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Organizing Afro-Caribbean communities : processes of cultural change under Danish West Indian slavery

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A Thesis

Entitled

Organizing Afro-Caribbean Communities: Processes of Cultural Change under Danish
West Indian Slavery

By Richard Meader

Submitted a partial fulfillment of the requirements for
The Master of Arts in History

Advisor: Charles Beatty Medina

College of Graduate Studies

The University of Toledo

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For Mom, Dad, Liz, and Kitty

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Introduction

In the three hundred years preceding the eighteenth century three human societies on three continents were amalgamating, interacting, and evolving to create an Atlantic world. Beyond the geographic limits of all continents, inhabitants discovered varying peoples, cultures, and organizations of power that required certain degrees of adaptation to co-exist within a stable environment. The eighteenth century saw the emergence of an increasingly complex, diversified, and competitive Atlantic hemisphere with the convergence of multiple nations, ethnicities, cultures, and continents in the islands of the circum-Caribbean. Denmark's relatively minor contribution to the early modern world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is nevertheless significant, and it has often been overlooked by major historians except within the context of the transatlantic slave trade or broader studies of the Caribbean and Latin America.¹ Very few historians have

¹ Phillip D. Curtain, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 27, 210, 212-14, 219-20, 223, 263; James A. Rawley, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1981), 19, 75, 98, 99-103, 289; Herbert S. Klein, *The Middle Passage: Comparative Studies in the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 66, 161; William St Clair, *The Door of No Return: The History of Cape Coast Castle and the Atlantic Slave Trade* (New York: Bluebridge, 2006), 1, 13, 102, 190, 225; Arthur L. Stinchcombe, *Sugar Island Slavery in the Age of Enlightenment: The Political Economy of the Caribbean World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 17, 18, 47, 101, 111; Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 246-47, 249.

examined the Danish colonies of St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix as another slave society in the Americas.²

Outside observers, mostly American or British citizens escaping northern winters, constantly note the “mildness” of slavery that existed in the Danish West Indies.³ They did not understand, or did not acknowledge, slavery could neither exist in a gentler form, nor that slaves were subject to statutory considerations designed to keep them in bondage. Slave-owning ideology not only demeaned the African slaves, but also legally categorized them as “black,” or inferior, in their social relationships with white Europeans. Because African slaves were universally organized at the bottom of social hierarchies they were also materially bereft and at times severely lacked adequate sustenance.

This thesis questions the “mildness” of Danish West Indian slavery. Descriptive sources do not illustrate that Danish slavery was in fact less severe. This thesis examines African slave agency and demonstrates that despite overwhelming structural and material constraints slaves used provision grounds and ritual to create their own systems of social organization. Constructed within the context of plantation slavery, provision grounds and ritual expression engendered conceptual as well as physical “spaces” outside the sugar estates. They not only served as places to cultivate supplemental food, but also as spaces for cultural malleability and centers of socio-relational activities. The basic need to

² Neville Hall, *Slavery Society in the Danish West Indies*, ed. B.W. Higman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Issac Dookhan, *A History of the Virgin Islands of the United States* (Canoe Press: Jamaica, 1994).

³ William Ellery Channing, *Memoir*, Vol. 3, 9th edition (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1868), 137; Sylvester Hovey, *Letters from the West Indies* (New York: Gould and Newman, 1838), 23; James Smith, *The Winter of 1840 in St. Croix* (New York: 1840), 26; Lt. Brady *Remarks on Negro Slavery* (London: Burne and Smith, [1831?]), 1[Lt. Brady], *Observations Upon the State of Negro Slavery, in the Island of Santa Cruz, the Principal of the Danish West India Colonies: With Miscellaneous Remarks Upon Subjects Relating to the West India Question, and a notice of Santa Cruz*. Goldsmiths’-Kress Library of Economic Literature 25998; London: Simpkin & Marshall, 1829, microfilm.

survive by procuring food contributed to the emergence of a unique Afro-Danish Caribbean community, or what nineteenth-century observers perceived as “milder” slavery.

Bernard Bailyn notes that the Atlantic world theoretically operated upon principles of “formal realities,” which assumes that abstract structures, such as the ideals of a slave society, do not reflect reality. The early modern Atlantic world was composed of formal designs (legal, political, religious), but underneath lays, “the informal actuality, which has patterns of its own.”⁴ The Danish colonies share a number of structural traits with other sugar islands in the Caribbean; namely a year round plantation system hinging on unfree labor of the blacks, political and social hegemony of the white population, and continual overbearing regulation of the blacks’ daily lives. It is, therefore, possible to assume that a reality existed beyond these characteristics. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker have demonstrated the hidden history of people who created the Atlantic world. From their perspective the growth of the Atlantic was a given where “the port is *there* before the ship sets sail from it; the plantation is *there* before the slave cultivates the land.”⁵ It is necessary to keep in mind the building of a civilization required the work of people, not just arbitrary formal realities known as “slaves.” Methodologically, this thesis takes a microcosmic view of the “hidden history” as it existed on the provision grounds, and argues that Afro-Danish community was integral to the goals and aims of Danish West Indian slaves. The provision grounds served both master and slave, the former being exempt from supplying their labor force with foodstuffs. Slaves, however, used it

⁴ Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concepts and Contours* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 60-61.

⁵ Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 42. Italics are in the original.

beyond the functionality of subsistence to create cultural spaces that diverged from the overarching slave system.

Black culture and ritual operated alongside the dominant white culture of the Danish West Indies, though legal measures were implemented to curb its development. According to Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, the slaves' only collective reality was their enslavement and therefore the groups of arriving Africans "were not communities at first, and they could only become communities by processes of cultural change."⁶ Danish West Indian culture emerged as slaves learned to manipulate their surrounding environment, taking what they could from the ecology. Culture, however, is not merely objects or words, but requires a "manner through which social relations are carried on through it."⁷ Furthermore these "processes of cultural change" could only come about through social relations. Afro-Danish slaves, therefore, found a material and culturally productive nexus on the provision grounds first in Obeah, then in family, and finally through festival and dance. The provision grounds as material and cultural centers were thus integral to the development of an Afro-Danish community.

The primary sources are mostly descriptive either translated or published in English, accompanied by various secondary works on the subject. Gordon Lewis published *The Virgin Islands* in 1972, which was the first call for historians and scholars to turn their concern toward the smaller islands or "lilliputs" in the Caribbean Sea. It was time to remove these islands from the scholarly perspective of amateur historians and anthropologists whose work was commendable, albeit lacked a grounded framework. Though Lewis did not examine slavery in any large extent, B.W. Higman would later

⁶ Mintz and Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), 21.

⁷ Ibid. 22

comment that, “it is satisfying to notice that the growth of historical scholarship, in the Caribbean . . . for which Lewis called has in fact occurred in the case of the Virgin Islands.” Issac Dookhan’s *The History of the Virgin Islands of the United States* and Neville Hall’s *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies* remain the most important books on the subject matter. Hall’s work is of particular value because it not only examined the micro-history of the Danish islands in excruciating detail, but also did so in an insightful manner, keeping at least one eye perusing Atlantic developments as they occurred. Waldemar Westergaard’s *Danish West Indies under Company Rule* supplies most of the structural information. His work was substantial, but suffered from an imperialist framework that lacked social dimensions and saw colonial history as meaningless except within the context of European history. Only one chapter actually deals with slaves and even then Westergaard contends that their good treatment was predicated by the self-interest of the planter. This work, however, is full of useful structural information that might only be found in the historical methodology of a different era.⁸

The first chapter discusses colonization and plantation development. It will open with brief summary of European encounters from 1493 until Danish settlement in the late seventeenth century, and an overview of the reasons for Denmark’s participation as a colonial power. Sugar and slavery were integral to the development of the islands, where the Danes saw Africans as sub-humans bound for servitude, but still felt the need to construct laws governing their daily lives. Severe material conditions made the slaves

⁸ Gordon Lewis, *The Virgin Islands: A Caribbean Lilliput* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972); B.W. Higman, “Danish West Indian Slavery in the Comparative Perspective: An Appreciation of Neville Hall’s Contribution to the Historiography” in *Bondmen and Freemen in the Danish Indies: Scholarly Perspectives*, ed. George F. Tyson (U.S. Virgin Islands: Virgin Islands Humanities Council, 1996), 2; Issac Dookhan, *A History of the Virgin Islands of the United States* (Canoe Press: Jamaica, 1994); Neville Hall, *Slavery Society in the Danish West Indies*, ed. B.W. Higman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Waldemar Westergaard, *The Danish West Indies Under Company Rule, 1671-1754* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1917).

increasingly restless within this system. Through a rebellion on St. John, they initially rallied around their African ethnicity and nationhood as they attempted to negotiate deplorable conditions. This strategy, however, made little headway into community building and ultimately strengthened ethnic differences making the rebellion easy to eradicate. Planters feared future insurrections and created provision grounds to give slaves an opportunity to grow their own food so they would not rebel again.

The second chapter will show how provision grounds fit into the work routines of slaves on the plantation. Slave provision grounds emerge as an important factor of economic expediency on the plantation. The grounds provide slaves with the material means to produce their own sustenance for the Saturday and Sunday market, and begin the processes that form Afro-Danish Caribbean communities. Using West African “ritual magic” practices, what Europeans called Obeah, the slave community constructed a self-enforcing deterrent from theft, as well as fictive kinship practices that surrounded the material culture derived from the provision grounds. Mutual aid and protection are centralized through the practices of Obeah as an organizational process in the formation of an Afro-community, as slaves increasingly view the provision grounds as spaces outside the realm of the plantation and legal recourse.

Chapter three reveals the increasingly Creole composition of the slave community and the effects this pattern had on the Afro-Danish community. Following abolition of the slave trade, planters were forced to encourage the construction of slave families as a means of breeding slaves. Demographic factors facilitated tight kinship relations across plantation boundaries where the slave population rejected Obeah practices, deeming them selfish modes of trickery. Instead, slaves increasingly turned to their family on the

plantation accompanied by what Robert Dirks calls the “black saturnalia” or slave festivals during the Christmas and New Year’s holidays.⁹ Provision grounds are indirectly related to the construction of festival “saturnalia” because slaves procured many of their costumes, drink, and seasonal food from selling surpluses in the market on Saturday or Sunday. These festivals and dances represent the epitome of Afro-Danish cultural expression. They are participatory in nature and represent a behavioral reality, in ritualized form, that act as a form of social commentary on the slave system in the Danish West Indies.

Though legally the Afro-Danish community held no bearing it went through a period of development that allowed many slaves to operate outside the plantation system. The slave community organized its own mores and constructed paths toward survival. The Afro-Danish community still experienced whippings, beatings, verbal abuse, and back breaking labor on a daily basis, but the community also found spaces for them to procure food, barter for goods, engage in ritual religion, create families, and dance at festivals. The formation of the Afro-Danish Caribbean community illustrates the informal actuality that existed underneath white European notions of how a structured slave society should operate.

⁹ Robert Dirks, *The Black Saturnalia: Conflict and its Ritual Expression on the British West Indian Slave Plantations* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1987).

Chapter One

Danish Colonialism and the Introduction of Slavery

The emergence of Denmark as a colonizing power occurred in the context of their late involvement in the race to get a stake in the Americas. For the nation to succeed as colonizers, the Danish West India and Guinea Company, a mismanaged and unprofitable enterprise, induced foreign settlers, both Creole and European, to initiate cultivation of three islands in the Caribbean. A multinational population of settlers introduced the Danes to sugar and African slaves, following similar developmental routes laid out by previous European colonizers in the Americas. They learned the environmental difficulties that settling in the new world involved, as disease, drought, and hunger plagued the early Danish years.

Caribbean sugar slavery was a violent and abusive system to slaves and Europeans alike, but the latter occupied a position of social and political hegemony. Restless slaves necessitated the creation of slave laws that forced starving Africans to conduct backbreaking labor, while the insubordinate were tortured and executed. Danish West Indian society was no different where droughts were as frequent as the daily crack of a whip. But we should not assume that African slaves were not totally discordant within the abusive context of Danish settlement in the Caribbean. St. John's slave

rebellion reveals the first patterns of African social organization. Creating a unified Afro-Caribbean culture began with the first process toward socio-relational continuity rooted in ethnic identification, all within the context of a multinational colonial establishment headed by Danish citizens. Though the first attempt by Africans to assemble into a social group failed for a number of reasons, it was the basic need for food and water that drove them to rebel and organize. Danish West Indian slavery might be described as anything but mild in this early period.

Virgin Islands Adventures

Today the Danish West Indies are known as the U.S. Virgin Islands. Part of the Virgin Islands archipelago, they are the westernmost islands that make up the Lesser Antilles which arc southward from Puerto Rico to Venezuela. Lying approximately forty miles due east of Puerto Rico, St. Thomas and St. John are the smallest of the three, with a square mileage of twenty-eight and twenty respectively. St. Croix lies farther south with an area of eighty-four square miles. Volcanic in origin, St. Thomas and St. John are generally hilly with rugged and mountainous regions, Crown Mountain (St. Thomas) reaching the highest point at 1,556 feet. St. Croix contains the highest proportion of arable land, making it a good region for agriculture. St. Thomas's many inlets, protected bays, and natural deep-water harbors can support commercial ventures. St. John, on the other hand, is the most rugged and least arable of the three islands, making it a scanty supplement to the agriculture of St. Croix and commerce of St. Thomas.

Europeans encountered the Virgin Islands on Christopher Columbus's second voyage in 1493. He first came upon "Isla de la Santa Cruz," or the island of the holy

cross. Sighting a series of a hundred or more islands, rocks, and inlets over the next few days Columbus named the whole region “Las Once Mil Virginias” in honor of St. Ursula and her 11,000 virgins.¹⁰ The name was eventually anglicized as the Virgin Islands. Over the next 178 years, the Virgin Islands changed ownership frequently. Spanish conquistadores effectively exploited and wiped out the native populations through overwork, war, and disease. For these conquerors, “the lands and inhabitants were neither a formidable challenge nor a powerful lure,” and they abandoned St. Croix after a century of warfare that destroyed the indigenous Arawak and Carib populations.¹¹ For the relatively small and transient indigenous population on the Virgin Islands, this meant a rapid and nearly unnoticed disappearance as the Spanish engaged in what geographer D.W. Meinig describes as “rapid, wide-ranging forays through the West Indies and mainland margins in search of riches to plunder,” and slaves to exploit.¹²

As early as 1560, Britain, France, Holland and Spain were endorsing privateers and encouraging buccaneers to disrupt each other’s colonization in the Antilles. Vying for regional control France, and England attempted to capitalize on Spain’s waning power in the seventeenth century. Since the early sixteenth century the larger nations of Europe constantly lived in a state of military chaos “beyond the line.” Richard Dunn explains this phrase to mean “a general flouting of European social conventions” where men scrambled for riches, exploited Indian and African slaves, and “robbed and

¹⁰ Norwell Harrigan and Pearl I. Varlack, “The U.S. Virgin Islands and the Black Experience,” *Journal of Black Studies* 7, (1977): 387; William W. Boyer, *America’s Virgin Islands: A History of Human Rights and Wrongs* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1983), 2.

¹¹ D.W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective of 500 Years of History*, vol. 1, *Atlantic America, 1492-1800* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1986), 11.

¹² Ibid; Isaac Dookhan, *A History of the Virgin Islands of the United States* (Canoe Press: Jamaica, 1994), 5.

massacred each other more freely” than European mores would ever allow.¹³ During the first forty years of the seventeenth century, British, French, and Dutch colonists worked with each other against Spain to select settlements in the Caribbean. By 1650, the alliances broke and “territorial claims were unreliable, often ignored when known, and commonly contested.”¹⁴ Santa Cruz was subjected to the same scramble, leading the Dutch and British into constant skirmishes after the Spanish left. Eventually the Dutch were ousted, the Spanish returned and destroyed the British settlement, but were soon after driven off by the French. For a brief period the Knights of Malta owned the island until it was sold back to the French in 1665.¹⁵ Santa Cruz was eventually renamed St. Croix, the linguistic equivalent in French, but was sometimes referred to as Santa Cruz even after it came under the Danish flag in 1733. When Denmark participated in European expansion in the Americas, they entered a hostile environment where Northern Europeans were dispelling the Spanish monopoly in the Americas while keeping the most profitable lands out of reach of their competitor nations.

Denmark Expands

Largely foreigners, particularly Dutch merchants residing in Denmark, fueled Danish involvement in the West Indian trade. Danish sailors travelled on Dutch and sometimes English ships to the West Indies relaying information to Copenhagen about abundant trading opportunities across the Atlantic. In the early seventeenth century, Dutch investors convinced the monarch it was time to improve trade and granted them

¹³ Richard Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 1972), 11.

¹⁴ Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concepts and Contours* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 68-9.

¹⁵ Boyer, *America's Virgin Islands*, 3-6.

full perpetuity, through a royal charter, to fund expeditions to the West Indies, Virginia, and Africa. These expeditions never left port on account of Denmark's involvement in the Thirty Years War in 1625, which necessitated diverting resources towards military agendas. Commercial enterprise was put on hold for the time being. Limited treaties and peaceful arrangements were made by mid-century, which provided Captain Erik Nielsen Smit the perfect window to navigate two successful expeditions to the West Indies in 1652 and 1653. Other Danish merchants rapidly organized and sent four successful voyages in 1654, collectively returning with over half a million pounds of tobacco, ginger, sugar, and indigo.¹⁶ In 1657 war broke out with Denmark's long-time rival Sweden, curbing any further ventures to the West Indies until peace was secured in 1660.¹⁷

When the war ended, Denmark was in political and financial crisis. An absolutist monarchy was established that shredded the nobility's representative body in court and, abolished an elective monarchy in favor of a hereditary line of succession. King Frederick III (1648-70) relied heavily on industrial and urban workers to establish his supremacy. With the support of a rising class of merchant capitalists—who established themselves from the successful voyages in the previous decade—Frederick III was able to effectively remove the power of the nobles in monarchical affairs. The once-thriving revenues from sound dues (payments for access to the Baltic Sea via Øresund) were lost during the peace with Sweden. To compensate for fledgling revenues the richest percentage of the population (nobles) were no longer exempt from taxes.

¹⁶ Dookhan, *History of the Virgin Islands*, 33-34.

¹⁷ The winter of 1658 was actually so terrible that the Swedish King Karl Gustav was able to cross the frozen Danish waters in the Baltic and lay siege to Copenhagen.

Denmark, however, needed new sources of income, and few had forgotten the West Indian successes in the 1650s. After the war-induced hiatus, a colonizing expedition was sent to St. Thomas under the leadership of Captain Smit in 1665. Having personally financed several expeditions after the Swedish Wars, he was well aware of the Atlantic routes, West Indian trading bases, and dangers that came with imperial expansion, especially in the Caribbean which was full of entangled alliances among hostile nations armed with vast navies. It is possible that the decision to settle St. Thomas came directly from one of Smit's earlier adventures, possibly in 1663, when he found the island a suitable place to begin colonization.¹⁸ The French had virtually abandoned St. Croix after colonizing the western third of Hispaniola known as St. Domingue, though still claimed it as their territory. The British briefly occupied St. Thomas before finding more favorable conditions on Tortola and Virgin Gorda, and the acquisition of Jamaica nearly doubled the landmass of British holdings in the West Indies. In essence, as prominent Caribbean historian Neville Hall observed, the Danish acquisition in the West Indies "was not determined by choice but by lack of feasible alternatives."¹⁹ Smit would lead his fifth journey to the West Indies in the hope of establishing a settled colony on an island that aroused little excitement among other Europeans.

