as a source of cash to support a life in Jamaica”.¹ And furthermore, the innumerable obstacles that resigned the bulk of Afro-Jamaicans to a life of poverty and destitution between the mid nineteenth and early twentieth century was ultimately the driving force prodding and sustaining their migration to Latin America.

At the time the first wave of Jamaicans went to Panama, the island economy, laws, and social practices were severely oppressive for Afro-Jamaicans, and society would remain that way for Afro-Jamaicans during the various periods of migration into Spanish speaking America. The first sets of migrant Jamaicans to Panama left the island in 1850 to work as laborers on the construction of the Panama Railroad. Here, the overwhelming amount of Afro-Jamaicans that decided to work elsewhere other than Jamaica is an indication that they were dissatisfied with the planter's² intent to control, restrict and define their progress in Jamaica.

Approximately sixteen years before this trek to Panama, gradual-freedom was imposed by the colonial government on its colonies in the Caribbean. Gradual freedom known popularly as apprenticeship was designed to last until 1883, but because of the inadequacies of the system the British were forced in 1838 to issue freedom to the enslaved Africans in its Caribbean colonies. During this period of apprenticeship, rightfully labeled by Petras as "a modification of slavery" it is understood that:³

In theory ... (it) was intended to provide a transition period during which all classes might adjust gradually to the new social relations of freedom. In practice, no such high minded purposes were served. The law extended the power of the former slave owners to compel labor to work on the estates for a few more years under conditions dictated by the owners.⁴

Although her analysis is correct about the law being an important medium in continuing the planter's hegemony over labor; Petras should have also discussed the proactive measures of Afro-Jamaicans in resisting apprenticeship as a major factor for its failure. Second, the planters struggled tremendously with the African mass over working hours on the plantations; and across the Caribbean, Blacks had developed their own notion of gradual freedom. And under the new system, Blacks believed that they had the right to define their working hours and to select employers wherein apprenticeship was interpreted in the Afro-Caribbean worldview as a sanction of their struggle during slavery to have complete control of their person and actions. Hence, as a result of their militant approach to apprenticeship the conditions in this period were extremely oppressive as well as brutal for the bulk of Africans in Jamaica and throughout the British Caribbean, and in short, it was truly a modified slavery.

Technically the planters were denied the privilege to punish those workers reluctant to work and abide by the rules of the new system. However, the state was invested with those privileges of the slave master to coerce the African masses to comply with the regiment of apprenticeship. As during slavery, the whip was used as the preferred instrument to deter noncompliance with orders for men. Truancy and other acts of resisting apprenticeship by women were typically punished with confinement to a prison treadmill. On these occasions when the women became weary they were flogged. The amount of "freepersons" that were subjected to this inhumane treatment speaks of the continued struggle for them to control their person and action.

In the first year of apprenticeship in Jamaica, August 1834 through July 1835, the “25,395 instances of punishment reported...imply apprentices” lack of cooperation with the apprenticeship regime.⁵ The methods of resistance used by enslaved Africans against apprenticeship are the same methods that they employed against the institution of slavery. Theft, running away, neglect of duty, disobedience, cutting and maiming cattle and insolence were seen as an offense by the state, but these were the strategies that Afro-Jamaicans used to cripple the system of apprenticeship. These strategies are furthermore an indication that Afro-Jamaicans were conscious of exploitive working conditions.

In 1838 when apprenticeship collapsed, the Afro-Jamaican struggle did not end against planter hegemony of labor and land. The planters, because they had over two centuries of unrestricted use of African labor, they reluctantly accepted the emancipation of enslaved Africans. Hence, their attitude toward emancipation reflected the general mood of emancipation throughout the British Caribbean, and thus in a shared sense (within the ranks of the slave owners) there was a loss of power, privilege and money that reverberated throughout the Americas, whenever emancipation occurred. Slavery allowed the planters to own their labor supply; however, emancipation denied them that privilege of labor ownership. And in contrast, in an emancipated society the planters had to contract the labor they needed, and also, they would have to offer competitive wages to attract labor. However, the mere offering of wages was not enough to compel the African to work on the plantation, a trend planters noticed from the period of apprenticeship (when wages were first introduced) coupled with the trend of the Afro-Jamaican to save their earnings, and the supplementing of their savings from plantation work with the monies earned from selling provision, goods and in performing other tasks. And subsequently, with their savings Afro-Jamaicans purchased small landholdings⁶; established their own freeholds and thus, they were among the first migration to leave the sugar plantations.⁷

In the decision of many Afro-Jamaicans to become landholders and independent farmers rather than plantation workers culminated into a barrage of assaults by the planters on their initiative in freedom. The first phase of this assault began in apprenticeship when the planters decided to “curtail the gathering of funds by apprentices” by charging “high rent for housing and provision grounds and steep prices for food and indulgences:” that “had been granted under the conditions of slavery”.⁸ This practice was continued after emancipation, however, the only result that the planters achieved was to aggravate Afro-Jamaicans workers as they interpreted the charging of high rent as an insult because as Douglass Hall argues “they never thought of these places as being anybody else’s property”⁹, because most Afro-Jamaicans believed that the property was theirs, because they cultivated the land. Yet, the charging of rent did not coerce the Afro-Jamaican to submit to a wage based system; instead, it only increased the process of their exodus from the plantation.

