



# **18<sup>th</sup> Century Jamaican Plantation Business Culture and Its Implications for the Island's Current Business Environment**

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# Introduction



- ▶ This paper forms part of a much bigger research that examines the formation and evolution of a Jamaican business culture between 1655 and 1807. It postulates that under British colonialism, the core features of the island's business culture were formed in its formative years and with some adjustment, would continue to dominate throughout the sugar and slavery period.
- ▶ The findings for the research demonstrated that several features of this early business culture could be applied to the current Jamaican economic climate, thereby provoking the question, what are the implications of the plantation business culture on Jamaica's current economic?
- ▶ Examining issues of governance, capital acquisition and expenditure, innovation and plantation management, this paper discusses the core features of the plantation business culture and concludes with some considerations of its potential implications on the island's business climate today.



# What is Plantation Business Culture?


- ▶ Mary B. Rose (1996): The values, attitudes, rituals and myths which give a firm its identity.
- ▶ J. E. T. Eldridge and A. D. Crombie:

The Culture of an organisation refers to the unique configuration of norms, values, beliefs, ways of behaving... that characterise the manner in which groups and individuals combine to get things done. The distinctiveness of a particular organisation is intimately bound up with its history and the character building effects of past decisions and past leaders. It is manifested in the folkways, mores and the ideology to which members defer, as well as in the strategic choices made by the organisation as a whole (J. E. T. Eldridge and A. D. Crombie cited in Mary B. Rose, 164).
- ▶ The term plantation business culture acknowledges that the sugar plantation was indeed a business with its own values, attitudes, rituals and myths which formed a distinct identity.
- ▶ Heather Cateau, John Campbell, Veront Satchell, and B. W. Higman have suggested that the plantocracy were akin to modern managers in that they maximised their natural, human and capital resources to achieve optimum productivity levels.




# What is Plantation Business Culture? (Ctd.)

- ▶ By the eighteenth century, a key feature of Jamaica was the plantation economy based primarily on sugar and characterised by the “...large scale of landholdings, dependence on enslaved and other forms of forced labour, hierarchical management, monoculture, export-orientation, high population densities, high ratios of African to European people, and high-value per capita output” (Higman, 6).
- ▶ With a large proportion of the enslaved working on holdings of over one hundred and fifty persons and a complex hierarchical management system, in many ways, eighteenth century Jamaican sugar plantations outpaced British enterprises which up to the mid-nineteenth century featured few workforces of more than two hundred people (Higman, 4).
- ▶ Caribbean planters, Creole and expatriate, were essentially British subjects, serving British needs and looked towards England for inspiration and guidance.
- ▶ British experience of business was governed by ‘gentlemanly capitalism’ wherein the ideals of the aristocracy – the centrality of land-based wealth; property and inheritance; the importance of social and kinship ties; the opposition to everyday hands-on labour; and the importance of heredity and continuity in business leadership – governed capitalist enterprises (Cain and Hopkins, Vol. I, 504). Gentlemanly capitalism was soon modified in Jamaica to suit new and local circumstances.



# Governance and Business Culture Development, 1655-1807

- Governance is central to business culture since the laws passed determine the pace and style of economic development.
- Tensions with Spain and uncertainty regarding the island's political status up to 1670 meant that the embryonic business culture developed amidst uncertainty and was determined by settlers forced to beat the odds to survive.
- Seeking to create a stable colony and business environment, Jamaican laws conformed to English legislations.
- Legislations to regulate credit and currency favoured start up planters. Laws against piracy, theft and making Africans payable for debt responded to the needs of the plantocracy.