The first attempt to colonize St. Thomas was fraught with the same troubles experienced by earlier European pioneers in the Americas. Hurricanes, privateers, and sickness confounded the settlement. Danes were not used to the weather or tropical diseases. Settlers perished daily. When Captain Smit took ill and died in 1666 the expedition was unable to adequately replace his exceptional leadership. The St. Thomas

¹⁸ Dookhan, *History of the Virgin Islands*, 35.

¹⁹ Neville A.T. Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies: St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix*, ed. B. W. Higman, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 1.

expedition was a failure, but the Danish crown did not wish to abandon whatever lucrative possibilities the West Indies had in store. In February 1666 Smit had managed to send three hundred rolls of tobacco and one-half hogshead of sugar in February 1666.²⁰ Although probably not harvested by the colonists themselves it was clear that a permanent colony would bring many remunerative advantages.

A Royal Board of Trade was created to oversee the preparation of new ventures. Danish individuals chartered a joint-stock company known as the Danish West India and Guinea Company. Both organizations attest to the Crown's continued interest in establishing permanent trade in the West Indies. King Christian V (1670-99) granted a royal charter to the Danish West India and Guinea Company in 1670 for the express purpose of settling St. Thomas, which the company leased in 1671. The marginal success of the first expedition clearly whetted the appetites of merchants in Copenhagen.

A second expedition to St. Thomas was planned, but there was hardly a rush of Danes to fill the two vessels outfitted for colonization project. In all likelihood, the failure of the first expedition was probably well known throughout Copenhagen and surrounding areas. All too familiar were the effects that New World diseases had on early colonizing expeditions. Compared to other European countries, Denmark's population was remarkably sparse. Of the 800,000 inhabitants during this time, nearly seventy-five percent lived outside of urban areas, with a density of only fourteen to fifteen people per kilometer.²¹ Clearly Denmark relied heavily on agriculture, and most of the population lived at subsistence level far removed from urban centers that disseminated literature on New World opportunities.

²⁰ Waldemar Wesstergaard, *The Danish West Indies Under Company Rule, 1671-1754* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1917), 30.

²¹ Knud J. V. Jespersen, *A History of Denmark*, trans. Ivan Hill (Palgrave MacMillan: 2004), 118-19.

Even those who heard calls for recruitment probably viewed opportunities for individual success with some skepticism. The change to an absolutist monarchy in 1660 substantially shifted land ownership throughout the nation. The monarchy was heavily financed by middle-class capitalists during the Swedish War who were rewarded with crown lands. They now owned nearly one-seventh of all agrarian land in Denmark.²² This left the independent farmer unsure of his future and forced into peasant tenancy on local estates.²³ Though the mechanisms of this manorial system allowed peasant farmers the ability to leave the manors, it is probable they saw no difference between their current situation and working plantation agriculture on behalf of a company; hence the inability to recruit from the farming population. This can be extrapolated from information on one of the vessels that sailed for St. Thomas. The boat *Faero* contained 190 passengers: 12 officials and 116 company employees, while the rest were taken from prisons and other “places of ill-repute” throughout Denmark.²⁴ It arrived at St. Thomas on May 25, 1672.

Over the next few years Danes, suffered the same difficulties as the first expedition had. Warmer Caribbean climates took their toll on the newly arrived settlers accustomed to Scandinavian winters and mild summers. Tropical diseases ran rampant, killing nearly all of the Danish indentured servants that arrived. Many lives were lost on the transatlantic crossing, and those who survived were often dead just a few weeks after their arrival.²⁵ Water was perpetually difficult to obtain. As late as 1793, Johan Nissen, upon arrival at St. Thomas, was “much distressed at the time for a glass of good water . . . so we were obliged to make use of rain-water, which was collected from some of the

²² Ibid. 123.

²³ W. Glyn Jones, *Denmark: A Modern History* (London: Benn, 1970; 2nd edition, Croom Helm; London, 1986), 17.

²⁴ Dookhan, *History of the Virgin Islands*, 38.

²⁵ Wesstergaard, *Danish West Indies*, 39.

houses in casks.”²⁶ Lifestyle differences exacerbated the death toll as few would step up to the challenge of growing food, constructing houses, or maintaining institutional governance. Those with company positions and administrative appointments tended to blame the idle, careless, and lazy nature of conscript labor and servants. In response Danish West Indian governors often resorted to force. Jorgen Iversen, the first governor of St. Thomas, was criticized by company officials in Denmark for his heavy-handed and brutal reign over the colony. From 1680 until 1686, a series of inept governors favored friendly policies toward pirates and lawless inhabitants, as well as nepotism over merit. These governors found it impossible to get along with inhabitants and were usually recalled by the Company or deposed by the local populace.²⁷ Not only did the company have enough trouble recruiting settlers, but also finding competent employees was equally burdensome. The labor supply suffered as a result and so did the colony. St. Thomas was a two-legged death trap, first on the three months at sea en route, and then attempting to maintain favorable conditions just to survive.

Given the great distance between embarkation in Europe and arrival in the Caribbean, Danish migrants came to St. Thomas only as a trickle. St. Thomas’s reputation became dismal. Only those with financial investments in the company or in the most desperate situation came to the Caribbean. The colony was, however, able to attract small numbers of immigrants from neighboring Caribbean islands. Dutch, British, and Spanish settlers came to St. Thomas more frequently than

²⁶ Johan Peter Nissen, *Reminiscences of a 46 Years’ Residence in the Island of St. Thomas* (Nazareth, PA: Senseman & Co., 1838), 13.

²⁷ Nicolaj Esmitt succeeded Iversen but was deposed by his brother Adolph who assumed the governorship in 1682, an act that was allowed by company directors largely because of the intrigues of his wife in Copenhagen. His successor, Gabriel Milan, was recalled and executed for arbitrary and often extravagant punishments. Adolph was reappointed in 1687 but was recalled three months later, a result of his inability to govern appropriately.

Danes. More familiar with the tropical environment, these immigrants proved more resistant to the hard work, but did not curb the growing labor shortage. The Dutch brought intricate knowledge of shipping avenues among various islands, while the British imported their expertise in sugar cultivation. The British commander of Tortola offered the Danish any supplies they might well need to initiate their settlement, sugar shoots being the most important resource besides labor.²⁸

Danish colonial settlements expanded in 1717. Dutch planters sought Danish protection on St. John hoping to find solace with a nation on amicable terms with England. Denmark had claimed the island as early as 1686, much to the protests of the British governor on Tortola, who finally recognized Danish ownership in 1718.²⁹ As with St. Thomas, the Danes's strategy for settling St. John relied upon an influx of immigrants and slaves, and the Dutch were valued highly. From 1686 until 1718, through various excursions to St. John the Dutch, again, established cultural hegemony with settlers coming mostly from St. Thomas to either expand their current holdings or take up new ones where they had failed.³⁰ The Danish West India and Guinea Company earned a clear claim to own the islands in the name of the Danish monarchy in 1718. Although administered by Danish authority and occupied militarily by Danish soldiers at the fort on St. Thomas (Charlotte Amalie), the most numerous nationality on both islands was Creole Dutch men. Dutch became the language of business and trade and both islands,

²⁸ Wesstergaard, *Danish West Indies*, 38

²⁹ *Ibid.* 49

³⁰ In a letter to the West India Company in 1722 Erik Bredal describes the condition of the thirty-eight inhabitants on St. John. For Cornelius Delicat, "His plantation here [on St. Thomas] is quite poor, such that he cannot support his family," while Thomas Bourdeaux's plantation "has always been poisoned by bad subsoil water," and Adrian Charles, "Has a poor plantation on St. Thomas, which he can not live off of." Others, however, were refugees, debtors, or company employees. Gary T. Horlacher. "Character of the Inhabitants on the Island of St. John - 1722 Inhabitants of St. John." (2001) <http://www.progenealogists.com/westindies/1722stjan.htm> (Accessed April 30, 2009).

while Danish and later English became the language of the colonial government. Danes made up only 30.8 percent of the population on St. Thomas in 1691.³¹

Dutch planters also brought their knowledge of sugar and slavery from settlements such as St. Eustatius and Curaçao. From the beginning of colonization, Denmark had aims to engage in sugar production. Like most Caribbean islands, sugar was the staple of the plantation society that emerged in the Danish West Indies. The British success with sugar on Barbados, St. Kitts, Nevis and Jamaica certainly influenced this decision. But productive sugar cultivation developed slowly. The Danish West India and Guinea Company could not pay return dividends to its investors because of the disastrous slave trading undertakings in Africa. As a result, sugar became the staple currency. Planters bartered with one another. It was not until 1688, the year of the first census, that the company's records on St. Thomas were enumerated in currency rather than in sugar.³² The census revealed that foreign planters continued to dominate the economy of both islands. Dutch and English owners made up a majority of the white population on St. Thomas. Meanwhile, on St. John, twenty-five of the thirty-nine planters in the 1721 census were Dutch despite Danish sovereign ownership.³³ This also reveals that Danes were completely reliant on other nations to colonize since Danish nationals still were not coming to the islands. The economic trajectory of the Danish West Indies was firmly in the hands of other European nations.

St. Thomas, in 1688, contained ninety plantations growing cotton, tobacco, indigo or pockwood, with only three devoted entirely to sugar. The next twenty years saw a

³¹ Creole Dutchmen also outnumbered the Danish Creole population. In 1691 of the 174 non-Danish Creoles on St. Thomas 109 were Dutch West Indian Creoles. See Table 1.2 in Hall, *Slave Society*.

³² Westergaard, *Danish West Indies*, 121.

³³ Hall, *Slave Society*, 11.

rapid transition to sugar. From 1691 to 1715 the number of sugar plantations went from three to forty, with thirty-two containing their own sugar mills. Although quantitative breakdown of plantations on St. John for this period does not exist, Westergaard estimates the island had thirty-nine plantations. By 1728 the number of sugar plantations reached twenty-nine; twenty having their own sugar works.³⁴ The increase in the sugar plantations demonstrates how easily foreign elements expanded the economy into sugar production. The Danish West Indies turned from exporting trade goods acquired from other nations to sugar production, a consumer item gaining popularity in Europe in the eighteenth century.

It was this international coalition of settlers, immigrants, and sugar producers that kept the Danish colony from catastrophe, though the future of the colony remained bleakly tenuous. Labor shortages from death and disease continued to plague early Danish forays into the Americas. Immigrants from Europe and the circum-Caribbean were not enough to keep sugar alive as a profitable crop. Instead, they needed to look to another continent that was only beginning to unveil its rich darkness.

Slavery Arrives on the Danish American Frontier

From 1673 to 1680 the population on St. Thomas grew substantially from one 100 to 156 whites and 175 blacks.³⁵ Slavery became an established form of labor as a multinational slave trade emerged and thrust Denmark into the business of slave ownership. Like most other European settlements in the Caribbean, Denmark turned to African slave labor to make up for the consistent shortage in settlers. One historian noted

³⁴ Ibid. 318.

³⁵ Ibid. 41.

the Danish West India and Guinea Company anticipated the need for African slavery with provisions in its charter to absorb the Glückstadt African Company.³⁶ In 1673 a ship, registered by Glückstadt, unloaded 103 slaves on St. Thomas and sent another ship the following year. In 1680 King Christian V sent a ship to Africa to fetch slaves for use in the colony, most likely because the company's management of the slave trade was poor at best. In the same year seven ships had undergone serious repairs costing nearly 40,000 *rigsdalers* (rdlr),³⁷ while the voyages produced no dividends.³⁸ The company therefore came to rely on an international composition of slave-trading vessels arriving at St. Thomas to supplement their inadequate importations of African slaves. A Portuguese ship ran aground in 1675 delivering twenty-four slaves. Foreign traders arrived more frequently than Danish ships. One Swedish captain traded exclusively to St. Thomas. Frederick William, Elector of Brandenburg, contracted with the Danes in 1682 to supply St. Thomas with slaves from two forts established by the Brandenburg Company until 1717.³⁹ A slow but steady influx of slave labor transformed the future of St. Thomas and the Danish West Indies.

By the time St. Croix came under Danish possession and settlement, sugar and slavery caused reciprocal economic effects contributing to the creation of a plantation economy in Denmark's colonies that relied solely on slave labor. The development of sugar over the eighteenth century as a viable commercial product greatly expanded the role of slaves in the Danish West Indies. Failure to create any number of other

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ *Rigsdalers* is the unit of currency used by the Danish in the West Indies. Over the years this currency fluctuated in value as new coins were struck and bills introduced, but for the purposes of consistency all of the following *rigsdaler* amounts are converted. See Astrid Friis and Kristof Glamann, *A History of Prices and Wages in Denmark, 1660-1800*, (London: Green & Co., 1958).

³⁸ Wesstergaard, *Danish West Indies*, 43.

³⁹ James A Rawley, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New York: Newton, 1981), 99-103.

agricultural or commercial pursuits outside the limits of sugar or slavery “stabilized” the discordant, Danish colonial system into a mono-crop, export economies. Ecological and geographic conditions prevented economic diversification. Rocky and rugged terrain on the islands kept the largest plantations below several hundred acres, much of which went uncultivated. The east side of St. Croix in particular demonstrates the limited size of even the most “sprawling” plantations. On a 1766 survey map there appear only seven sugar mills, in East End. Compare this to the adjacent Company’s Quarter with sixteen identified sugar mills. Though the map is hardly comprehensive and many of the plantations’ agricultural pursuits remain unspecified, there is a clear trend towards sugar cultivation by the midcentury.⁴⁰ As the numbers of African arriving on St. Thomas and St. John were continually rising, the islands could be considered among Europe’s sugar colonies by 1733. St. Croix developed rapidly as well, housing 88 plantations within the first ten years of colonization, increasing to 138 in 1754. But with sugar came the price of African slavery.

The Danish Slave Trade

Caribbean sugar economies went hand-in-hand with the transatlantic trade in slaves from West Africa. The vast increases in sugar production required heavy sources of cheap labor that the populations in Denmark could not supply. The second census taken in 1691 showed the increase in the African population, all of whom, in the early period, were slaves. In three years the slave population went from 422 to 555. Of the

⁴⁰ Waldemar Westergaard, “A St. Croix Map of 1766: With a Note on its Significance in West Indian Plantation Economy,” *The Journal of Negro History* 23 (1938): 216-228.

latter number roughly 347 were “capable” of performing work.⁴¹ Table 1.1 indicates how rapidly the slave population grew in the next thirty years. Sugar plantations were established and consumed hundreds of slaves each year. Because of St. John’s smaller size and rugged terrain, the number of plantations did not expand as rapidly, but by 1725 there were over 600 slaves on St. John. Demand for slaves on St. John was not as great on St. Thomas, probably due to the rugged terrain and smaller amount of acreage that could sustain sugar plantations.

St. Croix was the most important sugar island in Danish possession. Estimates put nearly 8,897 slaves on St. Croix alone by 1755.⁴² St. Croix had nearly twenty percent more slaves than the totals on St. Thomas and St. John, and in half the amount of time. It rapidly increased the scope of slave in the Danish West Indies, surpassing the total slave population on St. John in less than about six years, and doubling its importation almost every decade until 1765. The decade of 1745-1755 was the most important for St. Croix because the slave population in the Danish West Indies doubled in just ten years. With relatively flat topography and triple the square mileage of St. Thomas and St. John combined, it was the optimal place for the Danes to construct an agricultural economy to cultivate sugar using coerced African labor.

The average prices of slaves grew with importation, and so transshipment meant big money for slave carriers. The transshipment trade involved heavy numbers of slaves transported to other slave markets in the Caribbean, namely St. Domingue, Jamaica, and Nevis. An estimated total of 23,000 slaves were transshipped to British, French and

⁴¹ Westergaard, *Danish West Indies*, 123.

⁴² Rawley, *Transatlantic Slave Trade*, 100.

Dutch West Indian sugar islands between 1733 and 1803.⁴³ Prices of slaves fluctuated throughout each year, but when looking at the century as a whole there is general increase. If economic laws of supply and demand are equally applicable to the Danish West Indies in the eighteenth century, then Table 1.2 indicates that demand for slaves steadily increased, peaking in 1754 and remaining relatively high until the latter part of the century.

Table 1.1 Total Slave Population in the Danish West Indies, 1720-1765.

	St. Thomas	St. John	St. Croix	Total
1720	4,187	-	-	4,187
1725	4,490	677*	-	5,167*
1733	3,741	1,087	400-450	5,228-5,278*
1739	3,133	1,414	1,906	6,453
1745	2,994	1,650	2,878	7,522
1755	3,949	2,031	8,897	14,877
1765	3,734	2,024	15,699	21,457

Source: Westergaard, *Danish West Indies*, 318-19; Hall, *Slave Society*, 7; Svend Erick Green-Pedersen, "The History of the Danish Negro Slave Trade, 1733-1807: An Interim Survey relating in Particular to its Volume, Structure, Profitability and Abolition" *Revue Francasie d'histoire d'outre-mer* 62 (1975): 204; Green-Pedersen, "The Scope and Structure of the Danish Negro Slave Trade," *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 19 (1971): 149-40.

Note: St. John was not acquired by the Danish until 1718. Sporadic colonization commenced as early as 1691, but no data on slave populations exists before 1725. St. Croix was not under Danish rule until 1733.

*This information is based on data taken from 1728.

The Danes, however, did not exist within a closed mercantilist system. Svend Erik Green-Pedersen interprets the Atlantic trade as "triangular" but not in the context of the more traditional triangle trade from Europe to Africa to America back to Europe. A poorly managed system evolved within Danish slave forts along the Guinea coast. Danish forts sometimes did not have enough slaves on hand to fully stock Danish vessels. Rather than wait for a supply to arrive, Danish ships would sail to other European installations along the coast. Even then they would not always sail to the Danish West Indies but seek

⁴³ Highfield, "Danish Atlantic," 22; Green- Pedersen, "History of the Danish Negro Slave Trade," 207.

destinations with the lowest risk and highest prices.⁴⁴ At the same time, Danish ships failed to arrive when scheduled, and the forts would frequently sell to interlopers and other European nations.⁴⁵

Table 1.2 Fluctuations of Slave Prices in the Danish Slave Trade, 1700-1778

Year	Purchase price in Africa (in rdlr.)		Sale price in West Indies (in rdlr.)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
1700	32	28-32	85	-
1705	40-48	-	50-80	69-96
1714	64	40	80-128	50-80
1720	88-100	64-80	125-200	80-144
1744	112	80	140-224	100-160
1754	100	-	353-355	-
1770	128-144	96-112	160-228	120-224
1778	115-130	-	211	

Source: Dookhan, *History of the Virgin Islands*, 128-130.

Note: This 1778 sales price in the West Indies is only the average. Males fetch prices between 560 and 600 rdlr. Between 1778 and 1783 an estimated 5,116 slaves were brought into St. Croix totaling 1,090,135 rdlr worth of merchandise.

These prices never made the slave-trading ventures of the company profitable as a whole. With settlers establishing themselves on St. Croix in 1734, slaves were needed at a rate the Danish West India and Guinea Company could not supply. The ships often arrived during times when the forts did not have many slaves on hand, having given their holdings to foreign shippers in the area. Journeys to African forts never amounted to more than a handful each year, and the company was forced to relinquish its monopoly on the trade in 1735 just to supply St. Croix with the growing demand in slaves. Even

⁴⁴ Arnold R. Highfield, "The Danish Atlantic and West Indian Slave Trade," in *The Danish West Indian Slave Trade: Virgin Islands Perspectives* ed. George F. Tyson and Arnold R. Highfield (St. Croix: Virgin Islands Humanities Council, 1994), 17.

⁴⁵ Green-Pedersen, "Scope and Structure," 175.

with lax controls on the slave trade, the upkeep of slaving forts was left in the hands of private industry where no favoritism for Danish vessels ever prevailed. Again foreigners played an integral role in the development of the Danish West Indies during this time by supplying large numbers of slaves and more frequently. The British alone sent slave ships by the hundreds every year to Africa for their own colonies and others where slaves were in demand.⁴⁶ Against competition such as that, it is no wonder the Danish slave trade could never take off under company rule.

