

THE LAND OF MAROONS, MARLEY AND GARVEY

By Stan Simpson and David Person

KINGSTON, Jamaica – The African retention in Jamaican politics is best reflected in two seminal events in the 1960s.

The Jamaican Labour Party brought home the body of island hero and Pan Africanist, Marcus Garvey, from London in 1964. Two years later, Ethiopian King Haile Selassie visited the tropical island. Both events drew enormous crowds, including a strong segment of Rastafarians. Once demonized as a dreadlocks-wearing, ganja-smoking cult, the Rastas - who espouse Black unity and oppose colonialism and white supremacy - have evolved into one of the country's more influential factions.

To understand the African influence in Jamaican politics, you must first appreciate that it's subtly woven into the country's culture, music, food and religion.

Then, connect the dots from slavery to the Maroons to rebellion, to Garvey and Pan Africanism, Selassie and the Rasta movement.

When Christopher Columbus landed in Jamaica in 1494 and claimed the island for Spain, he found an island populated by Indians who were called Tainos. Jamaica was a hot, mountainous island, but unlike some of its Caribbean neighbors, it wasn't rich in precious stones or metals and only had a small percentage of land suitable for farming.

Cuba, by comparison, was loaded with natural resources like cobalt, copper, iron ore and nickel. Much of its land was suitable for farming. Nonetheless, the Spaniards who settled in Jamaica scraped out a living by forcing the indigenous Indians to work the land. They grew sugarcane, maize and raised some cattle. But the Indians, unable to handle the cruel rigors of forced labor, began to die off, creating a chronic labor shortage.



Slaves were forced to travel in cramped and unhealthy conditions on slave ships

To fill this void, Spain began shipping black slaves to the island to supply the Spanish settlers with a new enslaved workforce. By 1518, the slaves going to Jamaica were coming directly from the African continent. Lorenzo de Gomenot, a courtier of Spain's King Charles V, was given permission to ship 4,000 Africans annually to Jamaica and the other Caribbean islands under Spanish control.

Jamaica was ruled by Spain from 1494 until 1655, when the British launched Oliver Cromwell's Western Design. Cromwell's plan was to usurp Spain's control of the Caribbean islands with an initial attack on the island of Hispaniola, now the home to Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

According to Lyn McKenzie, history professor at Northern Caribbean University the British saw Hispaniola as a well-developed and populated island with good sugar production. The British also believed that by controlling Hispaniola, they would gain control of valuable trade routes to Central America.

The attack on Hispaniola failed. To salvage the plan, British troops moved on to Jamaica and were able to capture Spanish Town, later renamed Port Royal.

But Jamaica was merely a consolation prize, McKenzie said. The British soon discovered what the Spanish had already known: Compared with other Caribbean isles, Jamaica had relatively few natural resources.

"It was an outboard colony," she said. "It was a poor compensation for Hispaniola."

The British never got a firm grip on Jamaica or slavery. The Spaniards fled to Cuba, leaving behind their slaves. But these slaves decided that their days of toiling in the sugar cane fields on the hot sun were over. Some 1,500 of these abandoned Africans went to live in the mountains as free people.

Their flight was motivated by the harsh treatment received from the British. According to the "History of Slavery" by Susanne Everett, slaves accused of committing serious offenses were punished by being "nailed to the ground with crooked sticks strapped to each limb. They were then slowly burned alive, first the hand and

the feet, and then ... gradually up to the head."

Other escapees from British plantations joined the 1,500 slaves who escaped to the mountains when the Spaniards left Jamaica. These fugitive slaves were called Maroons, derived from the Spanish word "cimarrones," a reference to their fugitive status. Though lacking the resources of the British, the Maroons were able to intimidate their former owners by coming down out of the mountains to free other slaves, attack and sometimes kill British planters, and to plunder and vandalize the plan-



Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) arriving in the Americas

tations.

The Maroons' relentless attacks convinced the British to make a peace offer in 1738, ending what has been called the First Maroon War. While its terms were heavily weighted against the former slaves and their cause – one provision required the Maroons to help police the plantations and return any slaves that attempted to escape – it did allow the Maroons to maintain their independence.

By the end of the 18th century, the islands of the British West Indies were facing fierce competition from

HOME AWAY FROM HOME:

The Maroons' relentless attacks convinced the British to make a peace offer



Latin American countries in the sugar trade. Jamaican sugar plantations were no longer profitable. British planters, weary of the economic and social struggles, wanted to sell their lands and return to England.

In 1808, the slave trade throughout the empire was outlawed. British slaveholders were allowed legally to retain the slaves they held, but because it was more difficult to get slaves, it was harder to maintain them. McKenzie said that before the abolition of the slave trade, planters would work a slave to death – literally – and then buy another, usually every four to seven years.

“Once the price of the slaves went up, after the trade was abolished, it was cheaper to breed them than to buy them,” she said. This meant that slave women were moved out of the sugar cane fields to have babies, reducing production.

The British Parliament emancipated all of Jamaica’s 300,000 slaves in 1838. But this only increased the tensions between blacks and whites because the change in

legal status didn’t translate into a change in social attitudes.

Although many freed slaves soon began to leave the plantations and establish themselves as landowners, freedom did not lead to better living conditions for most black Jamaicans.

In response to British indifference, George William Gordon, a man of mixed race with a seat in Jamaica’s House of Assembly, began to criticize the government, reportedly even threatening armed rebellion. In 1865, one of Gordon’s followers, a black Baptist deacon named Paul Bogle lead a group of black Jamaicans on a 50-mile march from Stony Gut to Spanish Town to present British Governor Edward John Eyre with a list of concerns. But Eyre refused to see Bogle’s group.