Those that were able to purchase freeholds did so and those that were unable squatted on “idle” land. The plantation suffered from the withdrawal of thousands of Afro-Jamaican laborers and laborers that decided to work only on a part-time basis.¹⁰ Because of the Afro-Jamaican exodus from the plantation in the first twenty years of emancipation, over three hundred plantations were forced out of business.¹¹

The charging of rent (which proved ineffective to preventing Black Flight from the plantation) coincided with the encouragement of European immigration; this also was a failure. It was the belief of the planters that

In order to deny land to blacks, it was decided to encourage the importation of whites who would fill the cooler interior mountain districts. The Europeans began coming towards the end of 1834.¹²

However, relatively few Europeans arrived to the island and by the 1840’s this scheme was a complete disaster and thus discontinued. The failure of this scheme did not deter the planters from furthering other programs aimed to make the Afro-Jamaican dependent on the plantation for work and subservient to white rule. It can be argued that the planters operated with an open license to terrorize the Afro-Jamaican workers into submission to white dominance. The colonial government alarmed at the rate in which Afro-Jamaicans fled from the plantation discontinued any intervention that would prohibit the planters from successfully curtailing the Afro-Jamaicans lack of interest in plantation work. The Colonial Office

...in reaction to that danger modified its approach to West Indian affairs. The priorities of...protecting the liberty of freedmen against encroachments from the planters were supplanted by an official determination to reinforce the planters and preserve agriculture.¹³

Thus, it meant that planters were unrestricted in their use of powers to implement policies that suppressed the rise of black land ownership. For the following reasons it was important for the planters to do so. In a society such as Jamaica, land meant power. The ownership of a particular size of land, qualified a person to vote or run for political office. The ballot was a very powerful privilege. In post-emancipated Jamaica, the ballot in the hands of a Black man could spell the end of white rule in Jamaica. Like in other American societies such as Cuba where there was an overwhelming presence of Blacks, whites felt that their presence and dominance was threatened. The sheer numbers of Africans in proportion to whites in Jamaica heighten this fear amongst whites in the society. In order to prevent an early demise to their rule it was important for the planters to first redefine the amount of land needed to vote and qualify for political office. As a result of this “only two black men, Edward Vickars and Charles Price were elected to the Jamaican House of Assembly” in the first thirty years following the 1838 emancipation.¹⁴ The requirements were as follows

To contest a seat for the Assembly an individual had to be male and had to have an annual income of 180 (pounds) from land, or landed property worth 1,800 (pounds) or real and personal property worth 3,000 pound. A voter had to be male and could vote on a freehold with an annual income of six (pounds), or if he paid or received a rent of 30 (pounds) per annum, or paid direct taxes of 3 (pounds) per annum.¹⁵

Clearly the planters implemented these restrictions to ensure that Jamaica did not become another Haiti, hence, an island ruled by Black people. Nonetheless, in spite of the restrictions that prohibited the entry of more Black people into the elite governing body on the island, the Jamaican Assembly, Afro-Jamaicans were determined to participate in the politics of the island. In the lower governing bodies, in the vestry, where the property qualifications were not as steep, Black voters were able to seat a significant number of representatives. Overall, from the planters to the colonial office in England, white society was fearful of this political expression and assertion of rights, and as a result, throughout the era of post-emancipation, they deliberately hindered Black progress and participation in Jamaica through the manipulation of the law.¹⁶

The colonial office in their support of the planters also facilitated the assault on the ascendancy of Afro-Jamaican political, economic and social independence. And the aim of the assault was to force Black workers into submission to wage work offered by the plantation, however, the sugar-cane planters by themselves were not able to facilitate this process. Yet, when banana assumed importance on the world's economic stage, and it benefited the local plantation owners interest to retard the growth of Black land ownership and force the Afro-Jamaican into compliance with plantation wage work. And by the 1900's banana production would replace sugar as Jamaica's premier crop, and subsequently, in the midst of the competition between sugar and banana, Afro-Jamaicans were edged to the periphery of the society.

Therefore, banana and sugar fueled the agro-industry of late 19th and early 20th century which required huge tracts of land, and thus, in such an environment, it was sure death for Black freeholds because, "the colonial government had a policy of selling land in large tracts which, of course, the peasantry could not afford".¹⁷ Thus by the turn of the 20th century most of the fertile land in Jamaica was engaged in cultivation of banana or sugar and in the hands of 81 individuals.¹⁸ Therefore, the Black landholder by the late 19th century was a minority and typically, the lands that they purchased were well under fifty acres as Jamaica increasing became difficult and an oppressive place for Afro-Jamaicans. And furthermore, the general life choices for Afro-Jamaicans were limited to the above mentioned plantation wages, retreat into the hills, migration to Kingston, were they would joined the unemployed masses.