In 1755 the colonies came under royal control when the Danish West India and Guinea Company found itself holding nearly one million *rigsdalers* in debt.⁴⁷ Price disparity between the West Indies and Denmark was so high that by the time Danish vessels were able to reach Copenhagen, the price had dropped. The company's liabilities were in the order of 800,000 rdlr., but could possibly drop as low as 600,000 within a matter of months. Profit seems almost out of the question. The king assumed control of all the company's assets and debts, while throwing the West Indian colonies open to free trade. Several more Danish companies took charge of the slave trade, and an estimated 30,150 were imported to St. Croix between 1766 and 1802.⁴⁸

Among the analysis of Denmark's slave-trading ventures lies the human cost, namely, the Africans treated as commodities in transatlantic trading. Of the 15,000 slaves transported from Danish forts in West Africa aboard Danish West India and Guinea Company ships from 1697 to 1755 only seventy-five percent survived the journey.⁴⁹ The most disastrous venture involved the *Cron-Printzen* that foundered in 1705 drowning 820

⁴⁶ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1994), 35.

⁴⁷ Westergaard, *Danish West Indies*, 239-42.

⁴⁸ Highfield, "Danish Atlantic," 21; Green-Pedersen, "History of the Danish Negro Slave Trade," 208.

⁴⁹ Westergaard, *Danish West Indies*, 155.

slaves. Two more of the company's largest vessels were lost over the next five years, taking an untold number of slaves with them.⁵⁰ In 1733 the *Laarburg Galley* arrived to the Danish Islands with only 242 of its 443 slaves at embarkation; that was translated into a monetary deficit to the Danish West India and Guinea Company of 4,697 rdlr.⁵¹ Similarly the *Patientia* experienced slave mutiny in 1753. With the help of a British warship, the *Patientia* managed to complete its journey. Roughly 129 slaves perished during the insurrection and subsequent trip to the West Indies. The boat sustained severe damage, and once it returned to Denmark, the loss was assessed not in human lives, but in 20,000 *rigsdalers*.⁵²

Despite the early failures of Danish West India and Guinea Company, Denmark's colonies forged a minor but important role in European colonization importing an estimated 50,350 slaves from Africa between 1733 and 1802.⁵³ Substantially more work would have to be done, but James Rawley estimates about 123,000 slaves were introduced to the Danish islands, with about 70,000 – nearly 57 percent – re-exported to other islands in the Caribbean.⁵⁴ The Danes continued their multinational tendencies.

⁵⁰ Dookhan, *History of the Virgin islands*, 126. The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database indicates that the *Cron-Printzen* had a cargo of 826 slaves so it is possible that several survived the disaster, or Dookhan's numbers are wrong. Voyages: The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database, <http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces> (Voyage identification number 35050. accessed September 8, 2008).

⁵¹ Westergaard attributes the losses to a "virulent form of dysentery." He also notes that despite the severe deficit placed on the company by the voyage, the slave traders themselves enjoyed a profit of 69.5 percent. This best demonstrates that the money made purchasing slaves in Africa and selling them in the Americas did not necessarily correspond to a bountiful overall journey for the investors. *Danish West Indies*, 324-35; Transatlantic Slave Trade Database, <http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces> (accessed February 12, 2009. Voyage identification number 35099); Nørregård, *Danish Settlements*, 92.

⁵² Voyages: Transatlantic Slave Trade Database, <http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces>, (accessed May 4, 2009). Voyage identification number 35127); Dookhan, *History of the Virgin Islands*, 66.

⁵³ Green-Pedersen, "History of the Danish Negro Slave Trade," 201.

⁵⁴ Rawley, *Transatlantic Slave Trade*, 100.

Buying from non-Danish carriers and re-exporting to non-Danish possessions, Denmark's slave trade was more circum-Caribbean in character, rather than transatlantic.

Ideology

Danish planters and slave traders borrowed many of the ideological tools necessary to justify keeping Africans in slavery. Africans were inherently evil and did not come from the same spiritual family as Europeans. Protestant and Catholic discourses of a "Satanic Epic," that postulated the Devil planned to make exploration and colonization particularly difficult for settlers, demonized natives in the Americas.⁵⁵ Other Christian beliefs informed European perceptions of African slaves. Their cues came from a commonly held belief that African blackness marked them as relations of Ham, the youngest son of Noah in biblical scripture. Ham had seen his father naked and therefore sinned, making his son Canaan and all his descendents forever bound to servitude.⁵⁶ For Christians, according to Robin Blackburn, blackness was associated with heathen customs where sin and "those under the Devil's influence were depicted in black hues."⁵⁷ Haagensen makes this connection himself when he wrote, "their black skin gives proof of their wickedness and that they are destined for slavery," and recommends the great importance "that these slaves be made to work through the use of extreme force and kept under a harsh justice."⁵⁸ Many other planters on St. Croix saw the enslavement of Africans as not only correct, but as a Christian mission to dispense punishment for the

⁵⁵ Jorge Canizares-Esguerra, *Puritan Conquistadors: Iberianizing the Atlantic, 1550-1700* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 50-54, 68-71, and 82.

⁵⁶ Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492-1800* (London: Verso, 1997), 66.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 70.

⁵⁸ Haagensen, *Description of St. Croix*, 48-49.

slaves' morally corrupt character. Their hard labor was their punishment but the slave codes were attempts to introduce civilization to an otherwise spiritually deprived people.

On the other hand, there was always a fear that leniency might lead to idleness and cut into profits as equally as runaways or rebels. Johans Lorentz Carstens, writing in the 1740s, demonstrates this attitude when he comments, "there are not many poor people among the citizens, except those who, as a result of their foolishness and laziness . . . have destroyed and ruined themselves."⁵⁹ Planters were also under tremendous pressure from the Danish West India and Guinea Company to bring the land under cultivation. Having administrative authority over the colonial government, the company established laws requiring that the land be productive within the first year. Reimert Haagensen, a planter on St. Croix in the 1750s, described stipulations made in land contracts, which state, "No land will be credited to a buyer except on condition that its cultivation be undertaken before a certain period of time."⁶⁰ This law reflects a *zeitgeist* that frowned upon the poor and unsuccessful. It demonstrates the necessity for land to be productive, and if profits were to be made, slaves needed to work. Hans West observed in the 1790s the general mentality of the black slave is "to lose themselves in idleness and aimless living were it [up] to them."⁶¹

To that end, be it harsh or lenient, a master's slaves were entirely at his discretion. Governor Gardelin's Code of 1733 made official the ideological ammunition that favored plantation owners stating, "the slaves are to be regarded as part and parcel of property.

⁵⁹ J.L. Carstens' *St. Thomas in Early Danish Times: A General Description of All the Danish, American or West Indian Islands*, ed. and trans. Arnold R. Highfield (St. Croix, United States Virgin Islands: Virgin Islands Humanities Council, 1997), 53.

⁶⁰ Reimert Haagensen, *Description of the Island of St. Croix in America in the West Indies*, ed. and trans. Arnold R. Highfield (St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands: Virgin Islands Humanities Council, 1995), 21.

⁶¹ *Hans West's Accounts of St. Croix in the West Indies*, ed. Arnold R. Highfield and trans. Nina York (St. Thomas: Virgin Islands Humanities Council, 2004), 97.

Their masters therefore have permission, following the content of the law, to dispose over their slaves much as they would their other assets or property.”⁶² Essentially Governor Gardelin applied Lockean notions of landed property whereby owners that labored on that property effectively *earned* the right to own it. Although Locke was discussing land, it may very well be applied to slaves who were also legally viewed first and foremost as “property.” Hans West observed that without labor the plantations “must lie idle” as planters would flee, “Denmark having lost the land,” and therefore any claims to operate in the Danish West Indies.⁶³ So long as the plantation remained prosperous, planters, theoretically, earned their place in society by cultivating land through their “applied” labor. Even if the slaves were doing the work, they were still a property best utilized. Carstens noted a contradiction when he contemplates the different inhabitants of St. Thomas remarking that while some were trapped in idleness, “others have plantations which allow them to sit back and live off their land’s produce and income.”⁶⁴ He makes the plantation appear as an autonomous entity that produced wealth, and completely dismisses enslaved workers as an essential component of the system. Obviously the income was for the benefit of those who owned the labor that worked the land, not the slaves who toiled daily to produce the means of profit.

Slave owner ideology went to great lengths to denigrate African slaves. The Danish observers mentioned above, compared the slaves to animals or wild beasts. Regarding sexual relations between slaves, Carstens observed that most “copulate where

⁶² Neville A. T. Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies: St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix*, ed. B.W. Higman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 40.

⁶³ West, *Accounts*, 29.

⁶⁴ Carstens, *St. Thomas in Early Danish Times*, 53.

they happen to be, in the manner of dumb animals.”⁶⁵ Hans West relayed a similarly promiscuous countenance among the Negroes at an early age which he referred to as “animal mingling” or “mixing,” on account that “all their proclivities are nearly confined to an animal nature.”⁶⁶ Carstens commented that the genitals of one African nation “resemble those of dumb beasts both in size and in thickness.”⁶⁷ He also noted that males and females are “thick, fat and flabby,” with no recognizable difference between either except “female Negroes have large, long breasts with large red nipples.”⁶⁸ It takes little imagination to see how easily such a description might resemble that of an ox or cow.

Planters, however, never recognized it was the material conditions in which slaves lived and worked that kept them in a denigrated state. Slaves frequently displayed their desire to flee the plantation. At night guards are stationed among the animals to prevent the livestock from theft, meanwhile they must also “keep watch over Negro huts to ensure none of the slaves run away during the night.” The word maroon, referring to runaway slaves, comes from the Spanish *cimarrón* which means “wild” or “living on mountaintops.” It reflects a categorization that these slaves had “gone wild” by refusing to engage in civilized notions of work instead hiding in the untamed wilderness. Moravian missionary C.G.A. Oldendorp, visiting the islands between 1767 and 1769, found that runaways were called thus “because they live in the bush like apes, as the term maroon is said to mean an ape.”⁶⁹ Concerning the slaves on Maroon Hill he commented, “they do indeed enjoy the same kind of freedom that wild beasts have in the bush” so

⁶⁵ Ibid. 78.

⁶⁶ West, *Accounts*, 24, 29.

⁶⁷ Carstens, *St. Thomas in Early Danish Times*, 78.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 77.

⁶⁹ C.G. A. Oldendorp, *History of the Mission of the Evangelical Brethren on the Caribbean Islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John*, ed. and trans. Arnold R. Highfield and Vladimir Barac (Ann Arbor: Karoma Publishers, Inc., 1987) 233.

long as they successfully avoid capture in the annual maroon hunts. Not only did whites use derogatory descriptors to belittle slaves, they referred to arenas beyond the plantation as wild, just as if a horse or pig escaped its stable.

Food is the most essential aspect for human survival and slaves must have felt extreme neglect in the early Danish period when it came to food. Haagensen described how flour from ground corn boiled in salt and water is a “delicacy” among slaves, but “a man feeds the same mixture to his horses daily.”⁷⁰ If slaves received the equivalent of horse fodder at sparse intervals during the week then slaves only saw its functional purpose as sustenance. On the edge of starvation anything tastes good. Furthermore, he believed that slaves were unequivocally “tough by nature and used to hardship,” qualifying that some women “are back on their feet in a short time” after giving childbirth. Johan Christian Schmidt, manager of the four largest plantations in the Danish West Indies, does not directly denote slaves as beasts, but his descriptions of the slave children are still relegated within a framework that relates to animals. “Round about on the ground,” he observed, “lie other children on sheep or calf skins” or others who play while their mothers work, “in the manner of young pups.”⁷¹ These animal skins are, apparently, “the Negro woman’s most important possessions,” hinting at a relationship between black mothers and the animal environment. Even if less derogatory than Carstens or Haagensen, Schmidt noticed a relationship between slaves and animals. Carstens similarly noted that slaves sleep on small thin mats in the slave huts where “they

⁷⁰ Haagensen, *Description of St. Croix*, 51.

⁷¹ Schmidt worked primarily on estates La Grange and La Princesse, both owned by Heinrich Carl Schimmelmann who purchased them from the King along with a warehouse and refinery in Denmark; Johan Christian Schmidt, *Various Remarks Collected on and about the Island of St. Croix in America*, ed. and trans. Svend E. Holsoe (St. Croix, United States Virgin Islands: Virgin Islands Humanities Council, 1998), 7.

lie jumbled together like cattle.”⁷² Hans West engages a similar style as he notices the reactions of Danish Creole ladies when female domestic slaves serve the table, observing the white women “can scarcely see a beautiful Negro woman without coveting her, in the manner of horse fanciers when they see a horse of good breeding.”⁷³ These observations not only reveal the terrible living conditions slaves endured throughout the eighteenth century, but also that slave owners attempts to psychologically denigrate slaves.

Slave Laws

Disparagement and vilification may have been the *modus operandi* when constructing planter ideology, but statutes of limitation in the slave codes reveal its contradictory nature. When cows and horses misbehave there is no code of conduct or court of livestock to take them. Animals act of their own agency and are expected to do so outside the realm of human interaction. Slaves, however, were believed to be inherently unruly. A code of conduct unconsciously recognized the humanity of slaves. Laws codified punishment for running away, because planters knew, at least on some level, that slaves did not enjoy their bondage. If left to their own devices, unlike mindless cattle, slaves would resist work, runaway, or instigate rebellions. Planters needed restrictive measures to prevent this from happening because slaves were property, but also had personality.

Two seminal *Reglements*, or regulations, were passed in 1733 and 1755, as well a slew of other *ad hoc* provisions throughout the century. Particularly unique about these *Reglements* and codes is that no specific mention is ever made regarding the exact social

⁷² Ibid. Carstens, *St. Thomas*, 73.

⁷³ West, *Accounts*, 25.

status of a slave. The codes were merely reflective enumerations of public opinion towards chattel slavery. They not only delegated what was considered a crime but defined the white hegemonic universe. Blacks were perceived as inherently depraved and criminal in nature; therefore these laws were designed to specify orderly behavior to the otherwise ungovernable.

The Danes “had no tradition of slave law and, accordingly, they either had to devise legal codes to govern slavery or accommodate that institution within their legal systems.”⁷⁴ As a result the codes specified regulations where slaves were whipped and punished for the slightest offenses and could expect no leniency, because slaves were not allowed to runaway. As early as 1706 a law was passed that required all trees be felled.⁷⁵ Slaves sometimes used trees to fashion small boats to flee to neighboring Puerto Rico, so it was in the planters’ best interests to rid the island of any possible modes of escape.⁷⁶ Governor Gardelin issued the first comprehensive code in 1733, at the behest of planters, which outlined harsh punishments for runaway slaves including, branding, lashing, and cutting off feet and legs. Provisions established laws of deference and prevented slaves from comingling in “dances, feasts, and plays.” Witchcraft was punishable by flogging, though no definition of what constituted witchcraft was established. Slaves were punished with 150 stripes for running away for eight days and the loss of a leg for those

⁷⁴Alicia A. Jackson, “An Account of the History of Africans and Their Descendents in the Danish West Indies” in *The Dispersion of Africans and African Culture Throughout the World: Essays on the African Diaspora*, ed. Lois Merriweather Moore (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2007), 116; For comparative dimensions as they pertain to slave laws in the Anglophone colonies see Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1947), and Gilberto Freyre, *The Masters and the Slave* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1956), for Portuguese and Spanish slavery. A suitable, but overly broad counterargument is Marvin Harris, *Patterns of Race in the Americas*, W.W. Norton & Co., 1974).

⁷⁵ Hall, “Maritime Maroons: ‘Grand Marronage’ from the Danish West Indies” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Oct., 1985): 482.

⁷⁶ Reimert Haagensen, *Description of the Island of St. Croix in America in the West Indies*, ed. and trans. Arnold R. Highfield (St. Croix: Virgin Islands Humanities Council, 1995)33; Wesstergaard, *Danish West Indies*, 160-61, 186, 190-91, 228; Neville Hall

gone twelve weeks. C.G.A. Oldendorp, a Moravian missionary, noted of the code “a harshness in the punishments imposed on them [the slaves] which is not, to all appearances, in the proper relationship with the seriousness of the offense.”⁷⁷ Plantations became self-enforced zones of brutality and work. The particularly brutal punishments issued Gardelin’s *Reglement* represent the extreme forms slavery could take in the Danish West Indies and the Caribbean as a whole. Menacing gestures or disrespectful language resulted in immediate corporal punishment and, if the offended white so desired, the amputation of the perpetrator’s right hand.⁷⁸ Next to lashings, branding was the most prevalent form of slave punishment administered to thieves, insubordinates, and those engaged in “tomfoolery.”⁷⁹ This obsession with deference is indicative of the traditional slave laws the Danes created in their colonies.

According to Douglas Hay, certain laws passed in Britain and Holland were for the express purpose of “maintaining bonds of obedience and deference, in legitimizing the status quo.”⁸⁰ Danish slave laws in the West Indies possibly reflected a similar pattern of social arrangements that existed in Denmark. As one contemporary related, “it is only fear of punishment and not religion or education that prevents the wild and ignorant Negro from committing a crime.”⁸¹ The slave is explicitly described as “wild,” which harkened back to assumptions that planters were on a civilizing mission where a black’s proper place was servitude and work. The state of Negro slavery assumed cultural and

⁷⁷ Oldendorp, C.G.A. *History of the Mission of the Evangelical Brethren on the Caribbean Islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John*, ed. Johann Jakob Bossard and trans. Arnold R. Highfield and Vladimir Barac (Ann Arbor: Karoma Publishers Inc., 1987), 230.

⁷⁸ John Knox, *A Historical Account of St. Thomas, W.I.*, (1852; reprint, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1970).

⁷⁹ Hall, *Slave Society*, 58 quoting Akokat Balling’s written submission 5 November, 1784, 58.

⁸⁰ Douglas Hay, “Property, Authority and the Criminal Law,” in *Albion’s Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Douglas Hay and Edward P. Thompson (London: Allen Lane, 1975), 25.

⁸¹ Quoted in Hall, *Slave Society*, 44.

moral superiority of the European over the African. As such slaves were expected to engage in the “ungovernable passions of blacks,” which prompted harsh punishment to prevent crime, maintain the existing social subservience, and exemplify their inferiority.⁸² Slaves were whipped for galloping on horses in urban areas or in the open countryside. This behavior was a persistent example of slaves refusing to defer. A slave atop a horse could be interpreted by whites as a symbolic redress to their social primacy as ordained by law. Slaves were expected to acknowledge and accept their subordinate and secondary status within the slave society in the Danish West Indies.

Punishment was given at any moment to slaves in the Danish West Indies. Many slaves may escaped being “hung from the beams by their arms” and summarily “beaten with firebrands,” in the fort, but the lashing and flogging still existed on the plantation.⁸³ Even Schmidt, who recoils at the idea of overly fierce punishment, relents that swift discipline must “be meted out, as with children.”⁸⁴ Slaves understood that the whip was limply idle behind them, but could be cracked into motion for the slightest note of displeasure from the *bombas*, overseers, and master. Their relationship hinged upon the latter’s ability to administer punishment. Laws specifically granted Europeans the right to whip and beat or issue harsher punishments. But even some Europeans understood the consequences if they beat their slaves too much. After commenting on slaves that occasionally escape to Puerto Rico, even Haagensen, an advocate of fierce work routines and harsh punishment, contended that if it not for the fort, “no one could live among them

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Carstens, *St. Thomas in Early Danish Times*, 81.

⁸⁴ Schmidt, *Various Remarks*, 14.