Later that year, Bogle and his supporters clashed with police in Morant Bay. Eyre responded by sending in the military. Lives were lost on both sides and Gordon and Bogle were both hung.

By the end of the 19th century a religious-based protest against British colonial rule mystified and frightened British planters, who saw that its dances and other rituals empowered the blacks.

Alexander Bedwardism lead another religious movement, called Bedwardism. Thousands of black Jamaicans found inspiration and hope in Bedward's call for social justice and aid for the poor. Eventually, Bedward was arrested and confined to an insane asylum where he died in 1930.

That same year Haile Selassie became emperor of Ethiopia.

Rastafarians saw Selassie as the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy and considered him an incarnation of God, the one who would lead all black people to freedom.

Selassie's ascension to the throne coincided with the height of popularity of Marcus Garvey and his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Garvey's movement was based on the belief that black people all over the globe had a common origin. Biblical references to Ethiopia validated Garvey's view, and eventually became known as Ethiopianism.

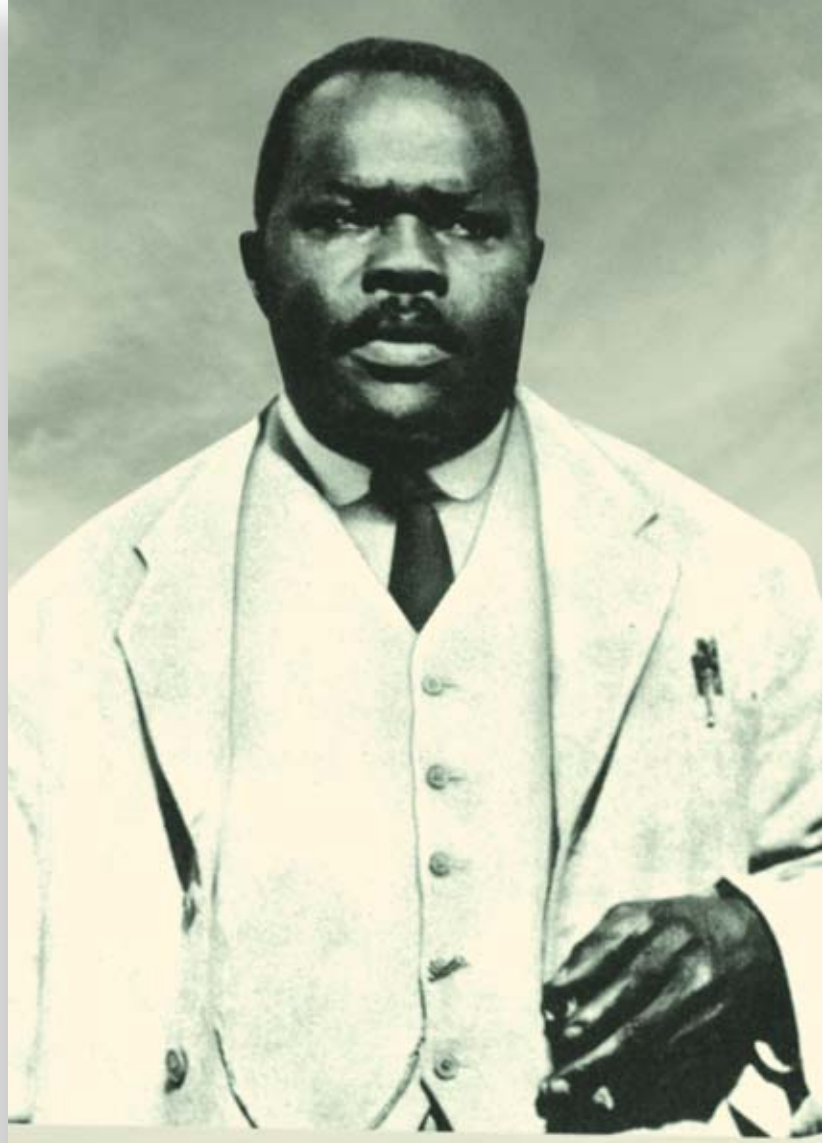
As stubborn as the Maroons, as fearless as the Obeahs, Garveyites elevated Africa and blackness above Europe and whiteness. At its height, Garvey's UNIA had millions of members scattered between Africa, Europe, the United States, Latin America and the Caribbean.

All three movements – Bedwardism, Garveyism and Ethiopianism – paved the way for Rastafarianism, which McKenzie said first appeared in Jamaica in the 1930s.

"The Rastafarian movement arose as a kind of protest movement to the social conditions," she said. As in Garveyism, Africa and social justice were important to Rastas. But McKenzie said that the movements weren't identical.

"Rastafarians speak to their own adherents," she said. "Garvey spoke to all black people."

"To me, Garvey is the most important social thinker in the 20th century" says sociologist Ian Boxill, a senior lecturer at the University of the West Indies. "I think Garvey articulated the fundamental issues that affected



Marcus Garvey was one of the first men of color to lead a worldwide mass movement

black people, which was psychological and economic (despair). He saw they were deeply connected.

In part, this may explain why the membership in the Rastafarian movement has remained small, not experienced growth in huge numbers, and why Jamaicans have only recently acknowledged the Rastafarian faith.

Rastas don't seek to engage the power structure, McKenzie said. They instead walk their own path.