It was this lack of opportunity for the masses that centered on land and political rights that forced the Afro-Jamaican to migrate in the thousands beginning in the 1850's as they migrated in response to dreadful conditions. And the decision to emigrate in contrast to staying could be considered a protest or as a way of flaunting of their rights as free persons, entitled to move in search of more opportunities. Here, this decision to migrate should not be distorted as a lack of courage on the part of Afro-Jamaicans to demand their rights. Rather it should be interpreted within the context of survival. Afro- Jamaicans after experiencing and witnessing the brutal repression that followed the 1865 rebellion in Morant Bay to the above mentioned conditions understood that direct confrontation wasn't the best strategy at that time. And most importantly, the aftermath of the rebellion undoubtedly left an impressionable reminder of the consequences of direct confrontation.

When the final tallies of the government repression were made, they revealed that a terrible vengeance had been unleashed: 439 dead, hundreds flogged, and 1,000 houses burned....90 British marines and sailors had marched from Morant Bay to Stony Gut. Finding it deserted, they burned Bogle's Chapel and 8 cottages. Despite orders for restraint people were flogged with whips made of twisted, knotted wire, and scores were shot or hung after ...Commanders were quite explicit about the objective of official violence; they intended to instill terror.¹⁹

Thomas Holt's description above of the use of a military response indicated to Afro-Jamaicans that any rebellion or revolution would be challenged by British armed forces. Thus, Afro-Jamaicans not wanting to accept the inadequate wages of plantation work or death for demanding higher pay and access to fertile land had no other choice but to migrate. And additionally, the rebellion at Morant Bay led by Paul Bogle, the flights from the plantation, and the stoppage of work by plantation workers transformed the Afro-Jamaican migrant into a conscious workers that were aware of their rights, and always looking to better their condition, they decided to work outside Jamaica.

Aspirations, Challenges and Confrontations

Initially as Velma Newton points out in *The Silver Men*, California was the destination of many dispossessed Jamaicans. However, this new outpost in America's "Wild West" lost its appeal to Afro-Jamaicans "by July 1852 when many of the emigrants had returned disappointed of their expectations since none had made fortunes".²⁰ In that same year, the building contractor for the Panama Canal Railway Company heavily recruited Afro-Jamaicans as workers. The Afro-Jamaican workers proved to be the only set of workers whose labor the railroad company could rely on.

In the beginning, the company tried using Afro-Panamanians and indigenous persons as well as imported Chinese laborers, but a myriad of problems ranging from desertion to disease and drug addiction to suicide forced the railroad company to reduce the amount of locals as well as Chinese they had recruited as laborers.²¹ The Afro-Jamaicans also deserted and suffered the consequences of disease, but enough of them survived to convince the recruiters that they were the most reliable set of workers. Thus, Afro-Jamaicans provided the bulk of the labor that would construct the railroad, and an estimated 5,000 Afro-Jamaicans are recorded as the mainstay of the labor force that built the railroad.²² This response entrenched the impression that the Caribbean was a source to find a cheap labor pool. Thus, when the building of the Canal commenced, the French and the Americans recruited most of its labor from the Caribbean. And moreover, the railroad as well as the Canal was central to the US, not only for finding a shorter route to the Pacific, but also to its rise as an economic superpower²³, because in short, it was the American response to the British Suez Canal juxtaposing the US ability to use Caribbean workers to facilitate its ability to surpass Britain as a world superpower.

In Panama, the workers were first mainly Afro-Jamaicans, and later they were joined by other Caribbean migrants, primarily Barbadians, and together, they shared their intentions and reasons for migrating which haunted them as they worked, although for the Afro-Jamaicans their situation was more oppressive than their previous condition in Jamaica (if oppression can be measured). And in the final analysis, both societies were dictated by the exploits of capital that did not regard the worker as human and that maneuvered racism to justify the denigration of Black workers. Thus, Euro-Americans in Panama like the planters in Jamaica collectively shared in their conceptualization of Blackness as inferior to whiteness, an idea and attitude very popular in American and European scientific, religious and intellectual circles during the time which helped to inform the global white perspective that distorted Black humanity.

In the United States of America the issue that a Black person was a human being and capable of citizenship had not been resolved. Thus in the Panamanian context, they allowed limited access to the ballot and participation in electoral politics by Blacks, but it was frightening to Euro-Americans who largely believed in the segregation of the races, as well as the inferiority of Black people.²⁴ This attitude often provoked hostile confrontations between Panamanians and Euro-Americans, and on April 15, 1856 the racial tensions erupted into violent clash dubbed the Watermelon Slice Incident in Panama City wherein armed railroad men shot at rioters triggered by the imposition of U.S. racial norms in Panama. Through that riot Panamanians and Afro-Caribbean persons were able to vent their anger towards Euro-American racial practices and towards the American owned Panama Railroad Company.²⁵ And it is not surprising that Afro-Jamaicans, the majority of Afro-West Indians (people of African heritage from or living in or around the Caribbean) in Panama in the 1850's would be overwhelmingly represented in the riot.