[slaves] without fear.”⁸⁵ He also understands that slaves indeed desired freedom and would fight for it when necessary.

The Restless and Rebellious

Danish West Indian slavery rested on the continuous pursuit of profit. K.L. Rahbek, a nineteenth-century pamphleteer and literary critic, noted the cyclical need for an accumulation of the wealth that maintained the luxury of the Danish West Indies.⁸⁶ Planters needed continually expansive cultivation. This meant buying more slaves and investing more of their time in longer and harder work. Bad harvests meant worse conditions for slaves as they needed to make up for that year’s loss and more loans. Profits, according to Rahbek, were invested in luxury rather than efficiency.⁸⁷

An increasing number of planters engaged in absentee-proprietorship. Like other sugar plantations in the Caribbean, Danish West Indian planters looked to make a quick fortune and leave their business behind and return to Denmark. But St. Thomas’s soil was nearly exhausted after a half-century of cultivation causing many planters to move to St. John. Once they had established their plantations they would hire overseers, or *mesterknegte*, to manage the operations while planters returned to Denmark. Overseers were only slightly interested in maintaining their employers’ profits, it was difficult for slaves – who had enough trouble on a properly managed estate – to bear the wrath of hired plantation overseers. Dishonest and brutal the *mesterknegte* exploited his

⁸⁵ Haagensen, *Description of St. Croix*, 49; Hall, “Maritime Maroons: ‘Grand Marronage’ from the Danish West Indies.” *William and Mary Quarterly* 42 (1985: 476-98.

⁸⁶ K.L. Rahbek “Concerning the Slave-owning practices of the Danish West Indies,” *Minerva*, February 1805, 199-203; William Howitt and Mary Howitt, *The Literature and Romance of Northern Europe* (London: Colburn and Co., 1852, 63-66.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

managerial status for personal gain. For some this meant a psychological reward from the prestige that came from managing a plantation estate. Incidences of planter absenteeism resulted in a cycle that perpetually dehumanized the slave and transformed the supposedly idyllic plantation into a nightmare.⁸⁸

Frustrated planters attempted to quell resistance among those in the slave population who ran away and refused to acquiesce.⁸⁹ Westergaard reports that seventeen slaves were executed in 1726, while replacements arrived on the next shipment from Africa.⁹⁰ Despite the slave codes, there was an inherent weakness that emerged from the predominance of other nationalities settling on Danish islands. Dutch and English planters were hardly motivated to provide for the Danish army that defended territorial extensions of Denmark. The Danish West India and Guinea Company's limited resources could only provide for administrative duties and loans to keep the slave trade and sugar plantations alive. Only six military personnel occupied the fort on St. John. Such a volatile system with no protective measures in place was bound to turn sour.

On November 23, 1733, a small group of slaves was able to capture the fort at Coral Bay, guarded by only a handful of soldiers, signaling the start of the uprising.⁹¹ Unlike other slave revolts in the Americas the St. John rebellion was one of few considered ethnically specific and insulated from the participation of other African nations. Oldendorp's account of the revolt reveals that "the rebels came only from the

⁸⁸ Hall, *Slave Society*, 40; Rahbek, "Concerning the Slave-owning practices of the Danish West Indies," 204.

⁸⁹ John P. Knox, *A Historical Account of St. Thomas, W.I.*, (New York: Charles Schribner, 1852), 69-71.

⁹⁰ Westergaard, *Danish West Indies*, 165.

⁹¹ The revolt of 1733 is taken from the following sources: Oldendorp, 235-236; Westergaard, *Danish West Indies*, 168-78; Knox, *Historical Account of St. Thomas*, 71-77; "St. John Slave Rebellion of 1733" www.stjohnbeachguide.com/Slave%20Rebellion.htm, accessed September 19, 2008.

Amina tribe, whose numbers on the island amounted to many hundred.”⁹² Amina probably refers to the Akwamu people of the Gold Coast who were versed in Akan and Twi languages.⁹³ The Akwamu were a particularly powerful nation in West Africa, armed with guns and extremely active in the acquisition of slaves. Many Akwamu found their position in the New World as slaves utterly detestable, and carefully planned and implemented this rebellion. Oldendorp notes, “Many other Negroes were neutral and looked upon the confusion only as a favorable opportunity to relieve the extreme scarcity which weighed heavily upon them at that time by themselves to the provisions of the Whites.”⁹⁴ Some slaves found an opportunity to use this revolt to find food, which indicates the severe conditions with which slaves lived. Carstens notes of the Amina in particular that they subsisted on rats and snakes, often caught with their bare hands.⁹⁵

Sandra Greene points out in her essay on the St. John revolt that newly arrived slaves, known as “bussals,”⁹⁶ did not shed their political identities in the Americas. Interactions among various ethnic groups continued much as they had in West Africa.⁹⁷ For the Akwamu this meant an incorporated effort to establish their cultural and political hegemony on the island of St. John. The Amina, according to Carstens, were “unfaithful

⁹² Oldendorp, *A Caribbean Mission*, 235.

⁹³ Sandra E. Greene, “From Whence They Came: A Note on the Influence of West African Ethnic and Gender Relations on the Organizational Character of the 1733 St. John Slave Rebellion,” in *The Danish West Indian Slave Trade: Virgin Islands Perspectives*, eds. Arnold R. Highfield and George F. Tyson (St. Croix: Virgin Island Humanities Council, 1994), 48-49; For a more detailed discussion of Amina as an ethnic designation see Gwendolyn Midlo Hall *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 111-125.

⁹⁴ Oldendorp, *A Caribbean Mission*, 235.

⁹⁵ Carstens, *St. Thomas in Early Danish Times*, 69.

⁹⁶ Comes from the Spanish “bozales” which was the term used for Negroes imported directly from Africa an account of their chains and muzzles the were forced to wear on the transatlantic journey. The term eventually signified those African slaves who were not versed in an Iberian language and did not practice Catholicism.

⁹⁷ Greene, “From Whence They Came,” 50.

and warlike to all other nations.”⁹⁸ Oldendorp also notes the continued ethnic tensions that continued in the West Indies when he interviewed a slave woman who said her nation often made war against the Amina.⁹⁹ This led Oldendorp to conclude that “most of the Creoles, however, remained loyal to their masters and defended them” during the uprising on St. John. These slaves probably had just as much stake in the ramifications of Akwamu leadership as their bussal brethren.

There is also evidence to suggest that the condition of slaves on St. John would not have changed in the slightest had the Akwamu succeeded. Pierre Pannet, a French planter on St. Thomas, explained that “the Negroes from other nations were to be provided to them to do their labors and were to belong to them as slaves. This is the reason why they preserved all the sugar factories and other buildings.”¹⁰⁰ As Sandra Greene notes, “this must have generated considerable concern among those Africans on St. John who knew firsthand how the Akwamu managed their conquered people.”¹⁰¹ Slaves on St. John, therefore, began a process of conglomeration into different African communities. A majority of the rebels were an ethnically exclusive contingent that hoped not only to remove the shackles of slavery from their white owners, but dominate those that did not share with them a commonality in the Akwamu nation. Others, however, went to the aid of their plantation masters, not because they felt slavery was a particularly helpful institution, but because they feared Amina and were not willing to submit to their hegemonic aspirations. Although the rebellion was eventually crushed it was the first

⁹⁸ Carstens, *St. Thomas in early Danish Times*, 69.

⁹⁹ Oldendorp, *A Caribbean Mission*, 162.

¹⁰⁰ Pierre Pannet, “Report on the Execrable Conspiracy Carried out by the Amina Negroes on the Danish Island of St. Jan in America 1733,” in *The Kamina Folk* eds. Arnold R. Highfield and George F. Tyson (Virgin Islands Humanities Council, 1999) 22.

¹⁰¹ Greene, “From Whence They Came,” 60.

time Africans had organized themselves into specific groups. In this case, rebels and non-rebels.

St. John's slave rebellion was also significant as one of the more important slave rebellions of the early eighteenth century because the rebels thoroughly held the island for a prolonged period of time, successfully repelling various European attacks and preventing any attempts to resume commerce and plantation agriculture. The French eventually intervened in May of 1734 and completely stamped out any fleeting remnants by June. Whatever major plans the Akwamu rebels had in continuing their own sugar-slave islands came to naught. Although the sugar works were left virtually untouched, hundreds of slaves and whites had been killed, or died from starvation, amounting to thousands of dollars in property lost or destroyed. St. John was in a state of disrepair, and the drought earlier in the year required re-tilling the soil. Many planters had lost so much during the slave rebellion that it only seemed pertinent to move to St. Croix, which Denmark had exchanged for French intervention on St. John. The French had not cultivated the island for nearly forty years because their focus on the colony of Saint Domingue that was eventually the most profitable sugar island in the Caribbean, and the most productive colony in the world.¹⁰² St. Croix was Denmark's most profitable island so the St. John rebellion proved a unique blessing.

The Danish West Indies would continue to rely on sugar long after the islands became royal colonies, but at a less successful degree compared to other nations. Plagued by tropical heat, diseases, malnutrition, dehydration, alcoholism, threats from foreign invaders, and slave rebellions, the Danish inhabitants indoctrinated themselves with various social mores of a slave society. This included attempts to strip slaves of both

¹⁰² Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America*, 56-57

individual collective identities while blocking legal and physical channels in which to escape bondage. Europeans were able to bring the land under control using cultivation processes dependent on slave labor, but could not find similar successes in relation to the entire ecological environment or its bonded cultivators.¹⁰³ Violence was inherent to American slave societies and the Danish West Indies were no different. Laws and regulations were established to maintain a dehumanized and subservient state of slaves on the Danish West Indies.

Conclusion

The St. John revolt was a warning to planters that slaves could not simply be used and abused especially on the tiny Virgin Islands. With a nationally diverse population the weaknesses of the administration were plainly seen and certain realizations about the dangers of owning slaves come to the forefront. In the aftermath of the St. John revolt, Pierre Pannet aptly warned, the slave “must be fed, clothed, and screamed and cursed at to make him do his task . . . [and] one has to sleep always with the fear that domestic enemies will slit one’s throat.”¹⁰⁴ The rebellion illustrated how an extremely brutal plantation system abused undernourished slaves that resulted in violence and rebellion. On St. Croix to leave slaves to fend for themselves and starve would be checked through the creation of provisional grounds where they could grow food without having to flee the plantation. Slaves were granted some clemency and freedom to pursue their own material means of subsistence, which they lacked before 1733.

¹⁰³ Sydney Mintz, “From Plantations to Peasantries in the Caribbean,” in *Caribbean Contours*, ed. Mintz and Sally Price (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 128-29.

¹⁰⁴ Pierre Pannet, “Report on the Execrable Conspiracy Carried out by the Amina Negroes on the Danish Island of St. Jan in America 1733,” in *The Kamina Folk* eds. Arnold R. Highfield and George F. Tyson (Virgin Islands Humanities Council, 1999) 22.

The harsh slave codes, however, would not be forgotten as whites not only checked the material proto-freedom slaves were granted, but made sure slaves realized that any further uprisings would be stamped out. Few Danish West Indian inhabitants were openly concerned with the contradictory tasks of both feeding and cursing slaves, but Pannet's warning was one that all planters on St. Croix had to bear in mind as the eighteenth century progressed. The second half of the century witnessed a consolidation of a Danish slave society organized around ideology, labor, and law. For slaves it meant organizing into a cohesive body by shedding some of their African characteristics, while retaining others. It was within this narrow window of mediated punishment and lackadaisical provisioning from their masters that slaves were able to establish a resistant material culture through processes of socio-relations that contributed to an Afro-Caribbean community.

Chapter Two

Black Landscapes in the Eighteenth Century

The rebellion on St. John was a direct result of a transformation in the slave system as it developed in the eighteenth century. St. John planters who lost property during the rebellion looked to the new purchase of St. Croix and fixed their profit-making schemes to an island that was double the size and with far more arable land than either St. Thomas or St. John combined. The lessons of the St. John rebellion did not die quickly. Planters understood the dangers that slave owning entailed. Unhappy slaves meant violent resistance, but underworked slaves could just as easily bring about economic destruction. It was expensive to import foodstuff to the colonies so planters devised a system of provision grounds where slaves were allotted small pieces of land and *required* to “provision” themselves with whatever they could grow in their spare time on that land. This meant slaves not only had to produce for their masters, but also needed to produce for themselves. Starvation awaited any who did not.

With the introduction of provision grounds, however, slaves found ways to integrate their own work culture into the labor of sugar production. Selective and creative in their approach, slaves in the Danish West Indies found ameliorative avenues within the slave system, but outside the boundaries of plantation estate. Through independent

cultivation slaves acquired a number of material objects that became threatened by newly arrived *bussals* from Africa who did not understand the nature and meaning of the provision grounds. In response, they appealed to West African traditions of ritual religions appointing Obeah men and women as the figurative ritual practitioners that enforced prevailing rules against theft, and adopted new slaves by conferring ritual protection. They also healed the sick, and provided fetishes, or sacred objects, that protected slaves and their material goods from harm or theft. They identified and supplied a supernatural context that drew slaves into cohesive units on the plantation, based around these fetishes and group possessions. Slaves established their place in urban markets selling a variety fish, food, and recipes they bartered or sold for cash, clothes, and other luxuries that marginally improved their physical conditions. By the mid-eighteenth century there were clear attempts to utilize the material environment, which directly influenced the foundations of an Afro-Danish Caribbean community.

Organizing Slave Labor

Slaves were arranged in a variety of tasks in the early economies. The most important was clearing the forests and “wild” landscape of the islands to make way for surveying future plantations. This was a considerably intensive and drained much of the early slave labor away from cultivation. Not only did environmental factors such as underbrush, vines, large deep-rooted trees, and tropical heat make the clearing difficult, but, snakes, insects, and disease took their toll on the slave populations. Despite the prevailing assumptions of West Indian planters that Africans were accustomed to the

climate, work load, and conditions, many Africans fell victim to negative physical and epidemiological effects of the tropics.¹⁰⁵

Usual work schedules began as early as four in the morning when the *bomba*, or slave driver, blew a shell-shaped horn, known as a tutu, to awaken the field slaves. They would usually cut grass for an hour or two for fodder and feed various livestock on the plantation, taking a brief break for breakfast if they had any food with them. From there they went to the fields. Planting began no later than August when a gang of thirty to sixty slaves would clear the land and dig holes a foot deep and two feet wide. Rainfall filled the holes with water, and sugarcane “cuttings” were planted in the ground. The growing season lasted at least ten months during which time slaves constantly tended the sugarcane. Pulling weeds, transplanting stalks, and removing dead roots must have been an arduous task, especially in Caribbean heat. Slaves were expected to maintain a thirty-to forty-foot-wide barricade between the plots of sugarcane in order to prevent sugar field fires from engulfing the entire harvest. Slaves also tended to prickly thorn bushes sporadically placed around the fields to prevent rats, or “sugar thieves,” from devouring the leaves.¹⁰⁶ Using a long stick, the slaves would sweep out weeds and rats from these prickly thorn bushes mostly cutting themselves in the process. Sugarcane could take up to thirteen months to grow before it gave good juice for making sugar. Meanwhile, slaves were exposed to many sorts of rodents, lizards, snakes, and insects.

Although slaves were expected to perform artisanal and domestic duties throughout the year, the sugar harvest was an intense and often dangerous time. Gangs of field slaves used machetes or *kapmessers*, to cut the cane stalks. Slave boys hauled the

¹⁰⁵ Hall, *Slave Society*, 35, 36-41.

¹⁰⁶ Johan Christian Schmidt, *Various Remarks Collected on and about the Island of St. Croix in America*, trans. Svend E. Holsoe (St. Croix: Virgin Islands Humanities Council, 1998), 14.

cane stalks on mules from the field to the sugar mill which were mostly wind-powered, but were sometimes animal-driven. Through several rotations of cylindrical grinders, the sugar juices were squeezed out. The juices were transferred via pipe to the boiling house where they were are heated in large copper vats using spent canes, or *megasse*, as fuel for the boiling fires.¹⁰⁷ Thick black molasses rose as the liquid was transferred to smaller basins down the line where they eventually were left to cool. The molasses could be used to make rum, along with cane stalks and water that washes the boiling vats after each cycle. Once cooled, the sugar was taken to the curing house as unrefined brown sugar where it continued to crystallize. Every step could spell disaster for any careless or overworked individual. In some mills an axe was kept close by to amputate any limbs that might get caught in the press. Schmidt reports that slaves “have to be careful feeding the cane into the mill [rollers] where it is crushed. It is very dangerous work, and when the Negroes are inattentive, they may stick their hands which can be caught along with the cane as the rollers turn. For that reason there is always an axe to cut off a hand in order to save a Negro’s life.”¹⁰⁸ The boiling house was especially dangerous as superheated metal and thick, syrupy molasses caused torrential bodily harm. The end of the day provided no respite, because slave still had to tend to their provision grounds to acquire the proper caloric necessary to fulfill the demands of this backbreaking labor.

¹⁰⁷ In rather amusing anecdote Henry Morton noted other uses for the pipes and megasse. A few slaves had heard some strange noises coming from the pipes leading from the mill to the boiling house and had gathered around the entrance.

“Suddenly a figure shot out . . . with prodigious vociferation, to the great dismay of the spectators – who recovering from their frights found that it was nothing more . . . than an . . . overseer who being in a hurry to get down to the works had seated himself on a heap of Megass in the huge gutter, and thus with the loss of all his outer garments and some of his hide had found out a short way from the mill.”

The distance from the mill to the sugar works was two hundred feet at a forty five degree angle. Henry Morton, *Danish West Indian Sketchbook and Diary, 1843-44* (Dansk Vestindisk Selskrab and St. Croix Landmark Soceity, 1975), 174.

¹⁰⁸ Schmidt, “Observations of St. Croix,” 9.

Provision Grounds

Studies of provision grounds, gardens, and plots reveal they were a customary practice in West Indian slave-based agriculture.¹⁰⁹ This practice was no less customary in the Danish West Indies.¹¹⁰ Although some plantations relied more heavily on rationing than provision grounds and others vice versa, these plots functioned as means of subsistence. But questions arise over who truly benefited from the provision grounds. Slaves certainly constructed a certain degree of autonomy otherwise unknown during the work day. Some Brazilian scholars, however, reconsider provision plots as nothing more than another burdensome agricultural relationship that shifts provisional supplies away from the planter and forced slaves into another exploitative relationship that replaces the whip with the need to survive.¹¹¹ Plantation owners saved tremendous cash without having to rely on expensive imports whose prices were rarely static for very long. The grounds were operated as a form of social control that functioned to provide an incentive for slaves to keep from fleeing, rebelling, or causing other supervisory problems.¹¹² For slaves in the Danish West Indies, unlike Brazil, there were no comprehensive laws that

¹⁰⁹ Dale W. Tomich, "The Other Face of Slave Labour: Provision Grounds and Internal Marketing in Martinique," in *Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World: A Student Reader*, ed. Verene Shepard and Hilary McD. Beckles, (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2000); B.W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 209-212; Michael Mullin, "The Slaves' Economic Strategies: Food, Markets, and Property," in *Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the Caribbean, 1736-1831* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 126-58.

¹¹⁰ Neville Hall, *Slave Society*, 114-115; West, *Accounts*, 79, 91, and 195.

¹¹¹ Jacob Gorender argues that slaves enjoyed any autonomy is misguided and misrepresents slavery as much milder in Brazil than it actually was, accusing scholars taking the opposing position of taking a "neopaternalistic" approach. For more on this debate see B.J. Barickman, "A Bit of Land, Which They Call *Roça*: Slave Provision Grounds in the Bahian Recôncavo, 1780-1860," *Hispanic American Heritage Review* 74 (1994): 649-687; Stuart B. Schwartz, *Slave, Rebels and Peasant: Reconsidering Brazilian Slavery*, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1992), 8 and 82-84.

