Some aspects of the socialization of the child in the West Indian families

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SOME ASPECTS OF THE SOCIALIZATION OF THE CHILD
IN WEST INDIAN FAMILIES

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
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THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY
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DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The natives of the West Indies have charted for themselves an ideological frame of reference for approaching life and the problems they encounter. This ideological framework can be viewed as patterns of thought which are defined as cultural values which contribute to and support the cultural beliefs of a people. These patterns are themes which are consistently reflected in the lifestyle and attitude of a people. These thought patterns are adhered to by the members of Caribbean society and thereby rewarded. All members aspire to follow these patterns of thought, though their goals may fall short.

The family in the West Indies plays a major role in the transference of these patterns of thought. In the process of orienting their offspring, parents chart the way for "success" by West Indian standards. These patterns are handed down from parent to child in the process of childrearing. These patterns of thought can be listed as: the value of money; the value of education; and race consciousness.

These patterns of thought embody the history, temperament, customs, traditions and beliefs of the West Indian people. They have been influenced by cultural variants, meaning the combination of African cultural residues and the influences of successive colonizers, and have developed over a period of years through a mellowing process of accumulated experiences.
This historical process has effected family structure of the West Indies. In particular, the events of slavery and the effect of colonization in the aftermath of slavery has taken its toll on the form of the West Indian family. For these reasons, the structure of the West Indian family exist in four distinct forms. The first is defined as the "Christian Family." It is based on a legal marriage and a patriarchal order which approaches that of the Christian type family of European origin. The second type of family is called the "faithful concubinage" or common-law union which is a marriage in one sense or another, but has no legal status. This family form is also patriarchal in nature and generally lasts over three years. The third form is called the "Companionate Family." The members in this family group live together for the sake of convenience and usually for less than three years. This form does not limit itself to a male/female relationship. A grandmother or another relative may be assisting in rearing the children. The final family-form is termed the "dis-integrate family." This family is structured solely around a woman and her children. The husband visits the woman from time to time but there are no established patterns of conduct. Only a small portion of the West Indian society, privileged by considerable economic means, live in a "Christian family" type environment. All members of the native culture aspire to live in the style of the Christian family. Simey points out that when a West Indian prospers he tends to marry and live a 'respectable' life. By respectable

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he is referring to a highly valued form, namely the Christian type. A case in point, on St. Thomas, "there has been an increasing tendency for upper-class status to become associated with adherence to the monogamic standard" but legal marriage and monogamic constancy are not the general rule . . . . among the lower class. 3

Independent of the form of family structure, be it "Christian," "faithful concubinage", "companionate" or "dis-integrate", each set the stage for the transference of three major patterns of thought to their offsprings. The method involved is through the process of childrearing which is very strict. The socialization process of raising children in a strict manner is a kind of protection against deviation from the pattern, by one's children. For this reason, indulgence is limited, obedience is demanded and tolerance for any type of social deviance is low. Childrearing is taken as a very serious enterprise because after all is said and done, parents consider their job as terminal. Once adulthood is attained, they then "wash their hands" of distasteful events thereafter. It is not unheard of for parents to ban their own children from the home because of a disagreement over some principle.

Whippings are not spared. "Upbringing is felt to require physical chastisement; parents regularly resort to the rod." 4 Because of the non-permissive atmosphere permeating the childrearing process, West Indian children are considered "strait-laced" and their parents are often misunderstood by outsiders. Black Americans see the whippings as unwarranted

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cruelty, while on the other hand, West Indians contend that, "American Negroes do not discipline their children."\(^5\)

But for the West Indian, physical punishment is not only used as a means of chastisement, but also as a means of educating the young.\(^6\) It is not uncommon that in the process of teaching a new concept a child's hands are lashed in order to solicit a response.

The whipping of children in the process of childrearing as a means of educating them is accepted and utilized by all classes in West Indian society.\(^7\) Learning life's lessons through the three thought patterns takes place in the same atmosphere of restrictiveness and violations often incur physical punishment. The three thought patterns one learns are the value of money, the value of an education, and the role of race consciousness, which are viewed as instruments of achieving familial social status or maintaining continuity of their status. It is in their children that the West Indian family envisions the hope of a better future for its members. Ample understanding and a healthy incorporation of these three thought patterns are the necessary foundation for ultimately enjoying the "good life" of West Indian society.

**Review of the Literature** — A review of the literature shows that consideration has been given to the West Indian family from different perspectives. The West Indian family has been studied from the viewpoint of having roots in African tradition as posited by Melville J. Herskovits in his book, 

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\(^7\)Ibid.
The Myth of the Negro Past. E. Franklin Frazier, on the other hand, limits himself primarily to a conception of the Negro family and its struggles as a social institution in the United States. He makes references to the treatment of the slave family in the United States which are applicable to the treatment of slaves in the West Indies. The two authors seem to have different assessments of the extent to which Africanisms exist in and have impact on the Negro family today. They differ on whether the tendency toward a matriocentric family structure in Negro families of various cultures stem from African tradition or evolved as a consequence of the slave system.

Gilbert Osofsky, in contradistinction to the above contends that "slavery initially destroyed the entire concept of family for American Negroes," but that "this had not been true for most West Indians." He refers to the West Indian family as being patriarchal in nature.

Another approach to the West Indian family has been by way of attempting to assess the problem of illegitimacy in the West Indies. David Lowenthal discusses the problem of illegitimacy as a result of the social system and as it affects the West Indian family structure. The status of the illegitimate child is discussed in terms of who cares for the child and


10 Lowenthal, Societies, pp. 110-111.
is responsible for its upbringing by Yehudi Cohen.\textsuperscript{11}

Ira De A. Reid did one of the earliest studies of the West Indian immigrant in New York. He concentrates on the difficulties they encountered in adjusting to the American lifestyle. Not only does the process of adaptation exercise a strain on the family but also the West Indian is constantly criticized by the Southern Negro for being "different". Southern Negroes have been especially critical of West Indian family structure. From the outside they viewed the West Indian man as cruel because he ruled the household with an iron hand and had a tendency to beat his wife. In addition to the pressure exerted on the West Indian family in New York from the outside, friction developed internally as their children began to rebel against the tradition of the "old country."\textsuperscript{12}

The West Indian family has been treated from diverse perspectives. Yet a study of the West Indian family concentrating on the patterns of thought instilled in children in the process of childrearing has not been done to the knowledge of the author. It is hoped that through an analysis of this type, West Indian society and culture can be made more comprehensible.

**Statement of the Problem** -- The purpose of this paper is to consider three major thought patterns valued to such an extent by West Indian society that they are cultural priorities which the social mode of childrearing serves to inculcate in their progenitors. Also in analyzing the historicity of the thought patterns, a clearer conception of their functionality in the

\textsuperscript{11}Yehudi Cohen, *op. cit.*, pp. 670-685.

West Indian social system will serve to explain the realities of West Indian life which precipitate the formation of these specific thought patterns.

**Limitation** -- This study on the West Indian family will be limited to the British West Indies. It is not the intention of the author to imply that these patterns are the only ones that can be identified in the West Indian culture, nor that they are found only in isolated states. For the purpose of this paper, the author will limit this study to three patterns, those which seem to be dominant.

**Methodology** -- The data for this paper will be procured from existing recorded materials available in the libraries in the Atlanta area and also from nineteen years of experience of this author living in New York City as the daughter of a second generation West Indian.
CHAPTER II
SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE WEST INDIES

The historical background of the West Indian family system is useful for understanding why money, education, and race consciousness are considered important to transfer to children in such a deliberate manner. The struggle of the West Indian family from slavery to the present is the foundation upon which the belief that the above values will make a better life for the future generation is based.

The first studies of the West Indian family were offshoots of studies of the American Negro. They were attempts to discover remnants of the African culture in the New World Negro. Later, following the studies of the Negro American family, the West Indian family was studied in terms of possible affects of slavery on family structure and function. In an effort to analyze the nature of the West Indian family, this study will begin with the germ of the family as it existed in slavery.