And as a result, Afro-Jamaicans efforts to migrate to Panama were repeatedly attacked by the planter class, and in n 1893, the Emigrant Labor Law was introduced to protect the interest of the planters, making migration expensive for Afro-Jamaicans and difficult for the recruiting officers to procure workers. The law specifically stipulated that “Jamaican laborers were prohibited from emigrating unless they or recruiting agents paid a departure tax”.²⁶ Hence, another feature of the law frustrated Afro-Jamaican movement to Panama, stating that,

the penniless labourer who was not hired by a recruiting agent, and could not produce two persons worth 10 (pounds) in property to stand surety for him, would not be granted permit to leave for the Isthmus.²⁷

This prevision dealt a blow to the legal movement of Afro-Jamaicans to Panama; thus, the number of Jamaicans leaving to Panama declined by the thousands. Before the restrictions on immigration went into effect, 15,000 Jamaicans were annually recruited to work in Panama at first as workers in the American owned Railroad Company and later with the French who initiated the construction of a canal in 1882. After the emigration acts, the migration of Afro-Jamaicans rapidly decline to less than 500 annually between 1890 and 1895. This along with the malaria epidemic frustrated the French just enough to force them to abandon the canal project. Subsequently, with a shortage of labor and the onslaught of a malaria epidemic, the French sold their rights to construct the Panama Canal to the U.S.

The U.S., eager to build a canal since its completion of the railroad in the 1850's, in 1904 they resumed construction of the Canal. And after one year, due to the Jamaican legislative restrictions on immigration, the U.S. discontinued “pursuing arrangements for the contracting of Jamaican laborers. Instead, formal recruitment was turned towards Barbados”. Thus from 1905 until 1914 when the Canal was completed, the majority of the legal workers hailed from Barbados, although the Afro-Jamaicans that were on the Isthmus, continued to work. In addition, the Afro-Jamaican population on the Isthmus was augmented by Jamaicans that circumvented the emigrant labor law restrictions imposed by the planters. Hence, the number of Afro-Jamaicans that went after 1905 is unknown because of the illegality of their migration, but it is indeed a testimony of their contestation of white power and hegemony in Jamaica that wanted to curtail their movement. And furthermore, the continued influx of Jamaicans and other Afro-Caribbean people into the Canal Zone was a direct challenge to white power in Jamaica and in the Canal Zone (particularly Panama), and a precursor to forthcoming radicalism among Afro-Jamaicans and other Afro-West Indians.

Confrontation and Black Political Resistance in Jim-Crow Panama

The exposure of Afro-Jamaicans to American Jim Crow racism in Panama exaggerated the trauma caused by British racism in their respective homelands. Hence, this double dosage of racism created a breed of firebrand radicals that were bent on crushing white supremacy wherever it reared its ugly head. And part of the planters' effort in trying to curtail the migration of Afro-Jamaicans to Panama probably stemmed from a fear that via their travel they would be more politicized and conscious that racism was indeed much more than a localized problem, and that it existed wherever whites intended to exert power and control. This fear became an awakening reality. And therefore, it adversely affected the political landscape of Jamaica as well as Panama.

In Jamaica, Black radicalism was temporarily silenced with the military suppression of the Morant Bay Paul Bogel led rebellion of 1865. However, in 1891 Black radicalism found itself at the fore of Jamaican society when migration to Panama contributed to its resurgence. Subsequently, the person responsible for reigniting the struggle for freedom was the Afro-Jamaican migrant Alexander Bedward. His approach to radicalism was strikingly different from Marcus Garvey who also was equally propelled to action after his first experience in Central America, in 1910, several years before launching the UNIA. Bedward relied on the Afro-Jamaican revival, a tradition that emerged from an amalgamation of Baptist Christian dogma with African spiritualism developed in the early 19th century by Afro-Jamaicans that were keen on preserving their ancestral religions which occurred in the face of missionary attempts to obliterate all African cultural survivals.²⁸ And throughout the post-emancipation years the revival tradition continued to face distortions and other malicious attacks from mainstream society. Hence, the contempt that the elites harbored for revival was displayed in a series of disparaging articles that appeared in the *Gleaner* in the 1890's. The revival tradition in these articles often were depicted as a psychotic phenomenon as suggested in the June 26, 1899 report titled "Revialism and Lunacy".²⁹ Yet, in spite of the elites' criticisms of the revival tradition, it survived as a key institution in Afro-Jamaican communities; and part of its appeal to Afro-Jamaicans was the immediate access it provided to the spirit world because it was in keeping with the traditions of the African homeland of spirit possession as well as dreams, which played a significant role in revival, moreover, in the possession and dream state, information and solutions to problems were given.³⁰

The revival dream tradition figured significantly in Bedward's departure from Panama and his establishment of a revival Church in Jamaica that served in many ways as a bastion of Black resistance to colonial rule.³¹ Immediately on his return to Panama in 1885, after a short visit to Jamaica, Bedward via a sequence of dreams decided to return to Jamaica, for good. The first dream that was responsible for his immediate return to Jamaica occurred "on the sixth night after his" second migration to Panama.