¹¹² Schwartz, *Slaves, Peasants, and Rebels*, 84.

provided for slaves to purchase their freedom until well into the nineteenth century, so cash could purchase food, clothing, and luxuries, but not freedom.

Likewise, an important advancement in slave codes was a requirement that slaves be given minimal provisions of food, clothing and housing. The 1755 *Reglement* specified that no free day could exist in lieu of rationing, but planters and slave owners largely disregarded this section as the price of imported foodstuffs increased. By the 1790s the practice of rationing was largely abandoned and custom dictated slaves were allowed – and expected – to provide their own sustenance. Self-sufficiency was the ideal goal in a plantation society and slaves were often forced to fend for themselves with the aid of their provision grounds. This would prevent the planters from assuming costs already associated with foodstuffs.¹¹³ Neville Hall does not argue either way, but views provision grounds in the Danish West Indies as a normal part of slave existence in the latter half of the eighteenth century, that arose from “creative initiative in the use of their ‘free’ time.”¹¹⁴ Karen Fog Olwig explains that planters might have not even known the location of the provision grounds, as they were located on the periphery of the estate.¹¹⁵

The physical emergence of the provisional grounds on the Danish West Indies is not entirely clear. Slaves may have carved them from the surrounding environment. On the larger island of St. Croix, it required over a decade to sufficiently clear enough forest and brush to plant sugar, so the initial provisional grounds were limited in size, sometimes being as little as thirty square feet for slaves to use their “creative initiative.” Overseers and drivers hired out slaves, often without the owners’ permission (recall many

¹¹³ Ibid. 59-60, 80-81; *Hans West’s Accounts*, 191, 194-195.

¹¹⁴ Hall, *Slave Society*, 114-15.

¹¹⁵ Karen Fog Olwig, *Cultural Adaptation and Resistance on St. John: Three Centuries of Afro-Caribbean Life* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1985), 45-46.

absentee owners), for this process of deforestation.¹¹⁶ Slaves may have become familiar with the territory and designated specific plots for themselves over time, especially *bussals*, or newly arrived slaves, who ordinarily, “have to be supplied with food for an entire year, until they can support their own land.”¹¹⁷ They saw “seasoned” slaves with yams and potatoes while they were relegated to bread and meager, salted leftovers. The provision grounds on the smaller islands of St. John and St. Thomas were placed within the slave villages as far removed from the plantation fields as possible to avoid cooking fires from spreading to cane fields during dry weather.¹¹⁸ This reflects that planters customarily provided plots for the slaves in the beginning of the eighteenth century. On St. Croix the provisional grounds would sometimes overlap with other estates, providing for possibilities of cross-plantation communities to form once the land had been cleared.¹¹⁹ Technically the planter owned the land his labor force cultivated, but since the provisional grounds eventually became largely relegated to the periphery of large estates, it was difficult for the owners to access them.

The early Danish period was a time when skilled slaves gained advantages from the provision grounds because they customarily received half-Saturdays and full Sundays to work for themselves. Field slaves, working from sun up to sun down, had little time to work these plots before the latter half of the eighteenth century when custom gave them similar free days. “Free” days, however, should not be misunderstood as a time which slaves were liberated from their status as chattel property, but a day in which they did not

¹¹⁶ Hall, *Slave Society*, 59.

¹¹⁷ Schmidt, *Various Remarks*, 22.

¹¹⁸ Olwig, *Cultural Adaptation*, 47; Hall, *Slave Society*, 191, 195.

¹¹⁹ Olwig, *Cultural Adaptation*, 44.

have to work and could engage in independent slave activity. It was not until 1843 that Saturday was codified as the official “free” day for slaves in Danish West Indies.¹²⁰

Schmidt offers evidence that it was indeed possible for slaves to extract nourishing and somewhat diverse foods from their small plots, of course with varying degrees of success. For midday meals, slaves could harvest potatoes or yams supplemented with a herring (although probably rotten) for a meal. They planted varieties of corn, pumpkins, melons, wild cucumber or *konkums*, chopped cabbage, and beans. Haagensen praised the use of the cassava root which is extremely poisonous unless properly dried, processed, and ground to powder, in place of flour, to make bread on the islands. He recalled that “it is used daily in every household,” and its “good supply” results from its popularity as “everyone takes care to plant some of it.”¹²¹ Schmidt recalled how slaves were extremely fond of cassava bread, so they too must have planted it. Corn was probably the most popularly grown plant on provision grounds because the climate of the region offered a year-round growing season that yielded three to four harvests annually giving slaves ample opportunity to gain food surpluses. The surrounding bushes and forests could also be utilized as an extension of the provisional grounds. Fruits, when available, could include lemons, oranges, plums, cherries, guava berries, and other berries that grew heavily on the north side of St. Croix.¹²²

Two to three pounds of salted beef or fish and between two and three pounds of cassava or fresh ground cornmeal were supposed to be dispensed to the slaves. Once or twice every few years, slaves were allotted rolls of linen or designed to cover their “nakedness and shame” that, according to Haagensen, a small strip of cloth failed to

¹²⁰ Hall, *Slave Society*, 114.

¹²¹ *Ibid.* 52.

¹²² Schmidt, *Various Remarks*, 23-24.

do.¹²³ Dispensing rum was forbidden in lieu of rations, but this probably had less to do with humanitarian efforts to supply nourishing provisions than attempts to keep slaves from being drunk and unruly.¹²⁴ Before these codes were printed Carstens observed that “plantation slaves receive nothing from their master in the way of food or clothing except only the small plot of land at the outermost extremity of his plantation land that he assigns each slave.”¹²⁵ In relation to the food grounds that planters allotted for themselves, the slave provision grounds yielded fruit, “which they consume for their daily upkeep,”¹²⁶ while the larger, planters’ grounds could harvest a total 1,000 half-bushels of corn in a single season.¹²⁷ These early stages of subsistence harvesting were probably mediocre at best and nonexistent at worst. It would take several years of accommodation among slaves after they arrived to establish a firm foothold in their grounds.

For those slaves that could not immediately find their own subsistence plots the Caribbean Sea was utilized, and in many cases acted as extensions of the provisioning grounds. Fish were available to slaves who lived near the coast, or lagoons. Some supplemented their midday meals with herrings, while others had the sole duty of collecting fish for the planter’s storehouse either for market or their own consumption. Carstens devotes a whole chapter to the hunting of “land-fishes” or tortoises, turtle, crabs, mollusks, and other shelled creatures. Whites and blacks chose these creatures because of their “good taste” and proportion of meat. Sea turtles are caught when they wander out of their den or come ashore. Slaves used “soldier crabs” and *cusku-lusser* (a mollusk) as

¹²³ Haagensen, *Various Remarks*, 53.

¹²⁴ Hall, “Slave Laws of the Danish Virgin,” 176.

¹²⁵ Carstens, *St. Thomas in Early Danish Times*, 72.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* 70.

¹²⁷ Haagensen, *Description of St. Croix*, 51.

“their primary source of meat” according to Carstens. Crayfish the size of lobsters were caught in a similar fashion, and various oysters were collected while diving in the shallow reefs. Most fish were boiled in a mixture of pepper and butter, which suggests it was possible for slaves not only to leave the plantations at night and hunt for food, but acquire items of somewhat luxurious standards. This would entail privileges to sell surplus food in an urban market and use the proceeds to purchase anything extra that may supplement their diet or add a bit of spice to their otherwise bland rations.¹²⁸

Slaves sometimes used thoughtful and unique methods to capture aquatic delicacies. Carstens describes nighttime, torch-lit hunting parties organized either individually or collectively.¹²⁹ The animal was distracted by the light, hit on the head, and captured. William Butterworth witnessed two blacks diving for conch shells in Christiansted harbor on St. Croix. They approached his vessel asking for an amount of fat such as the kind scraped off a pot. The fat smoothes the surface of the water, so, “they could see the conchs as the bottom much better.”¹³⁰ The divers extract the conch – in many cases measuring up to three feet long – and sell them at the fish market or concoct a soup “which is a popular dish, and much relished.”¹³¹ Some conch shells, with “richness of tint and smoothness of enamel,” are worthy to sale as souvenirs or exotic decorations. In these cases the conch is carefully extracted with an iron skewer. In the 1820s, Lt. Brady wrote that despite laws that do not permit slaves from possessing boats, “they go out to fish upon rafts, no otherwise adapted to marine purposes than by possessing the

¹²⁸ Carstens' *St. Thomas*, 124-125.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ William Butterworth [Henry Shroeder], *Three Years Adventures of a Minor, in England, Africa, the West Indies, South-Carolina and Georgia* (Leeds: E. Baines, [1831?]), 384.

¹³¹ Ibid. 386-87.

property of floatation.”¹³² Not only are they industrious in catching aquatic animals, but they create rafts that guide them only so far as the shore water will allow. The ability to craft boats that convincingly keep their masters from fearing maritime marronage is a cultural skill worthy of attention.

Commodity Exchange and the Market Milieu

Slaves were allowed access to urban markets for some of Saturday and all of Sunday to sell any products produced on the provisional grounds. This extended their territorial boundaries beyond plantation, and freed them to pursue errands of their own accord rather than at the whim of their master. They could then use the money to purchase useful tools and devices to further their cultivation and build a material culture in the slave community. It also gave a chance for plantation slaves to intermingle with one another and extend the sphere of social interaction. The urban environment proved a cross-cultural and regional marker where the entire slave population could interact. The noticeable amount of attention given to these activities in the regulatory records indicates the frequency that these events occurred and illuminates the concern many had toward effectively regulating deference.

Sidney Mintz and Douglas Hall found an extraordinarily intricate system of internal distribution in eighteenth-century Jamaica, suggesting the vegetables, tubers, fruit, and other harvests from the provision grounds and Caribbean Sea were just as likely

¹³² [Lt. Brady], *Observations Upon the State of Negro Slavery, in the Island of Santa Cruz, the Principal of the Danish West India Colonies: With Miscellaneous Remarks Upon Subjects Relating to the West India Question, and a notice of Santa Cruz* (Goldsmiths’-Kress Library of Economic Literature 25998; London: Simpkin & Marshall, 1829), microfilm, 15; Hall, “Maritime Maroons,” 478.

to be sold at markets as they were to supplement edible necessities.¹³³ Similar evidence can be found on the Danish West Indies. According to Neville Hall, the slave *Reglement* of 1755 “indicates that at midcentury, a vigorous effort was being made to arrest the development of an internal marketing system dependent on the initiative of the slave.”¹³⁴ It issued several stipulation to the effect that slaves could not legally own any property and that it was therefore illegal to sell anything for a monetary sum, giving any white citizen full policing authority to confiscate the property and even arrest the perpetrator. Unless their owners offered a ticket as proof that they were lawfully selling the goods on his behalf, the property was deemed stolen. Two white inspectors were assigned to the duty of investigating suspicious slave sellers.

Governor von Pröck left the above placard only half published and ultimately unenforced. When Oldendorp visited the Danish islands in 1767, however, he found multiple possibilities for slaves to earn cash income at the markets and purchase clothing and food.¹³⁵ Hans West described in the 1790s how many earned income by raising poultry and growing fruit, “which they carry to market, mainly on Sundays.”¹³⁶ Those who lived closer to towns brought grass, used as horse fodder, and firewood. Many in the urban areas relied heavily upon plantation slaves to provide them with firewood and grass, both commodities relatively difficult to obtain. J.P. Nissen observed on St. Thomas in 1798 “the crowd of persons . . . was very great, especially in the evenings, when the country negroes received permission to come to town with their bundles of grass and

¹³³ Sidney Mintz and Douglas Hall, “The Origins of the Jamaican Internal Marketing System,” in Shepherd and Beckles, *Caribbean Slavery*, 758-773.

¹³⁴ Hall, “Slave Laws,” 178.

¹³⁵ Oldendorp, *A Caribbean Mission*, 223-224. He was mostly referring to slaves and blacks operating within the mission, however, it is just as likely that plantation slaves engaged in similar pursuits, though as Carstens and Haagensen observed most of the slaves went about nearly naked. Clothes were probably not as important as food.

¹³⁶ West, *Accounts*, 80.

wood, for which they receive \$1 per bundle.”¹³⁷ Hans West attests to the scale of this distribution noting that slaves made anywhere between 2 and 16 skillings¹³⁸ per bundle of firewood and grass, and often received upwards of three rdlr. a week. West suggested, however, that selling produce and fish could yield two to four times as much per week.¹³⁹ Given this literary evidence, the slave *Reglement*, for purposes of regulating slaves’ market activities, was legislatively dead by the end of the eighteenth century. Most of the codes concerning runaways, stealing, and refusing deference referred to the 1733 codes for their punishment cues, and it was still legal for whites to employ harsh methods of punishment to reprimand insubordinate slaves. The evidence of laws pertaining to slave market activity clearly reflect an informal reality operating the formal codes of the legal establishment.

Obeah and Social Organization

The provision grounds were essential for plantation slaves able to utilize their resources and time and to form group relations among their independent activities. Meanwhile a separate, but socially valuable, organizational principle began to evolve around a deep-rooted African religious order. Slaves adopted their own means of protection revolving around, initially fictive, kinship relations. *Obi*, or *Obeah*, was an effective way of disciplining or protecting the community. Europeans used *Obi* and *Obeah* as grammatically interchangeable terms for “witchcraft, or sorcery, whereby certain Negroes by means of narcotics, potions, or poisons made from the juice of plants

¹³⁷ Johan Peter Nissen, *Reminiscences of a 46 years’ Residence in the Island of St. Thomas* (Nazareth: Senseman & Co., 1838), 34.

¹³⁸ 96 skillings = 1 rigsdaler

¹³⁹ West, *Accounts*, 80.

or herbs, occasioned trances or death in other Negroes.”¹⁴⁰ Oldendorp described the “practitioners of magical arts” when he observed a renowned old man who supposedly “supported himself in poverty by means of incantations and silly ceremonies which were believed to be magic.”¹⁴¹ Practitioners brought a magico-religious culture to the slave’s world through magic materials. This meant “the ritual surrounding the use of these materials that made them powerful” was not inherent within the feathers, nails, hair and herbalist remedies, but how the Obeah person used them in the entire complex of the practice.¹⁴²

The emphatic respect placed upon the Obeah in Africa was also transported to the colonies during the middle passage because of the Africans’ belief that Obeah could retain these traditions and possibly manipulate the supernatural world against the Europeans.¹⁴³ More importantly, these authoritative figures used magico-religious practices to institute “a system of intergroup justice by preventing, detecting and punishing crimes among the slaves.”¹⁴⁴ A systemic organization of slave groups under authoritative figures who possessed a certain degree of supernatural power was probably handed down from practices in West and West Central Africa, where many Danish slaves originated. Harnessed in Africa, these supernatural individuals could check abuses of power within the slave society, both against master and slave alike. Anthropologist

¹⁴⁰ Isidor Paiewonsky, *Eyewitness Accounts of Slavery in the Danish West Indies: also Graphic Tales of Other Slave Happenings on Ships and Plantations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989), 134, quoting Bryan Edwards, *History Civil and Commercial of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, 4th ed. (London: 1807).

¹⁴¹ Oldendorp, *A Caribbean Mission*, 263

¹⁴² Joan Cameron Bristol, *Christians, Blasphemers and Witches: Afro-Mexican Ritual Practice in the Seventeenth Century* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007), 151.

¹⁴³ Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 57.

¹⁴⁴ Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Parvisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 132.

Michael Rowlands suggests the presence of “an ambiguous perception of power . . . reflected in a belief that the possession of a supernatural substance is a precondition for the assumption of leadership.”¹⁴⁵ Oldendorp described these items as “fetishes or schambus.” Believed to be sacred objects endowed by a particular deity or god, slaves would hang them on their goods or themselves as “protective measures against everything they consider evil or harmful.”¹⁴⁶

When the provision ground came under attack from perceived threats, either supernatural or real, Obeah practices were employed. The priests often assumed the role of African diviners who cursed perpetrators and prevented thievery.¹⁴⁷ One contemporary observed that “when a Negro was robbed of fowls, or hogs, or provisions, he applied directly to the Obeah-man or woman. It was then made known among his fellow blacks that Obi was set for the thief.”¹⁴⁸ An English observer also noted that cursed concoctions were placed in full view outside of huts to prevent thieves from plundering their food during the night, “serving very much the same deterring purpose as scare-crows are in general use among English farmers and gardeners.”¹⁴⁹ Carstens revealed that many slaves believed the witch doctors among them could “bewitch a person the size of a cat” using an assortment of hair, fingernails, and pieces of rusty iron. Sometimes, he mentioned, the spells could result in death.¹⁵⁰ Oldendorp noted, “there is no lack of individuals who represent themselves as understanding those secret arts that enable them to detect

¹⁴⁵ Olwig, “African Cultural Principles in Caribbean Slave Societies: A View From the Danish West Indies,” in *Slave Cultures and the Cultures of Slavery*, ed. Stephan Palmié (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 28.

¹⁴⁶ Oldendorp, *A Caribbean Mission*, 189.

¹⁴⁷ Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, 57.

¹⁴⁸ Paiewonsky, *Eyewitness Accounts of Slavery*, 134.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Carstens, *St. Thomas in Early Danish Times*, 69.

perpetrators . . . as well as thieves and others.”¹⁵¹ His observation of widespread divination suggests that in the late 1760s provision grounds were expanding and more slaves operated in cultivating their own subsistence, which required vast sums of spiritual protection from outside threats.

Fetish makers assumed a prominence among the slave community because they prevent devils and evil spirits from causing harm to those under his or her protection. According to Oldendorp, the priests and priestesses who engaged in fetish making and act as intermediaries between the natural and supernatural, “enjoy the highest esteem of their people and exercise practically unlimited power over them.”¹⁵² Oldendorp’s missionary purposes in the Danish islands placed Obeah practitioners under the spectrum of subjective Christian attitudes, and are described as inherently arbitrary in moral judgment, especially when priests and priestess impose dietary restrictions on certain slaves. Olwig argues, however, slaves tended to identify with local places more than anything else.¹⁵³ Oldendorp said, “The most important part of the religious worship resides in sacrificial offerings that are performed by consecrated persons in holy places.”¹⁵⁴ The incidences of dietary restrictions probably had more to do with religious worship identified with a specific locus of supernatural power, rather than an arbitrary extension of power. Olwig explains that individual slaves in the Danish West Indies “placed themselves under the patronage of a particular person in a kin-like position of dependence,” which among other things conferred “ritual protection.”¹⁵⁵ The food

¹⁵¹ Oldendorp, *A Caribbean Mission*, 262.

¹⁵² Ibid. 191-192.

¹⁵³ Olwig, “African Cultural Principles,” 28.

¹⁵⁴ Oldendorp, *A Caribbean Mission*, 191

¹⁵⁵ Olwig, “African Cultural Principles,” 28.

obtained from provision grounds then might actually be restricted to certain slaves that fall under the Obeah priest or priestess's realm of supernatural power.

The Obeah priest or priestess assumed multiple roles in the Danish West Indies outside magico-religious dimensions; healers were the most prevalent of this mold. Oldendorp mentions how priests functioned as slave physicians. Some Africans, he observed, saw sources of illness and disease from supernatural elements and the afflicted must first be absolved of their sins before administration of the cure, but the treatment was any number of physical remedies harvested from the provision grounds in the form of ointments, herbs, and "internal use of medicines."¹⁵⁶ Hans West noted that planters were not inclined to sell "many old experienced Negro women who heal illnesses and sores with herbal remedies."¹⁵⁷

Schmidt provides the best illustration of possible healing abilities an Obeah person possesses. He heard about a terrible illness where several patients were given a lizard with the head and legs chopped. Many were cured of sickness after eight days. Schmidt treated a Negro man and woman, who both recovered from their afflictions quite rapidly. Schmidt explained he heard an "infected Negro" discovered this secret remedy "by chance." The man "practiced his art and thus became the best doctor for those Negroes infected with venereal disease," and eventually offered to give up his "secret" if he received freedom, money, and property. This not only demonstrates the command of the ecological environment Obeah people have, but their ability to negotiate for themselves, and other slaves, through African practices.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. 197.