West Indian Family Organization During Slavery

The West Indian islands were used to plant and harvest sugar and tobacco. Initially, labor was drawn from the native Indians of the islands. The next attempt was an experiment with European indentured labor which turned out to be a failure. As the demand for labor increased, planters looked to Africa for a new source of labor. Africans were brought to the
Islands from areas in Northeast Nigeria to areas South of the Congo.

The alien society in which the African found himself was abruptly different from his previous life-style. In light of the experience of forced emigration, the Africans made attempts to continue what they knew to be family life in Africa. It was accounted to E. Franklin Frazier that some Africans practiced polygamy. "The practice of polygamy was very generally adopted among Negroes in the West Indies . . . . It is reckoned in Jamaica, on a moderate computation that not less than ten thousand of such as are called Head Negroes (Artificers and others) possess from two to four wives." Frazier attributes the above to the existence of remnants of patriarchal family organization found in West Indian families throughout history.

While it was the desire of slave men and women to continue their lives as a family group, the slave family experienced great difficulty in maintaining a state of equilibrium. In a system of slavery, little opportunity afforded the kinds of expression needed to perpetuate a family unit. The slave family was seldom recognized as a social institution of cohabitation and childrearing. Except on the part of a few benevolent owners, slaves were seldom given the opportunity to work and live together so that through sharing common experiences, and companionship, they could be drawn closer together, strengthening their bond. For the above reasons, many elements of the slave system, deliberately or accidentally, operated to cripple or completely destroy the family of the slave.

The slave's work day on the plantation was one of long hours.

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In the West Indies slaves were sent to the farm at daybreak and labored all day except for the thirty-minute period for breakfast and a two-hour period in the hottest portion of the day, which was frequently the time set aside for doing lighter chores. At harvest time the work day was much longer, sometimes eighteen hours. Twelve hours were spent by half the groups at the boiling house and they were followed by the other half who spent an equal amount of time. Both groups had five or six hours of additional work cutting and bringing cane to the mill, caring for animals, cutting grass and hauling water. The driver did not distinguish between men and women in work requirements. . . .2

The slaves were carefully watched and supervised so that the maximum amount of labor was extracted. Slaves were worked until they were literally physically drained. It was not unheard of for a slave to pass out due to exhaustion. When the slave slowed down, he was subjected to the unrelenting cruelty and brutality of the overseer. He was termed "idle", and "lazy", and thus subjected to whip lashings and/or other forms of punishment thought to increase productivity on the part of the slave. Overwork and abusive cruelty only served to break the spirit of the slave, raise the level of his frustration, and render him useless as a functional member of the family.

To say the least the whole system of slavery was an economic venture, not a humanitarian one. In cases where slaves were allowed to set up a family unit, they lived constantly in the fear of being separated from one another. Husbands were taken and sold away from their wives, and children were separated from their mothers. It was believed by slaveowners that slaves did not have strong family ties and that they therefore, had no feelings about being separated from each other. Rationality was not the

foundation of this belief since it is known that slaves ran off to see
loved ones at the risk of torture and punishment if found.

As soon as he felt able to go so far, that is, in
about three months, he made another attempt to see her,
(he) was missed, pursued and caught. Then Thomas Stevens
(master) swore a fearful oath that he would cure him of
'wife hunting'. . . .3

Because of the belief that slaves had no feelings about being separa-
ted, slaves owners had no misgivings about selling some members of a family
away. In an instance when the father was separated from his family, it
may be out of the benevolence of the owner that he was allowed to visit
his family from time to time. But because of his prolonged, forced absence
from the family unit, his role was not secure. As a visitor, he had no
real authority over his family. Occasionally, a father was able to under-
take responsibility for his family to the extent of supplying them with
food from a little plot of land which he was given to cultivate. But
again, it was only out of the mercy of a benevolent owner. In general,
as a result of physical separation, the father was able to offer little in
the line of protection or provision.

Children, likewise, were taken from their parents. Resistance to
such action was usually to no avail. John Hope Franklin reports of a
mother who had to be tied to a loom when her children were taken away from
her to be sold. "And Josiah Henson's mother looked on in an agony of grief
as she saw her children sold one by one."4

As slaves learned the English language, they also learned the folkways
and mores of the European family system. They thereby reset their standards

4John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, p. 204.
of family living in accordance with the European model. Women were conscious of maintaining cleanliness and chastity. But as there were contradictions in the system of slavery, consequently contradictory behavior permeated in the life of the slave. Many white men forced Negro women into sexual relationships with them. Many young women resisted and as a result were subjected to inhuman treatment. Concubinary relationships later became generally practiced, and subsequently a way to gain social acceptability. For those women, being selected by the master was a means of acquiring status within the native group. For others it was a way of assuring their mulatto offsprings a better life, plus there was hope that the relationship with the master would bring material advantage for herself and perhaps even her freedom.

This form of relationship did little for family life in the West Indies. The young concubine was taken from her dwelling and lived in the master's house in an area provided for her. The same generally applied to women with children. With the advantages of a concubinary relationship judged highly by most Negro women, the possibility of the evolution of any kind of stable family life was dim.

For the most part, childrearing in the West Indian slave family due to the nature of the West Indian slave system, was never allowed to become a priority. In the United States slave breeding was done for economic gain, therefore, children were given consideration. Because they were viewed as valued commodities, the slave owners made some efforts at adequately providing for them looking forward to the day that they could be sold for profit.

West Indian planters, on the other hand, considered slave-breeding too humanitarian. It was felt by masters that it was cheaper to purchase
adult laborers than care for the young until they reached adulthood. This conception is reflected in the fact that women were forced to work up to the moment of childbirth. Because of this malicious treatment, miscarriages were high. Women who paused in the fields to care for their babies, which they carried on their backs, were lashed for what was considered idling. Inadequate food and lack of medical attention, functions of improper child care, produced a high mortality rate. These practices would suggest that not too much attention could be given specifically to proper modes of child-rearing.

West Indian Family Organization After Emancipation

Emancipation itself did not create for the West Indian a solution to family disunity. Some slaves chose to remain on the plantation as paid laborers. Domestic groupings, a crude family form evolved. Many of the social habits born and perpetrated by slavery continued to influence family groupings. Perhaps three forms should be distinguished. The first to be listed is a family form based on a consanguineous relationship. The household consisted of any combination of blood relations such as: a mother and her offspring; a grandmother, mother, and grandchildren; a father, and his offspring, etc. The second type was a household set up consisting of a man, a woman and children. This grouping was a family form which was the closest approximation of the European family-type, "but there is not the same recognition of the monogamous conjugal union as the licit and morally approved means of satisfying sexual needs as there is in Western Europe."5 Of primary concern to the white planters was the possible effect emancipation would have

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on their accessibility to Negro women as sex mates. The fact is the practice of selecting a Negro concubine from among those who remained on the plantation continued. This brings us to the third type of family. "White planters often accepted responsibility for their children by Negro mistresses." Kept by white planters, "not only were the status and material condition of the mother better in these cases, but the children often had the advantage of a better education than would otherwise have been available locally for them." And so was the perpetuation of the "kept family type."

But the majority of West Indian Negroes did not remain on the plantation. Contrary to the expectation of the British government, "when the slaves find themselves free their first instinct was to learn the hard work on the plantation and set up on their own as independent peasant farmers on any plot of ground they could find." The built-up frustrations of dependency and humiliation produced a need to escape the world of plantation living and all it implied.