In the first dream, a man appeared before him and commanded him to go back to Jamaica. “If you stay here, you will die and lose your soul, but if you go back to Jamaica you will save your soul and be the means of saving many others”. When Bedward complained that he had no money for another passage, he was told by the apparition to see several men who would provide the means for his passage.³²

This type of dream, which is a warning, is in keeping with revival traditions, in that spirits have the power to warn of foreseen dangers. Panama was neither the healthiest nor safest work environment for Afro-West Indian worker. In fact, from the construction of the Panama railroad through the period of building the Canal the working conditions were dangerous, unsanitary and plagued with malaria.³³ Therefore, there was a high probability that Bedward could have succumbed to any of those conditions. However, the power of spirit (that was instrumental in the survival of African people and their resistance to enslavement) intervened and prevented his premature death. In foreseeing Bedward’s mission to organize against British colonization, the revival spirits beckoned him to return to Jamaica.

Undoubtedly, it is not certain if Bedward had this meeting with spirit then other Afro-West Indians also had visitations by ancestors and other spirits. The dream world is very much prevalent in Afro-Caribbean cosmology. To those that had the power to receive the revelations the dreams served as a protector against calamity. The dream world continued to inform Bedward after leaving Panama to Jamaica; in Jamaica his dreams centered on the development of a revival church. It is from his revival church, situated along the banks of the Hope River, that Bedward built a movement of over 6,000 followers that included local Jamaicans, as well as some migrants to Panama. Therefore, Bedward’s anti-colonial message transcended national boundaries. And from 1891 through 1914 he clashed with the police on several occasions. The headquarters his church and his private premises were frequently raided by the police because his messages were erroneously branded as seditious³⁴. And in addition to his Black power rhetoric, the colonial government was fearful of his spiritual capabilities and the success of the rituals that were performed in the Hope River. Eventually the British colonial government received the fodder for the fire in which to prosecute Bedward when he declared to his followers that he was going to ascend to heaven³⁵. Hence, the British government misinterpreted Bedward’s pronouncement as literal; they arrested him and declared him mentally insane and confined him until his death in an institution for the mentally unsound. As a result, the British government destroyed a movement that had the potential to possibility uproot the British presence in Jamaica and destabilize the Afro-Jamaican workforce in Panama.

With Bedward isolated from the public, Marcus Garvey filled the void by launching the UNIA, and like Bedward's organization, Garvey's movement would transcend national lines, although the UNIA would surpass Bedward's organization in size and impact in reference to the Afro-Caribbean migrant population in Panama. And interestingly, Garvey's inspiration to create the UNIA was acquired during his working days in various Central American countries which included Panama; and the wretched conditions that Afro-West Indians were subjected to became the crutch that Garvey used to further his studies on the plight of Black workers throughout Central America, the Caribbean and Western Europe.³⁶ Thus, Garvey concluded that based on the problems that bested Black workers, the Black race was in need of representatives that would defend their rights against exploitation committed by the hands of whites.³⁷

Garvey conceptualized the Black labor problem as much a race issue as a class problem.³⁸ In Panama, like in Jamaica and America, race was a central factor in labor issues. For example, the organization of pay patterned an apartheid like system; the pay that Blacks received differed from whites in amount and value. White workers were paid in gold, and Black workers were paid in silver. This apartheid payroll established the basis of social segregation in the Canal Zone.³⁹ And the designation of silver and gold employees was used to differentiate between Black and white workers respectively to the point that the facilities in the Canal Zone were segregated according to the designation of silver and gold, and typically, the facilities for the gold workers like in the Jim Crow American south were better than those of the silver workers.⁴⁰ And, undoubtedly, Afro-West Indians were agitated and provoked to challenge this injustice, and with the rise of Garvey's UNIA, Afro-West Indian radicals were armed with a vehicle they could articulate a protest with to attack the various forms of blatant and covert racism.

The UNIA was a godsend to the Afro-West Indian and Black Panamanian radicals in the Panama Canal Zone, because Garvey's emphasis on race first was a slogan they could use as a call for unity.⁴¹ Nevertheless, divisions were extremely pronounced within the Afro-West Indian's community; the islanders as Carla Burnett points out were "divided by deep insular prejudice⁴²", yet activists were adamant that nationality was non-consequential in the Canal Zone, thus the use of race first was effective in not only destroying the divisions amongst Afro-Caribbean persons but also in dealing with the prejudices that existed between English and Spanish speaking Blacks. Hence, under the banner of race first, a cadre of radicals hailing from Barbados, Jamaica and Panama were able to unify around a Pan-African ideology.

Two prominent radicals William Stoute and Eduardo Morales were instrumental in mending the tensions between Spanish and English speaking Blacks. They reworked the energies of the Black worker into a consciousness that identified their immediate oppressors were Euro-Americans, not each other. Also, the *Workman* newspaper was extremely instrumental in reshaping the outlook of Black workers in the Canal Zone as it served a similar purpose as the UNIA's *Negro World*. Thus, activist through the *Workman* exposed the sheer wickedness and lack of compassion the Canal separation system had for Black humanity. The paper repeatedly denounced the practice of selling stale bread and other expired foods to silver workers.