¹⁵⁷ West, *Accounts*, 85

¹⁵⁸ Schmidt, *Various Remarks*, 26-28.

Similarly, Obeah practitioners could bring about suspicion and introduce abusive claims to authority that might bring about the discomfort to their enemies. Oldendorp discussed the particular dangers with regard to the first eight days after a child's birth. Women held vigils using candles, rice, and wine to hold back any evil spirits that would jeopardize the child's life. These items were probably obtained from skilled slaves using their extra time to produce these items, or represent the combined efforts of the cash earned from provisional grounds to buy luxuries otherwise difficult to obtain. On one of the plantations Schmidt managed at La Princesse, "there was an old, makron Negro woman, named Lehna, who was unfortunate in that they thought she was a witch and understood the art of eating children." She was frequently beaten if slave children died, or hide if a newborn died. Her example illustrates how Obeah could be directed toward a suspicious or lonely person believed to bring about harm to the community. Significantly, Obeah priests and priestess could use their social power for purposes of their own self-interest that was not always for the benefit of the community. But this example of directing community anger toward an individual is still representative of community organization.

The practice of abortion and infanticide was also widespread according to Hans West, who attributed the *ram-goat bush* as the most frequent mode for perpetrating an evil "that is either more common than believed by the good-natured or it will be so in the future if viewed with indifference."¹⁵⁹ Obeah priests and priestesses might have used this technique for more than just ritual protection and might try to place harmful curses on enemies. The threat of poisoning was the most fearful attribute of Obeah practices for Europeans. Obeah's associations with poisoning are seen clearly as Danes attached to the

¹⁵⁹ West, *Accounts*, 92.

provisions of 1733 slave laws, specific punishments against the use of Obeah.¹⁶⁰ As early as 1701 Père Labat described how a slave was burned alive for allegedly practicing witchcraft, and quite possibly dealing in poison.¹⁶¹ Slaves could probably rely on cassava tubers – regularly grown in provisional grounds – from which the extracted juice was extremely poisonous.¹⁶² Such was the reasoning behind regulating the practices imported from Africa. They probably also intended to destroy any remaining African retentions in the New World that might disrupt the plantation community. Poison effectively jeopardizes the lives of those holding power on the Danish West Indies, and represents the continuation of African traditions that may disrupt the seasoning processes required for subordinate labor force. These attempts to regulate Obeah, however, remained ineffective. Obeah would continue into the nineteenth century, but the practice would lose its communitarian aspects when, in the next chapter, we discover a remarkable transformation in the demographics of slavery.

Conclusion

Provision grounds acted as subsequent cultural spaces for the development of ritual Obeah that held ritual sway as a social organizing principle. From slackening white interference and a self-sustaining protective community emerged ritual leadership that defined particular cultural beliefs. Obeah men and women used herbal remedies from provision grounds and the surrounding ecology to heal, confer ritual protection, and in some cases punish wrongdoers or perceived destabilizing threats. Provision grounds were

¹⁶⁰ Hall, *Slave Society*, 58.

¹⁶¹ Oldendorp, *A Caribbean Mission*, 262. This incidence is referenced in *The Memoirs of Père Labat, 1693-1705*, abrid. and trans. John Eaden (1931; reprint, London: F. Cass, 1970),

¹⁶² Schmidt, *Various Remarks*, 23-24; Haagensen, *Description of St. Croix*, 52.

important for planters because it saved them money on foodstuffs, but for slaves they were places to create their own social and work culture. Within a system that constantly deemed them subhuman and second-class citizens, slaves found material betterment through cultivating their provision grounds. Small economic transactions brought slaves together to exchange deep-rooted African traditions while a strong influx in slave trading kept alive magico-religious practices. But the slave demographic was about to change when, in 1792, Denmark mandated that it would no longer be involved in the transatlantic slave trade.

Chapter Three

Nineteenth-Century Afro-Caribbean Culture

Slaves in the Danish West Indies had gone through a series of changes in their social organization, first around West African ethnicity, or nationhood, during the St. John rebellion and second around African religious practices in the form of Obeah, the latter being much more successful. Created from the mutual need for sustenance, this commonality would drive another principal formation in the nineteenth century. The African dimensions, however, would be lost on account of Denmark's decision to abandon its participation in the slave trade. No longer would nineteenth-century planters draw their labor from fresh African slaves. They relied instead on the independent procreation of slaves to maintain a stable slave population. From this necessity the slave community would witness an increase in the Creole dimensions of the population. Each islands' small landmass meant that newborn slaves who were sold to other plantations could easily return to other family members and kinship groups. With island-born families serving as the functional apparatus for social organization, dietary habits would acquire distinctive characteristics through market exchanges. On the eve of emancipation the Afro-Danish community assumed behaviors that were essentially expressed in the form of African-rooted music and dance, while acting in ritualized concert during annual

Christmas and New Years' celebrations. Slaves used these days and their traditions to operate as a unified group, and if only ritually and mockingly, to the slave system that oppressed them, in a space that existed not only outside the plantation, but the provision grounds as well.

Abolition of the Slave Trade

The Danish slave trade was an international as well as national experience when it came to the issue of abolition. Recent outpourings of abolition studies reflect a range of new perspectives and expansion of methodologies. As a result Denmark receives much greater attention in the historical conceptualization of abolition, especially with regard to the slave trade. Though it took ten years to go into effect, 1802 was the last year when slaves legally arrived from Africa in the Danish West Indies. Stanley Engerman notes that slavery and abolition must be “presented as only one part of the national and international experience, influenced by other aims and never being the single, all-encompassing aim in any country.”¹⁶³ Danish abolition, therefore, was only a unilateral step in anticipation of British abolition but was consumed by “great importance to the political and economic implications involved in the matter.”¹⁶⁴ Despite the prevailing humanitarian rhetoric in the British literature from Thomas Clarkson and Alexander

¹⁶³ Stanley Engerman, introduction to *The Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Origins and Effects in Europe, Africa, and the Americas*, ed. David Eltis and James Walvin (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), 4.

¹⁶⁴ Svend Erik Green-Pedersen, “The History of the Danish Slave Trade, 1733-1807,” *Revue française d’histoire d’outre-mer* 62, (1975): 216; Eric Williams notes British abolitionists distort the material conditions of the slave trade for the purpose of their particular interests in seeing its demise. Not all abolitionists were as humanitarian heroes propelling abolition and with the enlightenment. The abolitionist tactics, according to Williams, “smacks of ignorance or hypocrisy or both in the invectives heaped by these men upon a traffic which had in their day become less profitable and less vital to England.” No one seemed upset about the treatment of the urban poor or the exploitation of the feudal peasants that still existed. Even sailors may have experienced a higher mortality aboard non-slave trading vessels than the Africans did as cargo. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 34.

Falconbridge – which was no doubt known to the Danish royal ministry – abolition was a matter of fiscal policy and practicality not necessarily subject to the whims of humanitarianism.

While closely following the debates of the British Parliament concerning abolition, Danish finance minister Ernst Schimmelmann drafted the royal ordinance that established the Negro Trade Commission, which eventually set the timetable to end the Danish slave trade in 1802, in December 1791. His fiscal role in the royal administration gave him the ability to pursue monetary policies that favored his personal economic interests. The commission's purpose, therefore, was to determine how "to improve the structure of the Negro trade in our West Indian Islands and the Coast of Guinea."¹⁶⁵ It exhaustively researched the Danish criminal code while being sure to ignore anything that might contradict property rights. In effect, believes Svend E. Green-Pedersen, this led the commission to recommend fiscal changes without addressing the abolition of slavery itself.¹⁶⁶

The commission found that since assuming control of the colonies in 1755 the royal treasury was sinking up to 20,000 rdlr a year in loans to planters who were borrowing more than they needed. In essence the trade in slaves was unprofitable for the Copenhagen administration. In 1792 the slave trade was to be abolished after a ten-year grace period, which allowed planters to make slave purchases as compensation in anticipation of the ban. The royal government provided low-interest loans to shippers and

¹⁶⁵ Green-Pedersen, "The Economic Considerations behind the Danish Abolition of the Negro Slave Trade," in *The Uncommon Market: Essays in the Economic History of the Atlantic Slave Trade*, ed. Henry A. Gemery and Jan S. Hogendorn (New York: Academic Press, 1979), 403; Georg Nørregård, *Danish Settlements in West Africa, 1658-1850*, trans. Sigurd Mammen, (Boston: Boston University Press, 1966), 172.

¹⁶⁶ Green-Pedersen, "Economic Considerations behind Danish Abolition," 403; "History of the Danish Slave Trade," 216-218.

offered foreign countries a fixed payment in sugar for every slave imported, especially women. This was designed to appease the disgruntled Danish West Indian planters.

Except for those operating as absentee proprietors, there was no major class interest represented within Copenhagen. Arthur Stinchcombe characterized the Dutch and Danish plantation ties to empire as ones that did not favor planters, and the “colonial urban-dominated government of merchants was legitimated by a merchant-dominated government in the metropole.”¹⁶⁷ Planters in the West Indies consistently thought “economic development should be shaped so as to maintain the maximum discretion and disciplinary power of the master over the slaves.”¹⁶⁸ Planters’ power over slaves was something that was left largely unaffected by the commission’s report. Obviously displeased with a sudden loss of imported slave labor, planters, nevertheless, maintained legal channels with which to subdue female slaves into creating a self-sustaining slave population. The end of the Danish slave trade contained no provisions for the Africans themselves, but shaped the demographic context for the next step in a process toward an Afro-Danish community. Slave families were, first and foremost, a breeding apparatus to compensate for the abolition of the slave trade. Female slaves were “favored” in that the government made them cheap and easy to purchase so planters could secure a continuous supply of free labor.

Demographic Impact of Abolition

The commission’s report recommended several measures that related specifically to birth rates and women. Slave fertility in the Danish West Indies was extremely low.

¹⁶⁷ Arthur L. Stinchcombe, *Sugar Island Slavery in the Age of Enlightenment: The Political Economy of the Caribbean World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 179.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 181.

Demography scholar Hans Christian Johansen, notes several reasons given in the report: larger proportions of male slaves; a lack of formal marriages to the detriment of healthy sex patterns; a lack of care for newborns and pregnant women by slave masters; and too many domestic slaves.¹⁶⁹ While the last reason does not seem to fit into fertility patterns, the commission found a main component of the slave trade's unprofitability derived from an inadequately self-sustaining slave population. In the ten-year period no duties were levied on imported female slaves, no taxes collected on female field slaves, slave exports to the surrounding Caribbean were prohibited, and provisional loans were offered "to purchase more female slaves to raise the birth rate."¹⁷⁰ The commission indicated a desire to alter the perceived promiscuous lifestyle of slaves, commenting that female slaves, "living in normal conjugal relationships are extremely fruitful." Whites encouraged the formation of families well into the eve of abolition. "If it were possible to replace the slaves who are presently in the islands," the commission continued, "in a condition that would enable them – as other people living under civilized conditions – not only to maintain their population but to increase it, all new importations would become unnecessary and would cease spontaneously."¹⁷¹ To those ends the commission recommended an increase in religious instruction to encourage formal marriages, but as Johansen notes "the ordinance took no steps to introduce such measures."¹⁷² Karen Fog Olwig notes that one law allowed "strict punishment against women thought to have induced abortions or otherwise shown indifference towards their offspring."¹⁷³ Though

¹⁶⁹ Johansen, "Reality Behind the Demographic Arguments, 222-23.

¹⁷⁰ Eddie Donoghue, *Negro Slavery: Slave Society and Slave Life in the Danish West Indies*, (Bloomington: Authorhouse, 2007), 29.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 28

¹⁷² Johansen, "Reality Behind the Demographic Arguments," 223.

¹⁷³ Donoghue, *Negro Slavery*, 30.

farsighted in many respects, the commission's report held little weight in enacting the various recommendations it offered.

Whether or not a lack of religious instruction actually produced the demographic outcome over the next forty years is subject to a different scholarly inquiry altogether. Regardless, the planters were neither able to increase the reproductive capacity of slaves, nor stem their mortality rates. Johansen finds that there was a negative growth rate for every decade after abolition. The slave population on all three islands dropped nearly 37 percent from its historic high in 1802 of about 35,000.¹⁷⁴ Governor General Paul Oxholm reported only 284 births on St. Croix, accompanied by 607 deaths in 1815.¹⁷⁵ This trend continued through the century, cutting the annual slave population on St. Croix by nearly four thousand over the next twenty years.

Several factors become clear for slave life during this period. First, slavery did not offer women a safe environment in which to birth children. Second, the slaves themselves did not live in exceedingly good conditions. The slave population increased so dramatically in the eighteenth century because of importation that outstripped the mortality rate. A negative growth rate prevailed among the islands' slave populations. Finally, slaves were finding ways to acquire freedom, through self-purchase or marronage. The rise of free coloreds in the nineteenth century was certainly a factor in the decline of the slave population.¹⁷⁶ The destruction of the slave trade, nevertheless, created an inherent transformation of the slave community. Without the importations

¹⁷⁴ Johansen, "Demographic Arguments," 224; "Slave Demography of the Danish West Indian Islands," *the Scandinavian Economic History Review* 29 (1981):3; Green-Pedersen, "History of the Danish Negro Slave Trade," 204.

¹⁷⁵ "A Report From Governor General P.L. Oxholm to the Royal Westindian Chamber in Copenhagen, Dated May 4, 1816, St. Croix," trans. and ed. Eva Lawaetz (Chistiansted, St. Croix: 1977), 1-2.

¹⁷⁶ Hall, *Slave Society*, 145, 146.

from Africa the Creole, population rose steadily in the nineteenth century, and a different set of communitarian values emerged.

Cross-Plantation Kinship Relations

In 1847, a letter was sent to the King Christian VII of Denmark from Boston Massachusetts. From the hand William Gilbert, a runaway slave from St. Croix, the letter proclaimed once and for all the evils of slavery in the Danish West Indies. In the vein of David Walker, a black Bostonian who radicalized the abolitionist movement in the United States, Gilbert uses a myriad of literary devices such as poems, hymns, Rousseauian philosophy, and biblical verses to expound the unjust details of his life. “I was born free of my Mother womb and . . . made a slave of me in your dominion Sir.”¹⁷⁷ This lamentation indicates the important position that family had come to occupy within the Danish West Indies. Gilbert reflects the construction of a black Creole structure throughout the Danish West Indies. His diatribe against slavery contained a request. “Sir,” he continues,

I want to see my Sisters & my Brothers and I now ask your excellency if your excellency will grant me a free pass to go and come when ever I fail dispose to go and come to Ile of St. Croix or Santacruce the west indies Sir I ask in earnest for that pass for the tears is now gushing from mine eyes as if someone had poured water on my head and it running down my Cheek.¹⁷⁸

This emotionally charged passage indicates, above all, the evils that slavery placed on the family in the Danish West Indies.

Slave family units remained strong despite the emotional stress in Gilbert’s letter.

Though increasingly restrictive of slave movements throughout the eighteenth century,

¹⁷⁷ William Gilbert to King Christian VII, Dated April 23, 1847, in Donoghue, *Negro Slavery*, 202.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

after abolition in 1802, a marked change in demographic structure altered the social structure of slavery in the Danish West Indies. If slaves did not reproduce in the period after abolition, then it was tantamount to destroying planters' primary source of plantation labor. There was a rapid increase in the number of black Creoles in the slave population as indicated by Table 3.1. This was only natural given that new arrivals were coming from Africa. According to Mintz and Price, West African cultural decline is inevitable when new social relations are created with an emerging Creole-born identity.¹⁷⁹ This does not mean that the West African traditions that predominated in the eighteenth century suddenly became extinct, but their meanings changed with the new demographic.

Table 3.1 Total Creole and African slaves on St. Croix, 1792-1815

Year	Creoles	Africans
1792	9,724	8,397
1802	11,328	11,067
1804	11,530	10,546
1815	13,583	7,144

Source: Lawetz, "A Report from Governor General P.L. Oxholm," 2.

Karen Olwig notes an ability among the new Afro-Caribbean population on St. John to culturally adapt to exploitative labor systems.¹⁸⁰ With regard to plantation slavery she uses the concept of "resistance and response" as an analytical lens, first developed by Sidney Mintz.¹⁸¹ According to her anthropological study, slave culture on St. John centered on the plausibility of working provision grounds in spare time to provide material surpluses necessary to maintain a constant procreation culture.¹⁸² In order to

¹⁷⁹ Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective*

¹⁸⁰ Karen Fog Olwig, *Cultural Adaptation and Resistance on St. John: Three Centuries of Afro-Caribbean Life*, (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1985).

¹⁸¹ Sidney Mintz, *Caribbean Transformations* (Chicago: Aldine, 1974), 132-33; *Ibid.* 5-12.

¹⁸² Olwig, *Cultural Adaptation*, 46-50.

keep pace with this new method of increasing the slave population, procreation inevitably meant it was cheaper for slave-owners to allow slaves to fend for themselves than import foodstuffs, especially since custom created independent provisioning practices that were directly supplemental to slaves' expected rations. Intent on exerting more control over their bondsmen, slave-owners inadvertently created a mode of response that resisted the rigid plantation system, a mode in which where family was integral. As the nineteenth century progressed, one gets the idea that roads and paths were packed with slaves in the early morning hours as they visited husbands, wives, children and other relations on not-so-distant plantations. Creole slaves, first, had to redefine the center of their socio-relational responses to the institution of slavery.

Most noticeably redefined is the concept of Obeah. Considered “harmless Obeah” in the eighteenth century, predicting the future, protecting property, and curing ailments became somewhat more alarming among blacks in the nineteenth century. Lt. Brady, a British sailor, wrote about his visit to St. Croix in the 1820s when he witnessed the arrest of an Obeahman who was “accompanied by twenty or thirty men, women, children, who vented upon him such imprecations and audible thwacks, that he roared with pain . . . [and] the manager was obliged to interfere to protect him from the summary punishment.”¹⁸³ Another man, who appealed to this man to set Obeah, was never able to regain the confidence of the other Negroes on the plantation and was obliged never to “revisit it with personal safety.”¹⁸⁴ In another account several field slaves wished to obtain a driver position and attempted to set Obeah on a number of occasions in the

¹⁸³ [Lt. Brady], *Observations Upon the State of Negro Slavery, in the Island of Santa Cruz, the Principal of the Danish West India Colonies: With Miscellaneous Remarks Upon Subjects Relating to the West India Question, and a notice of Santa Cruz* (Goldsmiths'-Kress Library of Economic Literature 25998; London: Simpkin & Marshall, 1829), microfilm, 41.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

1840s.¹⁸⁵ As a result they were punished by the sheriff's office for conspiracy. This is inherently an expected white response to Obeah practices, but it no longer contains the unifying dimension that it did in the eighteenth century. Instead, obeah priests are appealed to in a manner that reflects competition and increases resentment among the slaves.