Domestic groups then evolved into independent residential units which constituted a household. The organization of these households followed the same pattern based on the forms of the past as emancipation did nothing to change these. The first household to be mentioned is the elementary biological family. The members of this family consisted of a man, a woman, the children resulting from their union and any other children that either

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7 Ibid.

the male or female may have had prior to their relationship or during their relationship. These children were usually referred to as "outside" children. A woman noted "some men don't mind if said child is not theirs." The family moved from a mere state of trying to survive to explicitly trying to satisfy the needs of the family. The family existed to satisfy the needs of procreation and childrearing, housekeeping, the protection of the family group and needs associated with the acquisition of status in the community.⁹

Concurrently in existence at that time was the independent residential matriocentric household. This form of family was composed of kinship members such as mother, grandmother, aunt, cousin, etc., and grandchildren in any combination. Often the grandparents raised an offspring's "outside child" (or children) when he or she was not accepted by a new mate or a child is simply raised by grandparents when the parent goes elsewhere to seek employment for the support of the child. This form of family lived together for the purpose of satisfying the needs of those individual members within the household and protection of the group.

With the extinction of slavery life on the plantation and the physical exodus from the plantation, the custom of concubinary relationships underwent considerable modification. A residential unit was set up in which a mistress and her children were "kept" by a married or unmarried man. In the case of the married man, the act of supporting a monogamous family and a home set up for the mistress and their/her children is known as the custom of twin household.

The early presence of European Christianity may have developed a trend towards a monogamous family form. In the West Indies, however, Christianity was discouraged among the slaves. From the planters' point of view, allowing conversion of slaves to Christianity disturbed him because the development of the Negroes' Christian conscience would reduce his accessibility to Negro women as sex objects. In the past he had indulged in sexual relations with many female slaves as frequently as desired with social sanction. There was no mention of marriage.

But with the ever influencing impact of British culture came the desire to follow the kind of family form adhered to by Europeans which was a monogamous relationship, preceded by the legal and social sanction of society, in which a man and a woman cohabitate and make provisions for the formation of a new family unit. In the West Indies, it was socially required that a marriage be carried out in a Church with pomp and ceremony, to be followed by a grand party. "People must be entertained with music, rum, and food; if this cannot be done, it would not be considered a proper wedding."¹⁰ Needless to say, very few could afford a legal marriage. Because only those who had money could afford to legally marry, marriages of legal standing became a status symbol and an established approach to family life among West Indian Negroes.

West Indian Family Organization Today

Today, West Indian family forms are clearly built on the past social history of the family. Trends which existed during slavery and emancipation shine through today. Money plays a major role in the choice of family

¹⁰Fernando Henriques, "West Indian Family Organization," p. 33.
The Christian-type family constitutes the smallest percentage among the four forms. While it represents the minority of family forms, it is considered by West Indians to be the ideal type of family style. It is the form of family life aspired to by most unmarried young women for it is a means to acquire financial stability. The Christian family form is also the life-style hoped for by unmarried women with children although they may live in the style of the other three categories.

The Christian family form typically consists of a man, wife, and from 2-8 children of the couple. The man has a regular job and a small plot of land which he cultivates, near the house or in the backcountry. He will be the sole wage earner (unless children are of working age, about fourteen). His regularity in employment constitutes the economic stability of the family. His sexual needs are satisfied within the marriage. If he feels the temptation to go outside, religion and respectability are liable to prevent him. To go outside of the family would meet with disapproval on the part of the members of a family and those outside of the family.

In relation to the total population, only twenty-five percent of the families come under the heading of the "Christian Family." Within this small percentage, most families are among the middle class. There are, however, many instances of lower class farmers who have seen fit to conduct their lives in the style of the Christian family.

The faithful concubinage is the kind of family in which a man lives with a woman, as if he were legally married to her and performs the same functions as in the Christian family. The relationship is generally motivated by economic convenience. The distinguishing point of the "faithful concubinate" relationship is the greater degree of equality which exists
between the male and female, although the male's authority tends to be most dominant. The reason women do not marry is that they fear that marriage will lead to undue domination by the man. While there is no social stigma attached, these women aspire to being eventually married legally but their reason for not being legally married to the man with whom they live is that they are unsure of him and want to wait until they are sure. Others are waiting for the right man to come.

The companionate family consists of a female head. Two types in the companionate relationship can be described. One contains no male head of the family. The other has a male head in the family. His role is nominal despite his presence and the female assumes an authoritative role.

Such a family has its beginnings through a young female member becoming pregnant while still living at home. The household may consist of the mother, her children, her mother's sister(s) and the girl's sibling. Here the adult members contribute financial assistance which supports the whole family including the young girl as she cares for her offspring. In many cases, the grandmother rears the child because the young mother leaves to either take a job or start a new life as a bride.

Another type of relationship in the companionate category can be seen in the short story, "Of Thorns' Whistles" by the West Indian writer, George Laming. A young woman (Mother Burton) gives birth to an illegitimate child (Leonora). Mother Burton meets a woman by the name of Rose who befriends her and helps her care for the infant. After three years the mother entrusts her child to be reared by Rose. "... Mother Burton left her to the care of Rose. She wanted to start life afresh... she worked her passage
to Jamaica and there she lived and worked. Here is an example of a friend who raises a child in the absence of its mother.

The final form of family existing today in the West Indies is the dis-integrate family. In the dis-integrate family, again, the mother is the head. This family has its origin in the mother who has several illegitimate children, all whose fathers are different. These children seldom know their father because as he has been away from the home a long time and has ceased to be functional. When these children become young adults, the girls have their own illegitimate children, thus repeating another cycle in the family history of illegitimate children. As the number of members in the household increase, those young adults who can support themselves are forced to do so. In particular, young mothers of illegitimate children are encouraged to seek employment to help with family support. Young male siblings are asked to relieve the family of the burden of their support. When Sam was 16, he departed for the capital where he went to work for some wealthy people. When Donald was 16, he left (home) to seek work in the parish in which Rocky Roads are situated. They were compelled to leave, for their mother said she could no longer provide for them.11

In conclusion, one can see that the West Indian family has its roots very strongly implanted in the old system of slavery. The branches that grow out from these roots still follow practices begun in slavery although time has done much to modify them.


Over a period of time money has become recognized as the means for improving life-styles. The family in the past has served the function of financially supporting all members of the family, a function well served particularly after emancipation, when money was scarce for everyone and mere survival was in question. But today, it is recognized that supporting members of a family who can well care for themselves is dysfunctional to the family unit, therefore independence is encouraged. People moving into the Christian family life and many others aspiring that their children direct their lives towards legal monogamous relationships indicate a steady lack of acceptance of any form of relationship which casts itself as a burden to other members of the family.¹³

Unless patterns in childrearing change, generations follow generations repeating the same negative trends preventing the family from social mobility and status. West Indians see the accumulation of capital as the mechanism for reducing the struggle element of life. Education is seen as one of the means to accumulating capital in terms of the theory that the higher the education, the more accessible a higher salaried job becomes.

Race consciousness functions to remind one of the expected difficulties that can be levied against him in his attempt to achieve social status.

¹³Ibid.
CHAPTER III

THOUGHT PATTERNS ON MONEY

Today, during the process of childrearing, West Indians are careful about transferring to their children a conception of the value of money. A father teaches his child directly and indirectly ways of handling money. A man knows that he doesn't spend all of his paycheck, however meager it may be. A child learns that when he is given money as a gift, he saves a portion of it. These are but a few of the many practices which contributes to becoming successful in handling money. The purpose of this chapter is to try to discover why money is a reoccurring theme in raising children in the West Indies.

This emphasis on money is based on a conception of the harshness of poverty, either vicariously or from actual experience. For this reason, West Indian people are constantly anxious over their economic welfare. This anxiety is founded on the belief that one never has enough money and opportunities for its acquisition are very limited. Generally speaking a man's foremost goal is the achievement and maintenance of great economic wealth. Hence, he will tend to avoid any situation which will tax his economic resources. For this reason, accumulation becomes a life long project.