Also, the writings of the radicals challenged the misinformation disseminated by the pro U.S. papers, i.e., the *Panamanian Daily*, the *Star* and the *Herald*. In addition, the articles also attacked the vices that were perceived as the roots of the division and oppression in the Canal Zone Black communities. Burnett sums up the vices that were mentioned by Morales and Stoute as “jealousy, insularity, provincialism, prejudice, ignorance, dishonesty, servile cowardice, moral cowardice, fear, failure, hatred, degradation, treachery, and economic slavery”.⁴³ Morales and Stoute literally echoed Garvey’s position that the continued oppression of Black people was largely steeped in traits that were endemic to their community.⁴⁴ It was the belief of the radicals in the Canal Zone, that if Blacks could solve these problems, then they could effectively combat exploitation at the hands of white persons and capital. Thus like Garvey, they did not condemn the entire white race. In fact, Morales and Stoute worked with white radical organizations.

Teaching the tenets of the UNIA was one aspect to the struggle against oppression in the Canal Zone. With Garveyism as the ideological core of their philosophy to radicalize the workers, activist like Stoute and Morales aligned themselves to the leftist white owned union, the United Brotherhood. The activities of the union in Panama were independent of the directives of the parent body in Detroit, Michigan.⁴⁵ In fact, being that Panama was thousands of miles away made it impossible for the parent body to have much bearing on the activities of the union, and it is not apparent from the ideological persuasion of the union leaders in Panama that they believed unionism was the solution. Hence, it is much more convincing to argue that the union leaders in the Canal Zone were Garveyites first, and union organizers second. The union was manipulated as a vehicle in which the radicals could contest white exploitation of Black labor in Panama, yet, Garveyism remained the key in organizing.⁴⁶ And as membership in the union grew in Panama, so did the membership in the UNIA Panama divisions.⁴⁷ Therefore the radical’s involvement with the union could be considered a Garveyite takeover of the United Brotherhood.

However, the participation of UNIA members in unionism ran afoul of Garvey’s anti-union position, and his stand against Blacks participating in white organizations.⁴⁸ Yet, Garveyites in Panama could not be as rigid as Garvey would have loved them to be because they needed an organization in which they could agitate the issue of the workers. The UNIA did not have a union component to its organization, therefore, the UNIA members in Panama co-opted the United Brotherhood for that purpose and under the guise of the union, and the Garveyites successfully organized a strike, consisting of over eighty percent of the work force in the Canal Zone⁴⁹.

The strike lasted nine days from February 22 until March 1 in 1920. The strike could have been effective in shutting down operations in the Canal Zone or in forcing the U.S. government to abolish its segregationist practices of silver and gold employees. But, the rule of law was on the side of the Americans. With a stroke of the pen union meetings both private and public were outlawed, the strikers unable to communicate with their leaders and were forced back to work.

Part of the blame for the collapse of the strike should rest with the leadership, and although they were united on the issue of the strike, they were divided on the intent of the strike. Certain leaders like Stoute although determined to end the segregationist practices and unsanitary conditions did not envision a race war as a possible outcome of the strike like the staunch Garveyite, Morales.⁵⁰ This difference in perspective of the strike created friction when the ideologically milder Stoute entertained possibilities of calling off the strike before the unions were declared illegal.⁵¹ Hence, Morales denounced Stoute publicly as a coward⁵², and because there was conflicting positions expressed by the leadership, when the union was declared illegal, there was no mechanism in place to organize an underground movement against white exploitation in the Canal Zone.

In spite of the weakness and unwillingness of the leaders to transform the strikers into revolutionaries the strike demonstrated that Afro-Caribbean workers were willing to agitate for better working conditions and equal pay. The stoppage of work that occurred on the Canal was the same strategy that was used during apprenticeship and post-emancipation to demand higher wages. Thus if Afro-West Indians were forced to resort to the same tactics used in the Caribbean, Panama was not an improvement in the condition of Afro-West Indians. Working in Panama posed the same problems like working in the Caribbean. Unsanitary working conditions, exploitation and racism were characteristic of both societies. In Jamaica the areas under banana cultivation had severe malaria epidemics like in Panama. Jim Crow practices and inadequate compensation for labor were other problems that emphasize a lack of improvement in the wellbeing of Afro-West Indians that went to Panama. Ultimately it was oppressive circumstances why Panama was the fire that burnt the expectations of better that motivated most Afro-Jamaicans to relocate to Panama.

Afro-Caribbean Exploitation and Political Agitation in Cuba

Cuba was no different for Afro-Jamaicans and other Afro-West Indians that migrated in search of better opportunities; racism and unfair working contracts like in Panama was prevalent in Cuba. The main thrust of Jamaican migration to Cuba for employment began in 1921, although there were small numbers of people that went before 1921, but it was of no comparison to the thousands that left for Cuba between 1915 and 1933.⁵³ According to the Commission on Cuban Affairs the estimated number of Jamaicans that arrived legally into Cuba between 1921 and 1933 stands at 38,856. Although 38,856 is a significant number of persons to arrive in such a short span of time, it was a minute figure in comparison to the 100,000 plus Haitian that made their way to Cuba in the same period. Afro-Jamaicans typical went to Cuba in search of employment in a number of U.S. enterprises ranging from cane cutters to tobacco workers, others worked as carpenters, independent shop keepers, and farmers.⁵⁴ The least desirable of these occupations was cane cutting because of the stigma of slavery that many Jamaicans and other British Afro-West Indians attached to the task.