Table 3.2 Slaves Baptized in the Danish West Indies in 1805 and 1835

	<u>1805</u>			<u>1835</u>		
Island	Baptized Slaves	Total Slaves	Percentage Baptized	Baptized Slaves	Total Slaves	Percentage Baptized
St. Croix	14,603	22,076	66.1	19,692	19,876	99.0
St. Thomas	2,103	3,344	62.8	5,064	5,315	85.2
St. John	1,294	2,417	53.5	1,636	1,943	84.1
Total	18,000	27,837	64.6	26,392	27,134	97.3

Source: Hall, "Slaves' use of Their 'Free' Time in the Danish Virgin Islands in the Later Eighteenth Century and Early Nineteenth Century," in *Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World: A Student Reader*, eds. Verene A. Shepherd and Hilary McD. Beckles (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2000), 723.

Further evidence for the abeyance of Obeah practice is the percentage of slaves who were baptized. Table 3.2 demonstrates that almost 99 percent of the slave population on St. Croix, the largest of the islands, was baptized in 1835. Considering the substantial penetration of missionaries in the early eighteenth century, it seems that obeah practices may have lost their appeal as a result. Besides the account given by Lt. Brady above, no other travelers' descriptions mention Obeah. As the Creole population increased and more slaves were baptized, it seems African religious practices declined with the slave trade. Slaves probably did not baptize for reasons other than the purely practical, such as providing a legitimate venue to congregate without fearing repercussions from the masters. The large number of slaves who attended the market on Sundays, especially on

¹⁸⁵ Olwig, *Cultural Adaptations*, 36-37.

St. Croix, indicates that despite the baptisms, many did not attend mass. What was needed was an entirely new cultural apparatus that could bind different communities together.

The kinship ties necessary for the protection of their provisional grounds were strengthened as a result, and family became a dominant social response replacing the self-enforcement role of Obeah. Family should not be understood in the nuclear sense, but rather as ties with fictive attributes. Instead of relying on the support of husbands, wives, and children to maintain the slave community, there was a large self-designated group on each plantation that helped one another, like a society for mutual aid. The provision grounds became the impetus for a self-sustaining slave community that existed across plantations. The social interactions, however, did not occur on the provision grounds. Instead, the grounds were a valuable resource from which to exchange commodities, food and other economic devices that supported the slave community.

Slaves produced goods to sell at market turning them into cash or barter for pork, fish, rum, cloth, headscarves, or candles. From this emerged an Afro-Caribbean community that existed outside the knowledge of plantation owners. Olwig postulates that “cultivation of the provisional grounds resulted in the establishment of more or less hidden village-type aggregations along the borders of the estates and led to numerous private economic transactions that crossed estate boundaries.”¹⁸⁶ Slaves used the surrounding bush lands as their territory and traveled freely within it conducting their own personal business along the way.

There were specific times for slaves to journey on to other plantations. Hans West noted that Sunday free time was an opportunity where “most of the field Negroes go to

¹⁸⁶ Olwig, *Cultural Adaptation*, 81

visit their friends,” no doubt also to visit family members on neighboring plantations.¹⁸⁷ Though slaves could move freely in the territory surrounding estates, they were still subject to the rules of discipline regarding what their masters considered running away. Kinship relations might have been a primary motivation for *petit marronage*, where slaves would run away for brief periods of time, usually for a few days or weeks. This was a less open form of resistance against slavery as it did not reject the institution completely. According to Neville Hall, men were the predominant perpetrators of *marronage* because women were usually immobilized “by pregnancy or the responsibilities of maternity” and “further deterred from deserting by attachments of family, sentiment, or sense of place.”¹⁸⁸ Maroons, however, often ran away to neighboring plantations where they had kin, spouses or, sexual partners. The unbalanced sex ratios favoring males meant that *petite marronage* to nearby plantations was the only way males could successfully find a partner.¹⁸⁹

But women also took to different plantations when the opportunity arose. In one instance two women, a mother and daughter, met on a plantation to consult a slave doctor about her newborn’s prolonged illness. The daughter’s husband, and presumably newborn’s father, arrived from a different plantation to attend. They were caught by a manager of the doctor’s plantation, but sustained no major punishment.¹⁹⁰ Four slaves from three different plantations reveal the spread of kinship relations across the plantations. The doctor must have had some connection with either the women or the

¹⁸⁷ *Hans West’s Accounts of St. Croix in the West Indies*, ed. Arnold R. Highfield and trans. Nina York (St. Thomas, United States Virgin Islands: Virgin Islands Humanities Council, 2004), 78.

¹⁸⁸ N.A.T. Hall “Maritime Maroons: ‘Grand Maroons’ from the Danish West Indies,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 42 (1985):480

¹⁸⁹ Hall, *Slave Society*, 84

¹⁹⁰ [Lt. Brady], *Observations Upon the State of Negro Slavery*, 40.

man and might have been a component of their specific kinship grouping. Families living on different plantations were not an unusual concept in the nineteenth century. Olwig's examination of the Moravian baptismal records from 1797 to 1802, reveals that sixty percent of slaves baptized came from parents that lived on separate estates.¹⁹¹ The small size of the islands facilitated easy access to other plantations. Whether visiting another plantation took place on Sunday, as West observed, or outside legal boundaries through marronage, slaves still found themselves on sojourns to meet up with family members.

For those lucky enough to live on the same plantation, one clear relationship between the provision grounds and kinship ties is the concept of rewarding work with food. A slave man might receive uncooked foodstuffs, for carrying a heavy load of cornmeal. Note an example on St. John where a slave woman "gave her nephew a good portion of the meat because he had cut wood for her at her request."¹⁹² It was also customary for relatives to receive a share of meat as a way of reinforcing familial relations and confirming future expectations of assistance. Women, in their spare time, would cook meals for people outside the slave household as well, mostly for neighboring field hands if they had no lunch or dinner for themselves. They would also cook for slaves that came to the aide of family members under the threat of harsh punishment. Elderly slaves were also taken care of by their children or those with whom they shared a fictive kinship. Rewards proved an especially noticeable aspect of the kinship relations that slaves experienced. Slaves without family may have had to use *petit marronage* as a bargaining chip to negotiate for better working conditions or escape cruel punishment of their master, including lack of provisions. Curtis, a slave on St. John, ran away because

¹⁹¹ Olwig, *Cultural Adaptations*, 60.

¹⁹² Ibid. 71

his owner did not provide him enough food, and he was eventually caught and subject to lashing.¹⁹³ Kinship relations in the early nineteenth century might have helped Curtis escape his punishment, but his story reveals that family members could not always protect one another from their masters.

“Victualling” and Favorite Foods

Dietary habits also changed in the nineteenth century on account of the rising Creole population and a slave’s ability to move more freely about the island to visit family members and friends. One observer noted that “they [Negro slaves] will . . . eat cats and rats,” but the taste for the latter “is declining, except among the Native Africans.”¹⁹⁴ The decrease in African-born surely contributed to the decline of hunting rats, as was the preference of the Aminas. The writer also explains that the favorite food of “Negro slaves” is soup mixed with some form of meat, yams, or other vegetables, and beans boiled in water served with cornmeal. Hans West observed that an increased trade with North America yielded a weekly allowance of twenty to twenty-four quarts of cornmeal or Indian meal that could be prepared as a biscuit or dumpling, reflecting the varied cooking styles prevalent on the Danish West Indies.¹⁹⁵ Governor Oxholm asserted that the slaves made a similar soup using maize boiled on iron plates, “roast it and eat it only half baked” which in many cases led to indigestion and other illnesses.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹³ Olwig, *Cultural Adaptations*, 35

¹⁹⁴ [Lt. Brady], *Observations Upon the State of Negro Slavery*, 14.

¹⁹⁵ West, *Accounts*, 78.

¹⁹⁶ Lawaetz, “Report From Governor General P.L. Oxholm,” 8.

Pork was of particular interest for slaves in the Danish West Indies because of the ease and cheapness with which they could raise pigs.¹⁹⁷ Supplementation of pork was a remarkable addition to fishing and planting, which were the primary dietary activities during the eighteenth century. During his forty-six year stay on St. Thomas, John P. Nissen kept brief records of the annual prices for provisions, and pork was consistently the cheapest purchase next to beef and flour.¹⁹⁸ He also noted in 1799 that six thousand to seven thousand head of cattle arrived from Puerto Rico, but were immediately sent to Barbados and Antigua by the British, on account of the war with the Spanish.¹⁹⁹ At the turn of the nineteenth century, a severe shortage of beef raised the price dramatically and forced a popular shift towards pork, which was, according to cultural historian Jessica Harris, highly “adaptable to most cooking methods, and there was very little waste.”²⁰⁰ She comments on transplanted African culinary techniques and the ease with which pork could be incorporated into the Caribbean slave system. “The choice parts,” she says, “could be eaten by the enslavers and the rest consumed by the enslaved,” who fashioned it to their own preference in a soups, sausages, or barbeques.²⁰¹ The greatest delicacy of Negro slaves, according to West, were “meals prepared with a small piece of pork . . . and many vegetables, strongly seasoned with Spanish or red pepper.”²⁰² According to Harris, this reflects a strongly Caribbean preference for “leafy green vegetables” and “abundant use of peppery and spicy hot sauces” observed by explorers, slave traders, and

¹⁹⁷ Jessica B. Harris, “Same Boat, Different Stops: An African Atlantic Culinary Journey,” in *African Roots/American Cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas*, ed. Sheila S. Walker (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), 177.

¹⁹⁸ Johan Peter Nissen, *Reminiscences of a 46 Years’ Residence in the Island of St. Thomas* (Nazareth: Senseman & Co., 1838), 40.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ Harris, “Same Boat, Different Stops,” 177.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

²⁰² *Ibid.*

planters in the Caribbean region.²⁰³ That this should be noticed at the turn of the century accounts for the amalgamation of Danish, English, Spanish, French, and Dutch cuisines and the increasing ability of slave families to purchase various luxuries at the Sunday market through a kinship labor network.

On the aquatic front of dietary considerations references about sharks, totally absent from eighteenth-century sources, make sudden and somewhat frequent appearances in the years following abolition. New York political boss Thurlow Weed brought attention to the rather strange but uniquely nineteenth-century practice of shark hunting when he ventured to the Danish West Indies. During his visit to St. Croix in 1844-45, presumably to escape the New York winter, he witnessed a group of slaves anchoring a dead cow, retrieved from a Spanish vessel, one half mile offshore as bait. They managed to capture an eight-foot shark that yielded seven gallons of lamp oil from its liver and “not less than thirty pounds of raw beef. . . . Among other delicate bits was a sirloin . . . with two entire and still unbroken ribs.”²⁰⁴ The Negroes then dumped the body in the sea “after its vitals were all out.”²⁰⁵ Weed does not discuss whether the shark or its undigested sirloin could be used for any purpose beyond the lamp oil, but we might assume that sharks were added to a list of desirable sea creatures. Henry Morton, a minister from Philadelphia visiting the islands in 1843-44, sketched “Chasing Sharks in the Lagoon,” which depicts two white men in a boat attempting to spear a shark, accompanied by a Negro oarsman.²⁰⁶ The old estate house and mill tower in the

²⁰³ Ibid. 172, 177

²⁰⁴ Thurlow Weed, *Letters from Europe and the West Indies, 1843-1862* (Albany, Weed, Parsons and Company, 1866), 356-57.

²⁰⁵ Ibid. 357.

²⁰⁶ *Henry Morton: Danish West Indian Sketchbook and Diary 1843-44* (Copenhagen: Danish West Indian Society/Dansk Vestindisk Selskab and St. Croix Landmark Society, 1975).

background indicate these men did not stray too far from the plantation and were most likely hunting the shark for sport. The above descriptions of sharks do not lend themselves to a pure understanding of where shark hunting originated. Whether Weed's two Negroes were emulating their owners or, in Morton's sketch, the planters found shark baiting curious enough for amusement cannot be discerned from either of these accounts. These two incidents, nevertheless, demonstrate that different practices were inserted into the lives of an increasingly Creole population.²⁰⁷

“Negro Festivities” and the Afro-Caribbean Community

Sunday dances and festival activities were two of the most important cultural aspects of the nineteenth century that blacks, free and slave, engaged on a regular basis. Throughout the sugar kingdom of the Caribbean islands, and the United States as well, Christmas and New Year's were annual times when slaves were released from work.²⁰⁸ Robert Dirks demonstrates that seasonal festivities surrounding Christmas and New Year's on the British West Indies were a “behavioral reality” that can best be understood as “ritualized expressions of the concrete conditions . . . and social relations.”²⁰⁹ Furthermore he describes the seasonal “saturnalia as a symbolic representation of the slaves' worldview” giving voice to the illiterate and socially downtrodden. Eighteenth-century plantation manager Johan Schmidt observed that “often they will express their feelings in song. . . . [And] if the Europeans paid more attention to these songs and their

²⁰⁷ Morton mentions in his diary a black man sitting under a tree on the beach was known locally as “African Charley” indicating a desire to label the African born as they were increasingly rare toward midcentury. See *Morton Sketchbook and Diary*, 169.

²⁰⁸ Robert Dirks, *The Black Saturnalia: Conflict and its Ritual Expression on the British West Indian Slave Plantations* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1987); Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas: A Cultural History of Americas Most Cherished Holiday* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 264.

²⁰⁹ Dirks, *Black Saturnalia*, xi.

behavior in bad times than they do . . . they could have often put out a smoldering fire.”²¹⁰ Schmidt recognized the importance of “ritualized expression” to slaves, and song and dance were the only mediums with which to voice their discontent. The celebrations turned everything upside down, revealing the inescapable logic of violence and conflict inherent in sugar island slave societies.

“On Christmas and New Year’s day,” observed anti-slavery advocate William Channing in 1831, there existed, “a kind of Saturnalia among the slaves.”²¹¹ By “Saturnalia” he referred to the Roman festivals commemorating the temple of Saturn, in mid to late December, where roles were reversed and tomfoolery ensued. Similar festivals on the Danish West Indies were viewed essentially, from the white population, as “serious disturbances.” As we saw with Gardelin’s code in 1733, tomfoolery was prohibited, banning all employment of “Negro instruments” for the purposes of dances and merrymaking.²¹² By the nineteenth century, all attempts to disrupt music-making had virtually ceased as whites accepted, although grudgingly, the saturnalia as an annual custom. Whites could expect “boisterous music and singing; partly in dancing to the sound of an instrument called the [Gombay].”²¹³ Neville Hall describes the difficulty officials had with suppressing the Gombay drum because of its “ritual significance, definite entertainment value,” and the skill required in festive rituals.²¹⁴

²¹⁰ Johan Christian Schmidt, *Various Remarks Collected on and about the Island of St. Croix in America*, ed. and trans. Svend E. Holsoe (St. Croix, United States Virgin Islands: Virgin Islands Humanities Council, 1998), 17.

²¹¹ William Ellery Channing, *Memoir*, vol. 2, 9th ed. (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1868), 143.

²¹² Neville Hall, “Slave Laws on the Danish West Indies in the Eighteenth Century,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Science* 292, (1977), 175

²¹³ Governor Birch, “Letter to the Danish Colonial Office, dated December 30, 1852,” in *Old-Time Masquerading in the U.S. Virgin Islands* eds. Robert W. Nicholls (St. Thomas, U.S.V.I: Virgin Islands Humanities Council, 1998), 77; Knox, *Historical Account of St. Thomas*, 69-71

²¹⁴ Hall, *Slave Society*, 119

Whether these “negro festivities” and dances existed with the same vigor in the eighteenth century is inconclusive. Hans West, writing, extensively in the 1790s, makes no mention of slave festivals and dances, while Carstensen only briefly mentions the “tragedies,” as he called festivals, which occurred on the coming of the New Year.²¹⁵ It is possible, indeed likely, that festive occasions existed throughout the eighteenth century fairly regularly, given white participation and pleasure in the annual celebrations. While those among the statused officialdom, such as Carstensen, turned their noses, “attempting to curtail these barbaric activities,” the lower sort “retained their traditional ways until they have had their fill of such merriments.”²¹⁶

Music and Dance

In his autobiography, former slave Olaudah Equiano wrote, “We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians and poets,” revealing culturally significant attributes in everyday African life.²¹⁷ Genevieve Fabre has examined dance within the context of the middle passage, finding that it expressed “the various moods and moments of the slave ship experience.” It was an experiment with the various ways that they might be able to escape.²¹⁸ On the Danish West Indies, dances might have offered similar modes to escape the daily regime in the sugar kingdom. The concept of “negro festivities” and their importance during the saturnalia cannot be understood without a discussion of the

²¹⁵ J.L. Carstensen, *St. Thomas in Early Danish Times: A General Description of All the Danish, American or West Indian Islands* (in Danish), ed. and trans. Arnold R. Highfield (St. Croix, United States Virgin Islands: Virgin Islands Humanities Council, 1997), 132.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

²¹⁷ *The Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vasa, the African* (Dover: Dover Publications, 1999), 12.

²¹⁸ Genevieve Fabre, “The Slave Ship Dance,” in *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage* ed. Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Carl Pedersen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 43

musical and dancing elements that prevailed among slaves and continued well into the nineteenth century.

Carstens, writing in the early Danish period, observed slave marriage and funeral ceremonies. The ritual purpose of these ceremonies for participants functioned, at least in Carstens's perspective, to "commit themselves to one another" in marriage or lament the dead in funeral.²¹⁹ Large groups sang and hummed while a smaller group danced inside the circle. The dances are participatory and consisted of "hopping and jumping about. . . . Facing one another, they cut various capers, do cat-like leaps and make figures with their entire bodies."²²⁰ Here Carstens returned to his unfortunate animalistic depiction of slaves, but his description also reveals the intense body motion involved in African dances. Shouting, screaming, and clapping are integral to the speed and volume of the song, in turn reflecting the movements of the dancers on the interior. He also described flutes, pipes, and tutu horns in the slaves' music that produced rhythmic rather than melodious sound. Though this takes place in the early eighteenth century, Carstens's descriptions remains relatively valid even into the nineteenth century.

Scholar Olly Wilson, has described several conceptions that influenced African music in the Americas. The ritual function was obvious enough and leads directly to the assumption that African music was "an interactive human activity in which everyone is expected to participate."²²¹ This includes the integral notions of body movement and body procession as interrelated aspects of the same musical expression. Another postulate is that African music contained linguistic characteristics expressed through vocalization

²¹⁹ J.L. Carstens *Early Danish Times*, 78 and 79.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

²²¹ Olly Wilson, "'It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing:' Relationship Between African and African American Music," in Walker, *African Roots/American Cultures*, 161.

in song and rhythmic acoustics.²²² Kofi Agawu believes that “rhythm refers to a binding together of different dimensional processes,” or a phenomenon of joining rather than separating.²²³ In the case of the Ewe of sub-Saharan Africa, he argues, rhythm is not simply one aspect of music, but is better understood as several different, yet related human activities.²²⁴ While his study is confined to Northern Ewe culture, it is possible to propose that similar beliefs were shared across West African cultures, making rhythm a key component to music and dancing in the Caribbean.

It is easy to understand then, why drumming and dancing were interconnected in the Danish Virgin Islands. Oldendorp mentioned the testimony of a missionary who witnessed an African burial “accompanied by the sound of drums.”²²⁵ He also noted the integrated nature of rhythm and dance when he described “a skin stretched over a small barrel or calabash . . . [which] animates their dances.”²²⁶ Weed described their primary instrument as “large keg or half barrel, over the head of which a goat skin is drawn, and upon which a negro beats with his hands.”²²⁷ Johan Peter Nissen wrote in 1838 that the dances “are of one sort; turning and moving about – they have no regular dances. Their principal instrument is called the Gombee . . . They must have one purpose continually knocking on this Gombee, which sounds very hard and makes a great deal of noise.”²²⁸ Once again there is mention of bodily movement accompanied by the continual “knocking” on a drum, here described as a Gombee or Gombay. Nissen is probably referring to a West African tradition that incorporated drum and dance into one coherent

²²² Ibid., 163.

²²³ Kofi Agawu, *African Rhythm: A Northern Ewe Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 7.

²²⁴ Ibid., 28.