The need to accumulate money is motivated by the tensions resulting from uncertainties arising from previous economic insecurity. This tension
represents the difficulties encountered in the struggle to recover from the effects of slavery. But the desire to succeed in developing economic security stretches much farther into the past. Many have sought to understand the persistence of this West Indian cultural priority. American Negroes have become envious as they’ve watched the West Indian succeed in an area in which they have been seldomly successful. In less generous moments, West Indians have been referred to by native Negro Americans as being "... craftier than a Jew, and is not to be trusted in financial matters." The many antagonistic remarks, expressed by American born Negroes about West Indians are not made out of simple hostility, but are ventilations disguised as envy, is a consequence of observing foreigners coming to the United States and seemingly reap economic benefits from the very country the American Negro built. A West Indian able to conceal his identity by the fact that he had no accent took part in a revealing conversation with American born Negroes, which discloses this hostility.

"As a sleeping car porter, I concealed my national identity and made myself an American. ... I did this for the purpose of knowing in very truth the prejudices of the natives towards the foreigner. Having no accent, it was not suspected. I would join the boys in their scathing criticism of foreigners. ... We admitted our fear of their superior ability to acquire knowledge, and property, and money, and we pledged our troth one to another to protect our birthright in business, in politics and in learning against the foreigner at any price. Those 'monkey chasers' are too damn smart, was an oft repeated expression. ..."

The West Indian and the African Tradition of ESUSU

Little did American Negroes realize that the ability to command large


sums of ready cash to provide a substantial down payment on a "brick" house or buy property was not necessarily a cultural trait of West Indians, but the result of an African tradition which was never completely extinguished, despite the event of slavery in the West Indies. The process of slavery in the United States seems to have completely destroyed this African traditional institution called ESUSU upon which West Indians rely for economic support. In his discussion of Yoruba associations, A. K. Ajisafe provides a description of the ESUSU institution as basically a rotation credit association.3

"There is a certain society called Esusu. This society deals with monetary matters only, and it helps its members to save and raise money thus: Every member shall pay a certain fixed sum of money regularly at a fixed time (say every fifth or ninth day). And one of the subscribing members shall take the total amount, thus subscribe for his or her own personal use. The next subscription shall be taken by another member; this shall so continue rotationally until every member has taken. . . ."4

The Esusu has its origins in Africa. Although the details of administration and organization differ from region to region, the determining factor that is, rotating credit, is virtually the same. In Yorubaland, the Esusu seems similar to the practice of a group called the Aro. The Aro is a cooperative organization one could join, in which a member would have the resources of the whole membership at his disposal to complete his work so that work would ordinarily take him a week to do alone could be done in a day or two. This practice served to cut down on spoilage of harvested crops. The recipient farmer was then obligated to work in the other members' farm as their harvest time came around. Here, the rotating credit takes the form of energy expenditure.

The Esusu organization in Yoruba does not differ significantly from Aro. Anyone who wishes may found an Esusu group, assuming others are willing to entrust their money to him. These may be neighbors. The organizer or president needs only be known personally by some of the members. The others, perhaps will only know of him. An organizer may announce his intention to sponsor an Esusu and the people willing to entrust their money to him indicate a desire to join. Personal acquaintances of the organizer, if accepted, in turn become heads of "roads." As heads of roads, these personal acquaintances of the organizer are entitled to inform their own friends and kin concerning membership in the Esusu. Heads of the roads are usually responsible for collecting the contributions and paying out the funds to those members who have applied to them rather than the original founder of that particular Esusu.

The tradition of Esusu has lasted as long as it did in the West Indies because the environment in the West Indies was much more conducive to its survival. Some experts on the Caribbean have posited that slavery was not as severe in the West Indies as in the United States but assessments vary. David Lowenthal contends that "West Indian slavery conditions were appalling. Conditions of work, nourishment, confinement, and punishment were probably the worst in the New World." But it may be the combination of this severity mentioned by Lowenthal plus the characteristic factors of slavery that gave the West Indian the cultural drive to improve himself. A discussion of practices characteristic of West Indian slavery which are considered contributory to the development of ethnic enterprise will follow.

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The West Indian and Economics During Slavery

It is important to take into consideration the fact that throughout the period of slavery, the African population exceeded that of the white population in the West Indies. Most plantation owners did not live on the Islands. It was perceived as more prestigious among owners to conduct their business from a European base. Resident planters differed from absentee planters only in being envious of them. They did not consider the West Indies as their homeland; only as a temporary habitat until they could do well enough so that they too could become absentee landlords. The majority of these residential planters sent their children to England for schooling and fewer than two out of three ever came back. Because of absentee landlordism, the white minority, which were not residential plantation owners, became the overseers.

These poor white overseers were the dregs of English society who were trying to make money and had no personal attachment to the plantation. Their only concern was to produce wealth for their employers because their jobs depended on productivity alone since to the absent plantation owners, increased profits was the measurement of success. This indirectly affected the lot of slaves living under the authority of these overseers. The slaves were overworked, underfed, and continually subjected to practices of maltreatment. One overseer bragged "though I have killed 30 or 40 Negroes per year more," he explained, "I have made my employer 20, 30, 40 more hogsheads per year than any of my predecessors ever did." Many absentee plantation

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6 Ibid., p. 35.
7 Ibid., p. 42.
owners returned after a long period of absence to find their soil exhausted, the slaves cruelly beaten and sometimes even mutilated.

"At times the floggings were so severe as to inflict wounds so large that a man's finger could be inserted in them. Another favorite type of punishment was to suspend the slave to a tree by ropes and tie iron weights around his neck and waist. Still another was to crop the slave's ear and to break the bones of his limbs. . . ."8

Absenteeism on the part of the owner caused an especially impersonal relationship between slave and master in the West Indies. The plantation masters in the United States often took a protective attitude towards their slaves. They were often heard to brag about the fact that they "took good care of their nigras." Members of the "big house" family, had favorites slaves and often interceded for them in times of punishment. These plantation owners provided their slaves with the necessary provisions from plantation storehouses. This type of paternalism kept the American slave in a state of spiritual and physical dependency.

In the West Indies, there was no one to intercede on the behalf of the slave. His independence was fostered by a practice in which slaves were often given a small plot of land on which he was allowed to grow his own food. The primary drawback of this system was that the soil was often poor and the plots were usually at a considerable distance from the hut. The slaves were allowed free time on Saturday and Sunday to cultivate their land. Even though most of them were tired, here was a motivating opportunity where personal ambition would be rewarded. Hungry, and tired many worked hard in order to supplement the meager food stuff rationed out on the plantation.

Another important fact about slavery in the West Indies was that in their absence, plantation owners made little organized provision for their overseers' subsistence. White plantation overseers were dependent on their slaves for their own food. Some slaves, instead of cultivating their own plot of land preferred to develop trades and crafts in their free time and bought food with the money received for their products. The division of labor among the slaves was such that they formed a market for the purpose of exchanging commodities. The shortage of whites allowed blacks to administer these markets which eventually became institutionalized. Both blacks and whites attended these markets. Participation in the marketing system often put a damper on the slave driver's authority as it gave the West Indian slave economic leverage. Slaves, successful in commerce could use their proceeds for the purchase of their own freedom. Some slaves even attained substantial wealth.

West Indians and Economics After Emancipation

Setting the West Indian Negro free unleashed a people with a sense of determination renewed by the experience of slavery. After slavery, the Carribean Negro became exceptionally goal-oriented, his goal was and still is a life of restored dignity and pride.

Conditions in the West Indies after Emancipation enabled the West Indian to move toward his goal. For the most part, the slave in the Islands had not developed a strict dependency on his master for survival. In fact, the reverse was true, evidenced by the reality that the sugar plantations declined considerably after emancipation due to an extreme shortage of labor, much to the disappointment of plantation owners who had thought that slaves would stay on after emancipation. West Indian Negroes ran
from under the foot of plantation overseers, whose injustices and cruelties were all too recent memories. "Many trekked to the 'back lands' of the plantations unsuitable for cultivation and unused by planters, others established themselves as squatters on the crown lands and in the forest reserves." In physically removing themselves from the plantations, West Indians felt they could achieve the greatest freedom from white domination. For some, the marketing system was successful. For others, it was a symbol of what one could possibly achieve with hard work and ambition. The prospects of prosperity were envisioned as achievable.