In Cuba most of the cane cutting was done by the Haitian migrants. The Afro-Jamaicans without the language barriers (that hinder communication between the Haitians workers and the Americans managers) manipulated their linguistic advantage to “move away from plantation field labor”.⁵⁵ However, Afro Jamaicans quickly learnt that their advantage did not shield them from the racist and oppressive practices that made Cuba a theater of horror for people of African descent.

It is without question that the oppression that Afro-Jamaicans encountered in Cuba should not be viewed as independent of the ill-treatment that confronted Afro-Jamaicans throughout Latin America. It can be argued that whether the Afro-Caribbean was in Costa Rica, Panama or Ecuador that it was inevitable for them to be oppressed, beaten and Jim Crowed in early 20th century Latin America.⁵⁶ What occurred in Cuba was just a part of this continuum of brutality that circumvented the Caribbean and Latin American space. White Cubans and Americans conspired together to create a hostile climate. Americans that wanted to reap economic benefits from Cuba supported and helped white Cubans to perfect their segregationist practices. It was customary in Cuba for Afro-Cubans to be publicly assaulted by the police or white mobs⁵⁷. Thus it is not surprising that the number of cases cited by Candence Wynter in her study *Jamaican Labor Migrations to Cuba 1885-1930* speaks of the brutally (that ranged from beatings to shootings) meted out to Afro-Jamaicans in Cuba⁵⁸. Obviously, the actions of white Cubans were deliberate, they wanted a white society and they were extremely antagonistic towards Black migrants from the French and English speaking Caribbean.⁵⁹ And how Afro-Jamaicans and the wider Afro-Caribbean population in Cuba were treated was reminiscent of the recurring violence that was used to terrorize Afro-Cubans since emancipation in 1866.

Afro-Cubans have a shared history with Afro-Jamaicans which recounted episodes where Black people were deliberately slaughtered by the thousands for standing up for their rights. Aline Helg gives justice in pointing out the shared history of brutalization that is intricately connected to the consciousness of Afro-Jamaicans and Afro-Cubans when she states:

...the 1912 massacre of Afro-Cubans parallels one other black tragedy; the 1865 repression of the Morant Bay rebellion in Jamaica in which over 1,000 Afro-Jamaicans were killed or flogged by British forces for violently protesting worsening labor conditions, shrinking access to land, and biased justice....In both Cuba and Jamaica, governments decided to resort to violence because blacks seriously challenged the white-dominated social structure⁶⁰.

It remained that as long as the societies continued to support the exploitation of Black workers, resistance would be evident. In Cuba, although the Afro-Cuban population was quieted by the vicious reprisals of 1912, Afro-Jamaicans relentlessly protested their dehumanizing conditions through a series of strikes. These strikes occurred frequently between 1917 and 1919, hence a clear sign that Afro-Jamaicans were willing to go to extreme ends to demand just and equal treatment. And of course, the British government was in most cases reluctant to protect Afro-Jamaicans and other British subjects against the exploitive and oppressive practices of the U.S. and white Cubans. As in Panama, the British turned a blind eye to the suffering of Afro-West Indians, and thus in a climate where racism and neglect was rife, Garveyism and the UNIA flourished. Thus, the activities of the UNIA in Cuba focused on what the British government was reluctant to do for the Afro-West Indian community, i.e., to stand up for the migrant West Indians against an exploitive and belligerent American capitalist machinery.⁶¹

Therefore it wasn't coincidental that Cuba had the most number of UNIA branches, 52, outside of the United States of America.⁶² And faithful to its Pan-African inspired mission, the UNIA message facilitated space to also include Haitians and Afro-Cubans because it wanted to be a representative organization for the larger Black community in Cuba and not just Afro-West Indians which included publishing the UNIA newspaper the *Negro World* in Spanish. However, these and other efforts to dismantle bridges between English speaking Blacks and Afro-Cubans were thwarted by deliberate actions of a small but influential Afro-Cuban movement to assimilate into Cuban society⁶³, and therefore Afro-Cubans who demanded assimilation into Cuba's mainstream perceived the UNIA as a threat to their standing as leaders of the Afro-Cuban people, thus they portrayed UNIA as a separatist and ultra-radical movement.⁶⁴ This worked to deter full Afro-Cuban support and participation in UNIA activities along with the deep seated fear since the massacre of thousands of Afro-Cubans in 1912 by the Cuban army was exploited to the detriment of the UNIA, limiting the organization to matters of concern for the transient Afro-Caribbean population mainly from the English speaking Caribbean, and to a limited extent from the people of Haiti.