²²⁵ Oldendorp, *A Caribbean Mission*, 264.

²²⁶ Ibid., 249.

²²⁷ Weed, *Letters from Europe*, 346.

²²⁸ Nissen, *Reminiscences of a 46 Years' Residence*, 164.

movement. Much as Agawu postulated the relationship between rhythm and human interactions, the drum represented martial rhythm and the dance social synergy.

George Pinckard recounts one of the more detailed descriptions of Gombay ritual in 1806. Pinckard spent time in the British West Indies but witnessed the following dance on the Virgin Islands. Although he does not express whether they were the Danish or British Virgin Islands, it is safe to assume their proximity permitted similar cultural characteristics among the slave population. Pinckard echoes C.G.A. Oldendorp's comments that the slaves' main passion was for dance, having half of Saturday and all of Sunday (except during harvest time) to engage in their "favorite amusement."²²⁹ He observes, similar to Carstens, the nature of the slaves' ensemble during the dance, stating, "They assemble in crowds . . . forming a ring in the centre of the throng, dance to the sound of their beloved music, and singing of their favorite African yell." Pinckard considered that the music to be "harsh and wholly deficient in softness and melody," indicating the extensive rhythmic nature of the dance, which

consists of stamping of the feet, twisting of the body, and a number of strange indecent attitudes. It is a severe bodily exertion – more bodily than you can well imagine, for the limbs have little to do in it. . . . Making the head and limbs fixed points, they writhe and turn the body upon its own axis, slowly advancing towards each other or, retreating to the outer parts of the ring. For the most part only two enter the ring at a time, but occasionally, as many as three or four! each making a small contribution to the band at the time of stepping into the circle. They circle, violently, together until one is tired, and when this escapes from the circle another assumes the place, thus continuing to follow, one by one, in succession, so as frequently to keep up the dance, without any interval, for several hours.²³⁰

While all this is going on, the drummer "beats and kicks the sheep skin at the end [of the drum], in violent exertion with his hands and heels, and [another] sitting upon the

²²⁹ George Pinckard, *Notes on the West Indies*, vol. 1 (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1806), 263-64; Oldendorp, *A Caribbean Mission*, 249, 227

²³⁰ Pinckard, *Notes on the West Indies*, 265-66.

ground at the other end, behind the man upon the drum, beats upon the wooden side of it with two sticks.”²³¹ From this detailed recounting of a Sunday dance, we can better understand how African conceptions of music and dance combined in the Danish West Indies. There is clearly ritual significance to the music that functions explicitly on group participation. The bodily contortions and movements that might be somewhat alien to contemporary observers are part of a broader rhythmic pattern that combines a multitude of human interactions. At the same time drumming is integral to maintain a rhythmic energy that binds the whole ritual together..

Christmas and New Year’s Celebrations

Christmas and New Year’s celebrations provide the context to explain how these ritualized expressions evolved out of the slave system. They were mirrors of a reality that slaves faced on a daily basis most of the year, and acted out the mirrors during seasonal era. Large throngs of slaves from different plantations converged in the urban areas acting out similar dances that strengthened ties in the Creole community. Seasonal festivals might be viewed as multidirectional unity, as slaves mocked their masters and one another through ritual gaiety.

The most prevalent characteristic during this period was the slaves’ excitement and preparation for the seasonal time period. Oldendorp observed that custom prevailed, giving slaves two days free of labor on Christmas, Easter, and Whitsuntide.²³² Thurlow Weed noticed how slaves, in the weeks preceding Christmas, “are busied with

²³¹ Ibid. 265

²³² Oldendorp, *Caribbean Mission*, 227; Whitsuntide refers to the Pentecost in the ecclesiastical calendar, which is the seventh Sunday following Easter Sunday, and continues as public holiday in Denmark. Most likely these celebrations were aborted over time because of their coincidence with heavy harvest period of various crops.

preparations for their festivities. Indeed their toil through the whole year is cheered by their anticipation of the holiday happiness.”²³³ One of the more poignant preparations he observed was the gathering of “all there is of turban, calico, ribbon, gewgaw and trinket, among them, [which] is reserved to adorn their persons” which was probably bought or bartered for in exchanges on the Sunday markets.²³⁴ Writing in the 1770s, Oldendorp mentioned that “by selling some of the produce from their planting, as well as some of the poultry and other livestock the Negroes acquire the necessary money for their clothing and other needs.”²³⁵ Recall Hans West’s observations of the Sunday market and daily sales of grass and firewood in the 1790s. It is possible that slaves could find the necessary exchanges to procure just about any luxury they desired.

Alcohol was freely distributed during Christmas time. Nissen describes a fire that blazed out of control during a New Year’s celebration where the crowds in the street did nothing because most were “too in state of drunkenness, and entirely unfit for work.”²³⁶ Carstens’s disgust with the festivities stems from his observations of planters who “take their slaves along with them [to celebrate] giving them unnecessarily strong drink. When the masters and the slaves have one and all gotten well drunk together, then the one master visits the other in the company of his slave.”²³⁷ Though Carstens is describing eighteenth-century revelries, this could be an early form of “visiting” that frequently occurred during nineteenth-century festivals. In fact, the purpose of wearing their “choicest dress” was, on a certain level, a means of reversing the roles.

²³³ Weed, *Letters from Europe*, 346.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

²³⁵ Oldendorp, *Caribbean Mission*, 223-224.

²³⁶ Nissen, *Reminisces of 46 Years’ Residence*, 165,

²³⁷ *J.L. Carstens Early Danish Times*, 132.

Slaves expected a certain degree of extra rationing, entertainment, and admittance to the homes of their owners. Sylvester Hovey discovered that Christmas was a time for “slaves on different plantations, attired in their choicest dress, to go in a body to the house of their master,” where presents are distributed among them of provisions, clothing, or even of money.”²³⁸ Weed also noticed that “the first privilege (or duty as they esteem it) of the slaves, on Christmas and New Year’s days, is to pay their respects, in a body, to their master . . . and generally receive presents.”²³⁹ They would often dance and sing for their owner and praise his generosity and liberality, singing tunes like,

Massa Walker give them the best Madrass,
Good brown and bamboo – and car dem well,
Come along! Come along!²⁴⁰

These were most likely meant to poke fun at the master for his “generosity” by working them through the year. In fact, many of the slaves probably procured their clothing themselves. While these yearly luxuries are important and noteworthy, this song satirizes the notion of getting luxuries once a year. Holiday happiness included passing out of extra rations and receiving annual allotments of clothing. James Smith wrote, “the slaves, according to custom, on that day visited their master in a body . . . and received an entertainment given by him.”²⁴¹ Victor Schoelecher, a French anti-slavery advocate, observed, “At Christmas they will be given four pounds of lard, four quarters of wheat flour and a quarter of sugar. For purposes of replacement, they are given twelve yards of bamboo, 24 yards of brown, and two bonnets every year.”²⁴² James Smith observed on

²³⁸ Sylvester Hovey, *Letters from the West Indies* (New York: Gould and Newman, 1838), 36.

²³⁹ Weed, *Letters from Europe*, 347.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 350

²⁴¹ James Smith, *The Winter of 1840 in St. Croix*, (New York: 1840), 20.

²⁴² Victor Schoelecher, *The Kamina Folk: Slavery and Slave Life in the Danish West Indies* ed. George F. Tyson and Arnold R. Highfield (U.S. Virgin Islands: Virgin Islands Humanities Council, 1994), 207.

Christmas day, in 1840, the rationing of cornmeal, dried fish, wheat flour, pork, sugar and rum. Some of the slaves, he noted, “were disputing about the measure of food that had been meted out to them,” most likely as too little in relation to what others had received.²⁴³ Slave owners were expected to give more than usual, and, as Hovey stressed, “the feelings of the slaves towards their master, through the year, depend very much on the treatment they receive at these times.”²⁴⁴ Slaves understood that role reversal that was taking place. Suddenly it was the well-dressed and relaxed slave who was receiving free handouts from his or her owners. It was less a formality and more a social commentary on the situation as it existed in a slave society. That they went in a large body certainly expressed the severe pressure slave owners would be under during the dispersal of gifts. If a certain number complained, as Smith observed, it was likely to escalate into open rebellion.²⁴⁵ These are also signs of the coherence that was emerging in Afro-Caribbean communities.

Weed offers the best example of coherence: when plantation slaves elected kings, queens, princes, and princesses along with honorary pages and maids of honor flanking their symbolic heads. Of particular importance was the Queen who maintained her title for most of her elected life until she died, retired, or stepped down becoming Lady Dowager.²⁴⁶ This probably had its roots in an African tradition and somehow survived in a state of ritual expression into the nineteenth century. Smith knew a plantation owner from Demarara who purchased a group that paid a great deal of obeisance to a certain woman. Upon learning she was a queen in Africa who had been enslaved with some of

²⁴³ Smith, *Winter of 1840*, 19.

²⁴⁴ Hovey, *Letters from the West Indies*, 36.

²⁴⁵ Smith, *Winter of 1840*, 21

²⁴⁶ Weed, *Letters From Europe*, 346.

her subjects, he remarked, “this deference is said to have continued until her death.”²⁴⁷

Smith noted that the Christmas queens are “chosen for life and her decorations are furnished by contribution of the slaves.” She was accompanied by her maids of honor, with flags “waving over the heads of the Queen.” During Weed’s stay over Christmas, he noted that one Queen was jailed for the misapplication of her master’s money toward her seasonal attire. A group of her “subjects” went to the fort where she was held and offer money for her freedom.²⁴⁸ Another song indicates a group of slaves’ praise for their queen:

Here is our Queen – she wears the best of linen –
She sports the best of Cambric and doesn’t mind the cost.
Hurra, hurra, hurra, hurra!²⁴⁹

Though the King occupied a similar ritual function, the Queen appeared to contain a substantially superior position, or at least was favored among the festival’s “subjects.”

That this tradition survived in ritual expression throughout the nineteenth century speaks to the further replacement of obeah priests as symbolic heads of the Afro-Caribbean community. Mock royalty was essentially another way of poking fun and projecting an aura of ritual inversion of the surrounding slave system. Female slaves, arguably the most exploited members of slave societies, now occupied a role during the saturnalia that was otherwise unthinkable during the work year. It was the culmination of the communities’ understanding of the perverse system under which they lived. The Queen was a way for slaves to voice their perceptions of the role whites expected them to play. Queens, in a way, projected a dual identity; one that was meant to be cute to the casual white observer, and one that was to garner snickers among the slave population as

²⁴⁷ Smith, *Winter of 1840*, 21

²⁴⁸ Weed, *Letters From Europe*, 349.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

a women “putting on airs” for the amusement of her fellow “subjects” at the expense of the genteel plantation owner. Not only did dance and drumming offer auditory annoyance to white unaccustomed to its proverbial noise, but the Queen offered subtle humor that could possibly offend, or amuse, a more observant white individual.

In many ways, the ritual Queen might represent that apex of convergence of the Afro-Caribbean community. She represents the culmination of processes over decades where slaves slowly went through organizational transformations. Though during the year she might confer some celebrity status, the Queen is the “behavioral reality” of how slaves rallied with one another in a repressive slave regime. Most of the year their livelihood centered on work for the benefit of another person who owed them no compensation, whereas the Queen established an avenue where slaves willingly placed their allegiance under one of their own. She represented the group’s survival where they worked together to make extravagant clothes, buy food and drink, and show off their cultural ingenuity in the form of ritual dance, in essence the stabilizing force that showed their white masters that they would not and could not be totally submissive.

Conclusion

The abolition of the slave trade was the first step in the nineteenth century toward a consolidated Afro-Caribbean community in the Danish West Indies. Demographic shifts in the population lowered prospects for a self-sustaining slave work force. Planters responded by proposing that slaves create families. Demographic conditions on plantations varied across regions, but most were not conducive to the construction of

close-knit families to produce offspring, and planters were forced to allow their slaves to travel freely in order to find appropriate mates.

The overwhelming interconnectedness of the slave population on the islands supported a transfusion and redefinition of eighteenth-century organizational practices and habits. The rise of a Creole population effectively disbanded the utility of Obeah as a form of social organization and enforcement and the preeminence of family fueled competition and resentment toward a single, self-interested Obeah priest. Christianity among the slave population reflects this trend away from Obeah as religious form of organization even if they did not embrace the ritual aspects such as mass or gospel. Meanwhile, slaves acquired a vast knowledge of the local environment with their new found ability to move freely within the islands. New diets emerge and the expansion of the Sunday market allowed them access to luxuries such as meat and spices that added new dimensions to provisioning. Complex markets also provided them material in the form of food, drink, and clothes during the winter festivals. Slaves elected ritual leaders, who replaced the Obeah priest, in order to engage in a system of role reversal that mocked the entire slave system. Dances and ritual expression during the Christmas season were chances for slaves to voice their discontent in a fashion that might otherwise be missed by white observers. The collective demand for release from work during this season also reflected the power that the Afro-Caribbean community has gained in the Danish West Indies by the end of the nineteenth century. Slaves found avenues outside the plantation in which to resist and oppressive system. One cannot help, but wonder if during this time blacks might contemplate the moral nature of whites, much as the latter did on a normal basis throughout the year.

Epilogue and Conclusion

As a result of the declining slave population, the governor of St. Croix took liberal measures from the 1830s onward. St. Thomas and St. John passed laws limiting the workday and regulating the amount of time slaves labored for their masters and for themselves. On July 28, 1847, King Christian VII of Denmark issued a Free Birth proclamation that would culminate in total emancipation in 1859. This, however, was too long for most of the slaves. The large-scale development of St. Croix and the intense networking connections facilitated rebellious plots and conspiracies. In the summer of 1848, nearly 8,000 slaves converged on the fort in Christiansted demanding immediate emancipation. Outnumbered and with the revolt growing in size the Governor von Scholten proclaimed the slaves free by way of “gubernatorial fiat.” The revolt was not entirely bloodless, and significant amounts of property were destroyed. This proclamation was extended to St. Thomas and St. John shortly thereafter. After emancipation, a peasant society emerged based around the similar communitarian efforts conducted under slavery. Afro-Danes still remained largely subsistence workers, but some were able to tap into the declining sugar industry or move to urban areas to pursue professional skills, huckstering, or open their own market stands. Others, however, vacated the islands completely, traveling to Jamaica, Puerto Rico, and Haiti.

The years following emancipation in 1848 were rife with social turmoil and economic decline as the sugar industry's main source of workers suddenly disappeared. Former slaves, free blacks, planters, government officials, and other inhabitants were forced to negotiate new labor systems and patterns of social organization. Planters found it difficult to keep their newly emancipated labor on the islands, while blacks were shocked by the sudden realization they could petition for better conditions, wages, and shorter workdays. Natural disaster burdened the already chastised economy, and political turmoil between the islands and Denmark only strengthened the social instability that ran rampant. More a bureaucratic nuisance than a respectable image of Danish geopolitical power, they were sold to the United States in 1917. That the islands' inhabitants were not consulted in the matter was hardly surprising. Most of the Danish islands' native residents were of African descent who operated on the periphery of Danish political participation. They were still only colonies of Denmark, and not true citizens.

This brief description of the post-emancipation period in the Danish Virgin Islands should not be interpreted as a foil against which to measure stable conditions that supposedly existed on the islands as a slave society. The aforementioned "modern" capriciousness on the Danish islands grew organically from social and labor relations, subsistence patterns, and cultural constructivism that existed under slavery. Racial tensions remained much as they had in slavery. Newly freed blacks still found themselves under the laboring jurisdiction of white plantation owners, much as slaves were exploited as the lowest rung on the social ladder. Blacks continued, however, to find avenues of resistance that now offered spaces to redress the new society. Street masquerades channeled their anger or impatience, while urban markets were still places to earn

supplemental income selling fruits, vegetables, and fish. Labor strikes and riots broke out much as there had been slave conspiracies and rebellions. Blacks could also protest with their feet by immigrating to other islands or, after 1917, America, just as slaves risked limb and life to sail to neighboring Puerto Rico, or Tortola.

Conclusion

Danish slavery resides within the boundaries of extremes much like most other slave societies. What makes the Danish West Indies entirely different, however, is the clear developmental pattern of an Afro-Caribbean community that many observers mistook for a milder form of slavery. First slaves arrived in multiethnic groups and are thrust into plantation communities where white masters were the central form of authority. There is little evidence to suggest that Africans came to the Danish West Indies and organized social exchanges outside their own ethnic group or nation. The Amina revolt of 1733 on St. John was the first collectively overt resistance to Danish slavery, but the ethnic ties remained too strong, and those not among the Amina nation either remained neutral or sided with plantation owners. The revolt represented a failure for Africans as well as planters. Slave owners were suddenly confronted by the possible repercussions of overly brutal slavery. In order to keep them marginally content planters provided provision grounds on the new island of St. Croix, at first integral to the plantation regiment. Unknowingly, planters gave slaves the spaces to construct their own social organization.

New subsistence patterns emerged within the labor system. Slaves unexpectedly found ample time to create surplus food from the provision grounds, which they could

cook, eat, barter, or sell. As Creole slaves established their provision grounds, newly arrived *bussals* were inclined needed a center to adapt to their new position as slaves on sugar plantations. Obeah applied African rituals that created a self-enforcing community with fictive kinship relations based on loci of supernatural power and conferred ritual protection and adoption. At the center was an Obeah priest who they relied as the mediator and ritual punisher of theft or other unwanted socio-relational behavior. Obeah people were also the communicator with the spirit realm and doctor for the sick or injured. As slaves attended urban markets and acquired more goods fetishes acted as supernatural objects that would protect their provision grounds and material possessions.

As African imports are cut off, family becomes a major part of subsistence and ecological culture. The abolition of the slave trade led to the formulation of cross-plantation marriages. Women outnumbered men on plantations the latter were forced to seek partners elsewhere. Planters encouraged this practice so they could maintain a self-sustaining slave population in the absence of fresh imports. The slave population Creolized and gradually removed Obeah relation magico-religious orientations from the cultural process. For family the provision grounds became integral to their existence, as each member was expected to contribute equally. Slave parents found sources of free labor in their children, but not as producers of profit, like their white masters, but as procurers of edible material. The Afro-Danish community grew as family groups connected within and across plantations.

By the nineteenth century, slaves could count on annual social festivals that involved rhythmic music and dance, dressing up, and electing kings, queens, princes, and princesses as their ritual leaders. They put on costumes either created or bought from the

cash earned from provision grounds in the market. Slaves spent several months preparing for the festivities indicating a highly incorporated degree of cooperation and organization once the seasonal saturnalia approached. The community went to open houses expecting, or demanding, rations of food, clothing, and drink from the master and his family. These rituals reflected the way a slave community perceived the world during most of the year. It was a behavioral reality in which roles were reversed and slave could suddenly expect to gain free procurements from their masters, instead of the other way around. Since the grounds were created as part of the slaves' organized labor it was essential to remove the community, at least briefly, to spaces more integral to the social context of the slave society, such as the master's house, or urban centers. This, in effect, gave the Afro-Danish community a sense of legitimacy as they removed themselves from plantation apparatus that took form on provision grounds.

What all these developments had in common was the necessity for a physical and metaphorical space outside the bounds of the plantation estate and slave system with which to mediate the constraints imposed by Danish West Indian authority. Slaves creatively utilized these spaces to conjure festivals, maintain families, and form Obeah religion. Each started off primitive as African drum dances, fictive kinship relations, or spiritual figureheads, but ultimately grew into the characteristics that constructed and Afro-Danish community. What this study illustrates is that cultural resistance does not happen within a social vacuum, but is conceived out of shared relationships among multiple people. Likewise these relationships occur in physical places and informed by material conditions. How slaves interacted in this physical environment was largely determinate by their collective, physical needs.

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