The West Indian and Economics Today

With an accumen for marketing having been established, the traders were able to increase their profits with the aid of the rotating credit associations. In the various islands, the word "esusu" has evolved. It is called, "asu" in the British Bahamas, "susu" in Trinidad, and "partners" in Jamaica. Independent of the name, the function is the same, that is, to enable members to use large sums of money they would not have access to by their own means. Traders have used membership money to restock their shelves. Businessmen have used membership money for further investments. James Weldon Johnson summarized this tendency as found in West Indians in Harlem as follows:

"Often companies of half-dozen men combined to buy a house—these combinations were and still are generally made up of West Indians, and would produce five or ten thousand dollars to put through the deal. Then. . . ., the land companies that had been

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holding vacant the handsome dwelling on and abutting Seventh Avenue decided to put them on the market. . . . Houses that had been bought at from $15,000 to $20,000 were sold at one-third of those figures. They were quickly gobbed up (by cooperations of predominantly West Indians). . . . Everyone of these houses was sold within eleven months at an aggregate price of about two million dollars. Today they are probably worth about 100 percent more. . . ."10

Others used the money for general consumption, purchasing property, or just accumulating capital. Since the practice of esusu has been handed down through generations as a method of acquiring capital, there has evolved around this African tradition several practices which enhances the keeness of West Indians in the area of money. These thought patterns about money are considered important while teaching children the value of money. Accumulation of money has already been mentioned as a means of economic security. In order to accumulate money, one must live a life of thrift. Only those necessities are afforded. For example, clothing is considered a necessity of life purely in a functional sense. Little attention is paid to fashion or style until such time one feels one is in the financial position to do so. The problem with being thrifty until one feels one has enough money is that one tends to live ones life on a shelf.

Having cash on hand to make a purchase was considered important. One waits to gratify oneself when one can afford to do so. Buying on credit was seldom done unless it was a major investment. Putting articles "on the lay-away plan was condemned."

Another practice generally upheld is the concealment of one's personal

assets. This practice applies to friends and relatives as well as husbands and wives. Husbands and wives maintained absolute secrecy about their cash earnings from each other. The habit of maintaining secrecy about financial resources is functional in the sense that it precludes the possibility of anyone planning on someone else's money. In the event that one does not think that money requested by another will be spent adequately it is possible to avert a conflict by simply saying, "I don't have any money." It is a statement which cannot be refuted when one's assets are kept private. This policy is a way of protecting an individual's financial resources from unnecessary demands. Without an unnecessary drain on funds, the West Indian can go on with the business of accumulating money.

Another practice transferred is the importance of having ready cash. Ready available cash gave the individual a sense of security for he knew he could care for himself in an emergency. It also allows him considerable power of purchase. He was judged by his neighbors in terms of how much cash he had to spend. The use of credit was an indication of poverty which was frowned upon as imprudent and a possible sign of mismanagement of funds since it was thought that one should prepare oneself adequately financially before purchasing a desired item. Also, the purchase of any article(s) should never leave one flat broke.

Many West Indians literally kept money on hand. This author remembers a story about an old West Indian lady who died in New York, and left thousands of dollars hidden in her apartment. On another occasion, it was said that the dispensing of the personal possessions of a deceased member of a family, dollars were found in many unsuspected places throughout the house. Many
West Indians today believe in keeping some sort of money box on hand in the home while banks are used only for large sums of money.\textsuperscript{11}

In a discussion of the value of money, it is impossible to exclude the transference of capital into property and land for land was the key to social mobility especially in the rural areas.

Ownership of land and/or a house are considered status symbols. The high value of home ownership motivates every West Indian man to strive towards affording the house in which he and his family reside. To fall short of this goal is a grave disappointment to a young man. The following quotes point to the high value placed on ownership of land and home to the average West Indian.

"If there's one golden rule, we all on this island got, . . . it is this: if the God give you health and strength, work till you can get yourself a shelter over ya head by day, and a corner to rest your bones at night, and once you get it, give the good God thanks and never get rid of it...."\textsuperscript{12}

"A man ain't a man til he can call the house he live in my own...."\textsuperscript{13}

West Indians have for a very long time understood the value of money as it functions to enable one to live a better life. Most have lived without access to enough money. Some have acquired limited resources and live a relatively comfortable life. In remembering the struggle of the past, the insecurity about money still lingers in those who have reached some kind of success. Those who have not reached that success are still firmly embedded in the struggle to achieve that end.

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid.


\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., p. 245.
Nonetheless, there are certain practices which have been responsible for the fact that West Indians have been far more successful about economic matters than American blacks as a whole. The survival of the traditional African society of *esusu* is certainly a very valuable custom which has afforded West Indians the utilization of mass capital. These cultural keenness which has always been designated to the West Indian culture as a result of their experience in the New World, must be re-evaluated in terms of the fact that it is not purely a West Indian characteristic, but a cultural residue of African origin.

Other practices have developed by dint of experience in the New World. In the struggle to regain equilibrium from slavery considerable value has been placed on money as a mechanism for achieving a new balance. Methods of handling money have developed as means of survival, such as strict thriftiness, secrecy about financial holdings and an unrelenting appreciation for sheer capital accumulation.

Since the financial betterment of the family is realized in its children, it has become the responsibility of the family to teach its progenitors the mechanisms for continuing positive economic patterns set by the older generations in the hope that they will build on the existing foundation. In instances where the economic foundations of a family are non-existent, it is the task of the young, through the above mentioned means, to raise the status of the family.
CHAPTER IV

THOUGHT PATTERNS ON EDUCATION

Education is another important factor in the acquisition of status by West Indian standards. While many are interested in an education for the sake of acquiring new knowledge, the majority are concerned about education as a means of upward mobility. Education is used as a principal criteria in determining placement in the occupational system. Generally, the higher the education level the higher the position in which one is placed. The higher the position, the more money remunerated. In the preceding sentence, one can see the link between two important thought patterns namely, education and money. An education is considered necessary in life by West Indians to the point that the individual feels vulnerable without some form of education. The higher the academic level achieved, the less he feels subject to the mercy of society. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the question of anxiety among the West Indian as it relates to education and thereby discover the reasons education is so highly valued as a thought pattern to pass on to one's children.

From the time the West Indian youth is able to comprehend the notion of occupation he becomes job oriented because it is necessary to supplement the family income as soon as he is able. He learns early about various professional occupations and their advantages over blue collar jobs. Education is perceived as necessary.
It is said that academic performance is the first stepping stone towards the acquisition of a professional job. Therefore, learning new concepts is emphasized as time well spent and achievement is rewarded. Play is limited. Time may be given to household chores, but most activities are subordinated to the learning process. To emphasize the point, one can observe the West Indian child in contrast to an American Negro child:

"... with natural childlike curiosity he (the West Indian Child) weighs the abandon with which native children can play and enjoy themselves. Up to this age has been stressed on his mind the theories that it is not 'nice' to be on the streets like a hoodlum at all hours of the day..."\(^1\)

At the onset, a child learns to prepare himself for the seriousness of the business of education. Achievement is expected and demanded by West Indian parents. There is little allowance made for misbehaving in class since education is viewed as an opportunity. Deviation from the learning process is antithetical to the explicit purpose of school attendance. Since school is not perceived as a social event in which one has time to play with one's schoolmates, infractions receive serious reprisals. Dual punishment results; it is administered in school by the teachers and at home by the parents. Since many parents did not have the opportunity to advance educationally for want of money and/or because of early parental responsibility they are willing to make the necessary sacrifices so their children will have access to an education they did not acquire to improve their life's position.