Conclusion

Afro-Jamaicans that went to Cuba and Panama realized that the conditions abroad were no better than the conditions at home. Many wanted the experience to travel and to better their circumstances. However, the overwhelming majority that left Jamaica for Latin America realized that the fire of oppression was just as rife abroad as it was in Jamaica. Also in many instances Afro-Jamaicans stood a greater chance of being lynched abroad than at home. In escaping the harsh Jamaican reality of "white you are all right, brown stick around and black get back" Afro-Jamaicans were greeted in Latin America with increasingly bitter racial situations propped up by a modern form of capitalism that was non-existent in an island with a white minority struggling to hold on to its paternalistic forms of control.⁶⁵

The exploitation that Jamaicans encountered in Latin America was tarred with a vicious brand of racism that was only comparable to the American Jim Crow South. However, neither the Latin American nor the Jamaican societies of the early 20th century offered an environment free of discrimination and exploitation. Hence it is understandable why Marcus Garvey conceptualized a UNIA, why it appealed to thousands of migrants, and why there was strong bitterness towards white capital amongst many who had left and returned to Jamaica as evident in the utterings of Henry Archibald Dunkley and Leonard P Howell, first teachers of the *Rastafari* ontology, who had worked in Panama previous to creating a movement that eventually dominated the anti-colonial voice of Afro-Jamaicans.⁶⁶

¹ Brodber, Erna *The Second Generation of Freeman in Jamaica, 1907 -1944* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004, p.73

² Planters: The term is used in reference to large land owners engaged in Agriculture. At the time of Emancipation most plantations were engaged in sugar cane farming. As a result of the Planters economic position they wielded tremendous Political Power. Racially most planter were white and a small minority were mulatto and black. For further discussion on the Planters see Douglas Hall's *Free Jamaica, 1838-1865* or Aggrey Brown's *Color, Class, and Politics in Jamaica*.

³ Petras, Elizabeth McLean *Jamaican Labor Migration: White Capital and black Labor 1850-1930* London: Westview Press, 1988 p. 28

⁴ Ibid., p.26

⁵ Paton, Diana *No Bond but the Law: Punishment, Race, and Gender in Jamaican State Formation, 1780-1870* Durham: Duke University Press, 2004 p. 72

⁶ Petras, Elizabeth McLean *Jamaican Labor Migration: White Capital and black Labor 1850-1930* p.30

⁷ Green, William A. *British Slave Emancipation: The Sugar Colonies and the Great Experiment 1830-1865* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976 pp. 170-171

⁸ Ibid....,p.30

⁹ Hall, Douglas *Free Jamaica 1838-1865* Hartford: Yale University Press, 1959, p.20

¹⁰ Green, William A. *British Slave Emancipation: The Sugar Colonies and the Great Experiment 1830-1865* pp.171,194

¹¹ Hall, Douglas *Free Jamaica 1838-1865* p. 82

¹² Ibid...., p. 21

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- ¹³ Green, William A. *British Slave Emancipation: The Sugar Colonies and the Great Experiment 1830-1865* p.171
- ¹⁴ Wilmot, Swithin "The Growth of Black Political Activity" in Lewis, Rupert and Bryan, Patrick *Garvey His Work and Impact* Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc. 1991 p. 39
- ¹⁵ Ibid..., p. 39
- ¹⁶ Ibid..., p. 43
- ¹⁷ James, Winston *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America* New York: Verso 1999, p. 20
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- ²¹ Petras, Elizabeth McLean *Jamaican Labor Migration: White Capital and black Labor 1850-1930* pp. 62-67
- ²² "Diggers, Panama Canal: Creation of a Nation" PBS Documentary 1984
- ²³ Petras, pp.53-56
- ²⁴ McGuinness, Aims "Searching for Latin America: Race and Sovereignty in the Americas in the 1850's" in Appelbaum, Nancy P., Macpherson, Anne S., Roseblatt, Karin *Race and Nation in Modern Latin America* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press 2003, p. 93
- ²⁵ Ibid...,pp.91-92
- ²⁶ Newton, Velma *The Silver Men; West Indian Migration To Panama 1850-1914* p. 66
- ²⁷ Ibid..., p.61
- ²⁸ Stewart, Dianne M. *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005, pp.79-89
- ²⁹ *The Daily Gleaner*, "Revivalism and Lunacy" June 26, 1899
- ³⁰ Simpson, George Eaton *Religious Cults of the Caribbean: Trinidad, Jamaica and Haiti* Rio Piedras: Institute of Caribbean Studies 1980,pp.166-169
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- ³² Pierson, Roscoe "Alexander Bedward and the Jamaica Native Baptist Free Church" in Burkett, Randall K. and Newman, Richard *Black apostles : Afro-American clergy confront the twentieth century* Boston : G. K. Hall, 1978, p 3

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- ³⁴ Pierson, Roscoe “Alexander Bedward and the Jamaica Native Baptist Free Church” p. 6
- ³⁵ Ibid...p.7
- ³⁶ Martin, Tony *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* Dover: The Majority Press 1976 pp. 4-6
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- ⁴¹ Ibid..., p.24
- ⁴² Burnett, Carla *Are we Slaves or Men? Labor, Race, Garveyism, and The 1920 Panama Canal Strike* Illinois: University of Chicago 2004, p.5
- ⁴³ Ibid...p.93
- ⁴⁴ Martin, Tony *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* pp.30-31
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- ⁴⁷ Ibid..., p. 100
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