The West Indian and Education During Slavery

It is not difficult to understand this strict and stolid approach to

education when one looks at the conditions prior to establishing educational institutions in the West Indies. Education during slavery was generally inaccessible to the slave. On occasions a slave master may educate his colored slaves out of benevolence. But for the most part, planters were opposed to anything resembling universal education for the slaves. For one reason, children of possible school age did a large portion of the work on the plantation thus planters wanted to insure the continuance of this labor supply. They did not want to educate slave children in that they felt education might give them occupational skills unrelated to plantation life thereby terminating the symbolic nature of their relationship.

Because of the dependent relationship of overseers and owners on slaves for supplies, the planter felt it risky to educate slaves as it may breed discontent and make it impossible for the planters to exercise effective control over their laborers. As it was, David Lowenthal points out, planters recognized the galling state of their dependency.

"The discrepancy between slave-master's authority and his circumstances was for him a source of aggravation and shame. He found himself dependent on his slaves at every point; livelihood, for safety, for comfort, even for companionship. Power encouraged a taste for tyranny. . . ."2

Aside from the belief that the education of slaves would be a significant factor in the event of slave uprisings it is important to note that schools were slow in coming to the West Indies for another reason. Because the plantation owners did not see the islands as home, they did not raise their children in the Caribbean and therefore, had no reason nor interest

2Ibid., p. 50.
in establishing a school system in the West Indies. Those planters who resided in the West Indies found it more prestigious to send their children to England to school.

The West Indian and Education After Emancipation

At emancipation, the freedman population of the West Indies had few alternatives open to it. It has been mentioned previously that in disdain and rejection of slavery, many freemen fled to the back country or the bush in an effort to live a life totally independent of the slave system. Others having developed a trade or craft, moved into the market exchange economy. In areas, such as Barbados where fertile land was scarce and the land which could yield adequate harvests usually belonged to plantation owners. Freedmen were forced to participate in an apprenticeship program.

The apprenticeship system grew out of a twofold foresight of the planter owners. First, it was expected that upon emancipation, slaves would be a threat to the planter class as had occurred in Haiti. "...between 1791 and 1863, all West Indians slaves were freed and legal disabilities on grounds of colour were terminated. In Haiti, where slaves and free coloured had suffered the most, revolution reversed the power structure; surviving whites were forbidden to own land, and mulattoes were harried by blacks." The apprentice system was seen as a means of immediate social control under which gradual behavior modification on the part of the slave would eventuate. "A race has been freed...," but a society has not been formed. "Under the system of apprenticeship, slaves though emancipated, were bound legal ties to their old masters for whom they had to work so

that they should learn gradually to stand on their own feet and fend for themselves.\footnote{4}

The second purpose of the apprenticeship program addressed itself to the question of the labor force. Once slaves were freed, where would the planters acquire the necessary labor to keep the plantation a viable economic enterprise. It was the desire of the planter society to continue sugar production despite emancipation. The apprenticeship program was an answer to this question. It could be said that the apprenticeship program was a means of legally prolonging slavery in order to keep alive an already declining system of 'sugar production'.

The apprenticeship program attempted to convert ex-slaves into contracting wage laborers. These ex-slaves had little choice but to work at degrading jobs for very low wages. These jobs often represented the poorest paying jobs, the least personally rewarding jobs and the lowest prestige carrying jobs in the whole socio-economic system.

However, demeaning and rudimentary the apprenticeship system, it represented the first attempt to formally educate the freedmen by the planter society, although the motives for beginning the program were other than altruistic. With the money received, freedmen were expected to pay their rent and assume the financial responsibility for wife and family. Freedmen were socialized to conform to the norms of the existing society. Social status for the Negro was associated with conformity to the life style of the planter class. The closer the approximation to the planter's life style the faster one achieved social mobility. Social mobility took visible

\footnote{4Agnes M. Whitson and Lucy Frances Horsfall, \textit{Britain and the West Indies} (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1948), p. 31.}
form in the promotion of a freeman from the less prestigious job of an agricultural laborer to a more credited job of domestic or artisan labor.

Churches were largely responsible for the first semblance of an educational institution for the freedman. Churches made the first effort to extend education to the masses of freedmen.

The Church of England supported by public funds was the official church of the Islands which attempted to educate Negroes in the West Indies. Because it was seriously undermanned, it made little impression on the people it served. Later, dissenting denominations such as The Moravians, The Methodists, and The Baptists, made headway. They were the most energetic pioneers of education for the freed Negro masses. These institutions already in operation were boosted financially by the Negro Education Grant offered by England which gave a total of 55,000 pounds to those churches involved in educating freed Negroes, but these funds soon diminished.

The problem of qualified teachers detracted from the viability of existing schools. Because of low salaries, lay teachers were also accorded low status. The majority of teachers in post-emancipation West Indies received no specialized training for the purpose of teaching. A Tobago school inspector shook his head in despair saying in reference to the learning of the English language in a local school. "It is hopeless to expect this rising generation to arrive at a . . . fair knowledge of the tongue they speak, when they hear from their teachers such phrases as 'where did Moses born?'--'I eats yam', etc. One of the worst documented cases of an uneducated teacher came from British Guiana (presently called Guyana), where a school inspector found an ex-cart driver whose sole qualification was that he "looked wise."  

The fact that children who did attend school learned very little as long as teachers were unqualified was recognized by Mico-Charity, a philanthropic organization which subsequently founded Mico-college, one of the earliest training institutions in the West Indies designed to adequately educate teachers. The mico school was successful in raising the standards of the schools by training qualified teachers and even starting new schools in areas lacking educational facilities.

In Barbados and Tobago so great was the desire for education that parents provided schools for their own children. Some children walked as much as five miles to school. Parents made their children share what they learned in school with children who could not, for various reasons, attend.

The curricula in most schools in the West Indies in the early days and for years afterwards was limited to reading, writing and arithmetic. Towards the end of the century, lessons in history, geography, and singing were added. Schools were afforded additional grants if they gave elementary agricultural instruction, and had a school garden or taught manual work or sewing. At the suggestion of the Colonial Office, special schools teaching agriculture and carpentry were opened in the West Indies, but parents refused to send their children "to work cutlass and shovel," and the schools had to close. Parents wanted their children to acquire book-learning as they hoped that such school would enable their children to rise into the "white collar" class. David Lowenthal quotes Andrew Pearse, who wrote:

"However slender the chances may be of... rising... out of the ranks of the laboring classes, modification of the

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6 Agnes M. Whitson and Lucy Frances Horsfall, Britain and the West Indies, p. 66.
curriculum, or the curtailment of the amount of time spent in 'cultural' subjects is deeply resented. Indeed the idea that the school should try to prepare school children for the life which their parents are forced to lead is still abhorrent.*  

What the West Indian Negro parents wanted from the school system was the means by which their children raise themselves above the despised calling of the agriculture laborer associated with their days of slavery. They wanted an educational system which simulated the more prestigious English system. The closer to the British school model, the more legitimate it was felt to be. Afro-Carribbeans took the standards of the white elite as their own. Status was associated with imitating the British culture. The need to disassociate themselves from anything that had to do with slavery was fulfilled when the least practical studies were undertaken. West Indian students learned to despise the customs and traditions of the everyday common folk as these detracted from status. In adopting English cultural standards, these West Indian Negroes became more British than the British.

While the great majority of parents regarded education as desirable, a gap often existed between aspiration and reality. Often children eager to learn have to assume household responsibility as their parents work. School attendance is high at the beginning of the week, but attendance tends to decline as the week progresses. Common reasons for absenteeism are lack of clean clothing, marketing for the household and caring for other siblings. The point here is that household responsibilities along with the very British standards of education in the school system prevented

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the development of an environment conducive to scholarship which often led to a lack of success in the academic sphere:

"They will sit for the scholarship examinations and fail. . . . They will fail them because there is always water to be fetched, chickens to be fed, rice to be dried, and a host of other chores which children are expected to perform once they are home. They will fail them because parents, though willing are unable to help their children understand the lesson taught at school. They will fail them because by 6:30 in the evening it is too dark to read a book or do what little homework has been assigned. With no electricity, night effectively envelopes and suffocates school work. In the end the children will fail the examinations because they have had the misfortune to have been born in. . . (a rural village). . . ."

The relatively high cost of education could not be met within the limitation of the average household budget. Schools were frequently located in sections of town inaccessible to the poor families and transportation was generally inadequate or non-existent.

The West Indian and Education Today

Looking at the above, one can see that securing a fruitful education in the West Indies has been a difficult task. Despite the fact that many years have passed nothing has happened to change the rooted feeling that agriculture and any labor associated with slavery is the fate of the unfortunate. There is still a strong incentive to send children to schools in the hope that they will be able to obtain good jobs upon finishing.

Since the end of World War II, there has been a rapid developing of educational opportunities. Governmental control of schools has meant that children of poor families are now able to attend. Secondary education has

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8Ibid., p. 119.
also developed so that most children can attend. The subjects taught in the secondary school curriculum still are academic rather than practical. The concentration continues to be centered around European studies rather than on those of the Caribbean. Students in most accredited schools take Cambridge General Certificate of Education examinations at the end of secondary school.

It can be stated that the absence of West Indian cultural forms in most West Indian schools prevent students from being equipped to handle West Indian national and cultural problems which has led to the avoidance of these. The tendency has been for West Indians to leave their island countries for England or the United States.

"Nor has the educated West Indian identified himself with Carribbean values, for he has been shaped by a process of pedagogical indoctrination in which the 'pleasures of exile' have been seen as more desirable than the responsibilities of local life. . . ."9

West Indian migrants to the United States have been able to take advantage of that educational system more efficiently than the average Black American who is generally hampered by inferior schooling and other circumstances surrounding poor achievement. Highly ambitious, West Indians arrive in the United States with a firmly implanted familial tradition of stressing education as mechanism for future achievement and generally finishes ranking high in his class.

Indeed education has paid off for most West Indians. Completion of an academic course brings a new self-confidence which plays a contributory

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role in the success of landing a job as well as the actual academic qualifications for a job. In the West Indies, educational opportunities abroad have enabled the Afro-Caribbean who has returned home to qualify for jobs they could not have hoped for in the past. Many now not only fill administrative posts and civil service posts traditionally held by whites, but also have been able to enter the medical and professional world.

In closing, the mode of living aspired to by most West Indians is felt to be accessible by means of completing an academic educational course on the highest level possible.

Education had been associated with prestige by the planter society when they sent their children off to foreign countries. Negro West Indians establishing a status system of their own, assigned positive value to securing an education and placed academic achievement among the highest symbols of that status.

The struggle for education has been tedious for most West Indians since learning institutions were slow in offering services to the masses of people. Those who have been able to secure an education have been well rewarded with jobs that carry status in West Indian society. Amply paid in these jobs, many West Indians have turned their money into the obvious material symbols of achievement, namely property, house(s), and more capital.

Recognizing these symbols as the visible signs of a comfortable life, the family prods its young to take their education very seriously in order to attain a lifestyle that reflects a conquest over the degenerate legacy of slavery.
CHAPTER V

THOUGHT PATTERNS ON RACIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Black West Indians are a very race conscious people. References are constantly made to color gradations. It is important to note that this form of color consciousness is a direct result of the social history of the West Indian peoples where privilege fell into the hands of lighter skin West Indians.

In the West Indies significance of color has been nurtured by the Negro social group as one of many means of breaking the black/white class line. Whereas in the case of the American Negro, the definition of his status is solely a product of external factors independent of and exterior to his individual achievement. The white society defines the Negro as a member of a sub-societal group making no real functional distinction between those who achieve and those who remain in a state of dependency. Although individual achievement is recognized within the black sub-group by its members, there exists little consideration of the Negro's personal achievement in relationship to the total dominant society by whites. Irregardless of his individual success the American Negro is referenced in relationship to his racial group and he is limited to social mobility only within the sub-societal group designated for him. In contradiction, West Indian society defines individuals in accordance with personal achievement in economic matters, occupationwise and in the area of education. While
race can also be a determinant of status, West Indian society does not seek to keep Negro members from moving socially within the total society.

It is in the desire to achieve upward mobility that West Indian Negroes are preoccupied with color distinction. The purpose of this chapter is not to prove that racial discrimination exists in the West Indies, but to point to the functionality of color awareness in the context of West Indian society.

The utility of color consciousness is a particular and specific thought pattern parents consciously are concerned about passing on to their children. They have suffered from social discrimination in the past and they know either experientially or vicariously the extent it has influenced their personal advancement. By making a child aware of society's conception of color by constant instruction and pointing out the direct effect of racial discrimination on individual achievement, a parent presents the future alternatives. For a child, the only realistic alternative for the present is to perform well in school thereby making it possible to go to college and eventually select a job which offers him status and money, whereby he subsequently gains the respect and rewards given by West Indian society.

It should be understood that the process of making a child aware of color does not imply that a child learns to feel inferior, a loss of self-respect or defeated, but rather he acquires a sense of motivation from which he is socialized to be successful by West Indian standards.

**The West Indian and Race Consciousness During Slavery**

Under the institution of slavery there are two popular jobs which slaves were 'selectively' chosen for. The first was the selection of slaves to work in the house as servants, and the other was the selection of slaves
to be used as concubines.

A part of the criteria used to select slaves to perform domestic chores and be involved in concubinary relationships was personality of the slave. The more amenable and gentle the slave the higher the probability of selection. Resemblance to the European physical type was another criteria, the more likely they were to be chosen. Of the African peoples brought to the New World, Gardner noted the Madagass from Madagascar as being "lighter in colour than the average Negro from the Gold Coast and their hair was less woolly."¹ Bryan Edwards described a Mandingoes as being intelligent and "thought they were according to their features and hair the link between the Moors and Negroes."² Slaves of this description were referred to as mulattoes and given preferential treatment.

The slaves as portrayed in Mandingo, a novel by Kyle Onstott, give ample description of the kind of slave generally chosen to work in the 'big house'. These slaves were very subservient and domicile. A major character, Hammond, a young master, describes himself as being "a connoisseur of fine animals (slaves)...."³ He was "...proud of Big Pearl, enjoyed showing her off to white men who appreciated black perfection...."⁴ Big Pearl described as being "...a fancy light-yaller wench...."⁵ The


⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., p. 63.
lighter the skin of the slave, the higher the price. "They (white men) all dreamed of getting fancy yaller wenches that they ken sell young for a monstrous price." 6 " . . . Mandingoes . . . . Beautiful niggers, all of 'em." 7

Concubinal relationships added to the population of light skinned African people. One reason for the frequent occurrence of inter-racial unions was the lack of English women on the Islands. The slave woman was completely at the planters' disposal. Rejection of a sexual advance could lead to severe punishment. Concubines were often rewarded by relief from field labor and given other privileges.

As the colored offsprings resulting from such unions grew, the privilege of belonging to this group became obvious. Planters naturally desired to free their concubines and the children she had borne him. Property was often left to these colored children, so much so that the growth of a wealthy colored population was feared by whites.

During slavery the social grading was as follows, in descending order. There was the white class superior to all people in the Island, be they planter, bookkeeper or merely poor white farmers; next, free people of color, those born free of light complexion; freed coloreds; free blacks, those born of dark complexion; freed black; and colored and black slaves. Black society was graded by color, those of the colored group nearest to whites in appearance were seen as superior to those whose appearances were more Negroid, independent of his occupational status.

6Ibid.
7Ibid., p. 67.
The West Indian and Race Consciousness After Emancipation

After emancipation the same lines of distinction were carried over into the freeman's society. The Negro man remained at the bottom of the society while the colored groups maintained their superior attitude towards the Negro, and the white population considered itself superior to both of these groups.

By this time, the colored group began to compete with whites for economic power, but although individuals may be equal or even superior to whites in terms of property, they were never considered social equals.

By dint of the fact of slave history, colored people in the West Indies had been favored and therefore, able to profit by education and monetary advantages. The Negro or Black was forced to combat this totality of discrimination without any form of favoritism which accounts for the relative advantages of the colored class over blacks in the West Indies.

The West Indian and Race Consciousness Today

Needless to say, the problem of race has not been resolved. Whereas in the past, the tendency was one of resignation to social attitudes towards race, the present brings an attempt to break the barrier of color distinction. The strategy of blacks to break social racism ties in recognizing color distinctions as a useless vestige of slavery which can be broken by achievement in other areas.

Today color preference continues to be a trend in the West Indies although more subtly. However, subtle, this trend tends to be perpetuated. It affects social relationships, attitudes and opportunities. Below follows some situational examples.
Within one family, as often happens, the children are of different shades of color. The most lightly colored will be favored often at the expense of others. Some light-skinned persons will try to sever ties with darker relatives.

Since marriage is one of the easiest and most accepted ways by which a woman can raise her social status or maintain it, color gradation affects the choice of marriage partners. A woman's family often encourages her to 'raise her color' by marrying someone light. "I could never have a black man" expressed the attitude of one woman. Giving her son advice on what complexioned girl to marry, a Barbadian mother tells her educated unmarried son, "put a little cream in your coffee." He understands that she is not talking about beverages.

'Marrying bright' can also be a means of erasing one's blackness in order to better one's self-perception as explicated by Frantz Fanon:

"I wish to be acknowledged not as black, as white.... who but a white woman can do this for me? By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man...I am a white man..." Frantz Fanon,

Jobs are often withheld from darker skinned people because of color consciousness. Reasons given by employers for discriminating hiring practices are 'customers prefer fairer skinned sales girls', etc. The following comments are made by lower class blacks expressing their awareness of the fact that color is a deterring factor to getting a job: "Color makes a

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difference in work, some places give preference...." "...color affects the job you get...."\(^{11}\)

In the West Indian school system, racial discrimination is not officially practiced, i.e., there are no segregated schools. But dark skinned children see very early the advantages of having fair skin. The bias in favor of light skinned children is not often well hidden by teachers as they mete out daily rewards and punishments.

The above are examples of a negative race consciousness which parents being aware, try to move their children in another direction, away from these old attitudes. Today, emphasis is placed on positive race consciousness which can be defined as an affirmation of the physical features that are characteristic of that particular group of people; with an eye towards making a contribution to the achievements of West Indian civilization.

Because of changing attitudes, West Indian race consciousness is besieged by ambivalence and confusion. Negative forms of race consciousness parallels the positive. Within individuals there is a mixture of the negative and the positive elements of race consciousness. On one hand, West Indians act aggressively and superiorly to other non-whites. Yet, on the other hand, they contend that they do not make color distinctions among people. West Indians continually alternate between receiving racial hostility and expressing it; still they have met the outside black world with the concept of racial solidarity.

The above trends of ambivalence is the context in which Harold Cruse has criticized West Indians. In particular, he mentions Stokely Carmichael,\(^{11}\)

Lincoln Lynch and Roy Inniss, three noted West Indians, who have been early leaders of the 'black power' movement in the United States. Lincoln Lynch was quoted as saying: "I was shocked when I came here and found that the word 'black' was almost a cuss word with the American Negro. . . ."\textsuperscript{12} The three said that "they were tired of unenforced laws and felt that many class Negroes (American) were trying to escape their race."\textsuperscript{13} In contradiction, Cruse notes that the "... West Indian middle class has the deepest of skin-color phobias; to them, the word 'black' is even more opprobrious than Lincoln Lynch found in the United States."\textsuperscript{14}

The duality of feeling with regards to race consciousness indicates a struggle between past and present attitudes. David Lowenthail suggests that West Indians are overly concerned about race. "Preoccupation with race leads many West Indians today to attribute every action to it." Over preoccupation with any subject can have disadvantages. One such is that it may not allow one to perceive and understand a situation beyond a defined parameter.

On the other hand, more positively speaking, preoccupation with race indicates a true attempt on the part of the West Indian to come to grips with the ever permeating reality of race. Although members of West Indian society evidence varied paces in adjusting their attitudes of race consciousness from a negative to a positive conception, growth has been stimulated by preoccupation.

Concluding, color grading has been utilized as a criteria of status

\textsuperscript{13}\textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{14}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 428.
in West Indian society by non-white members. This practice stems from social history. In the past, light complexioned slaves were given social advantages over black slaves by white masters.

In a society where having a fair complexion has been associated with all that is positive and dark skin has been associated with that which is negative, over a long period of time, race consciousness has developed. Among colored members of society race consciousness functions to maintain their social status.

For black West Indians, race consciousness serves to be useful in another way. The unequal distribution of material goods and societal rewards on the basis of color renders race consciousness effective as a reminder that a black must attain status by achievement in the areas of acquiring money or education. By means of education and economical wealth one breaks the color line. Thus negative race consciousness becomes dysfunctional and one develops a positive race consciousness.

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CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

One of the important tasks of the family is socialization: the process by which "...individuals selectively acquire the skills, knowledge, attitudes, values, and motives current in the group of which they are or will become members."1

In a relatively simple society, the socialization of children may be done entirely without deliberate effort on the part of the family because imitation is a sufficient tool by which a child observes the actions and reactions of those around him and responds accordingly.

But when a society is complex, as is the case of the West Indian society, the socialization process becomes more complex. Socialization then operates on at least two levels; one described above as being non-deliberate but rather a function of daily circumstances. The other level of socialization which takes place in a complex society is 'childrearing by specific design'. At this level childrearing is deliberate, conscious, and generally verbal. Parents serve not only as models but also as teachers. This is the level at which the patterns of thought regarding the value of money, education and race consciousness are transferred to children in the

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West Indies.

The West Indian family purposefully conveys these patterns based on the experience of its ancestors. Compiled and tabulated, these experiences have been converted into values and norms which serve to guarantee some amount of social mobility depending on the degree to which one adheres to these standards.

The West Indian process of childrearing functions both on the non-deliberate and deliberate levels. It can be said that non-deliberate socialization is unavoidable and therefore requires little direct instrumentation on the part of parents. Therefore, non-deliberate socialization does not apply to this paper. This analysis has attempted to look at the three thought patterns transferred by the West Indian family to its offspring deliberately and intentionally. Why the family concerns itself with dwelling on these three patterns has been determined, as well as, how the three fit in with the social history of West Indian society.

The social history of the West Indies during the period of slavery and post-emancipation have had direct influence of the development of the family and what the family portrays as important today. Economics, education, and race consciousness are three recurring themes in West Indian society because they are the phenomena which have served to stratify its members into three classes; upper, middle and lower classes. The three thought patterns are parallel to status since the rewards given those who have attained money, education, or race consciousness are high. The criteria of status is visible in land determined specifically by how much land; a home determined specifically by its size, quantity of homes, and location; the amount of capital one has to manipulate; one's educational level; the rank and position of
one's occupation; and one's skin complexion.

The West Indian family plays a direct role in this class stratified society. As society has influenced its form, it has direct bearing on the influence of its young. An individual receives his initial class position from the type of family into which he is born. On the other hand, achievement on the part of the young serves to enhance its status.

Because the West Indian family is concerned about bettering (or maintaining) its institutional status, parents concern themselves with the achievement of the individual members of the family. Parents deliberately take on the social function of trying to insure the success of its individual members against external odds.

Socialized by internalization of thought patterns about education, money, and race consciousness from childhood to adulthood, one understands the nature of social mobility. By successfully incorporating and utilizing the content of one or more of these thought patterns, one moves upward in status, breaking the barrier of class.
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