# Governance and Business Culture Development, 1655-1807, ctd.

- In spite of laws which sought to assist the plantocracy, there were those that would inhibit its enterprising and entrepreneurial spirit.
- Most significantly were the seventeenth century Navigation Laws, which would define the place of the British colonies as suppliers of raw material and purchasers of manufactured goods. Thus, the plantation economy and its enforced dependency were established very early on.
- Restricting innovation and entrepreneurship, these Laws ensured that British interests were served and the island would not rival her manufacture or trade. Early on, Jamaica was established as a colony of exploitation.
- Local government was fiercely independent and as a local entity could respond immediately to situations as they arose.
- The drawback which would be passed on throughout the centuries and resulted from an inadequate white population was that many persons held posts for which they were unsuited.
- Exacerbating the problem was the patent system, an English derivative, which ensured that absentees and their unqualified deputies controlled the bureaucratic system, creating grave inefficiencies. This would become a recurrent theme.
- Unlike many planned seventeenth century North American colonies and in keeping with her position as a colony of exploitation, the island continued to be plagued by prolonged infrastructural underdevelopment.
- The nascent business culture would evolve in the context of poor infrastructure and an inefficient bureaucratic system. This forced Jamaica's business culture to be adaptable, creative and independent in the seventeenth and for most of the eighteenth century.



# Capital Acquisition

- ▶ Producing sugar was risky business.
- ▶ Early settlers created an opportunistic and not always ethical business culture.
- ▶ Nuala Zahedieh avers that plantation agriculture in Jamaica was financed by Spanish silver earned in lucrative illicit trade based on plunder and contraband.
- ▶ Many original settlers became paid government officials and through their post acquired venture capital in the form of monies and land.
- ▶ Others hunted the cattle left by the Spanish and took advantage of the island's other resources.
- ▶ There were planters who obtained property by taking advantage of the system of escheats and forfeitures.
- ▶ Early eighteenth century entrepreneurs included those who inherited property from their forebears.
- ▶ Unscrupulous methods to obtain property would remain a hallmark of Jamaica's business culture in the eighteenth century. Some unwitting individuals undertook loans from merchants who were unethical enough demand repayment before the plantation had fully taken off. Other illicit practices reflected seventeenth century methods as planters declared executors on wills would cheat inheritors of their properties and its value through various means.



# Capital Expenditure

- ▶ Seventeenth century entrepreneurs for the most part ploughed back their profits into the unrealised potential of their properties.
- ▶ Despite ploughing back capital into their investments, the template for ostentatious living was established early on as planters educated their sons abroad and established expensive annuities for kin.
- ▶ The eighteenth century witnessed the maturation of the sugar slavery business and as a result, predicated on the behaviour of the ancestors, the spending would be even more lavish than before. Luxury goods were ordered and consumed, lavish dining was the norm, vast mansions were constructed, elegant tours abroad were arranged, and sons were educated at renowned educational centres where they rubbed shoulders with royalty.
- ▶ In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the practice of annuities expanded as estates came to have more dependents during periods of profit and loss.
- ▶ In spite of all this, the business culture was evolving to develop a social conscience as several wills established schools for the less fortunate.
- ▶ Capital was also placed in what was considered safe investments in properties and industries in England.





# Innovation



- ▶ Innovation, a key feature of future generations would be central in the seventeenth century as plantation owners searched for labour saving and cost saving innovations.
- ▶ Manure was utilised despite the relative fertility of the soil; there were innovations to obtain more cane juice from the pressed canes; and there were innovations in milling technology. Thus, planters in the seventeenth century not only constructed buildings and expanded their holdings, but they were keen to innovate; there was an environment and a spirit of innovation and dynamism.
- ▶ This spirit of innovation and dynamism continued to be a feature of the plantation system as planters eagerly kept abreast of new technology.
- ▶ They formed agricultural societies and purchased agricultural treatises.
- ▶ Ploughs were purchased; planters viewed the operations of their competitors in the island and in the region and sought to imitate them where possible.
- ▶ By 1805 planters experimented with several species of cane. The efficacy of these new technologies were weighed and assessed against cost and practicality.



# Plantation Management

- Absentee management was a feature of Jamaican plantation life since the latter quarter of the seventeenth century. Planters had to put in place strategies to govern from afar. These strategies included higher wages, allowances, occasional supervisory visits and making white salaried employees sign bonds for good behaviour
- Patronage was essential in hiring whites for managerial positions on estates as well as in other areas of colonial life. However, patronage could lead to the employment of men unsuitable for estate work. However, the increasing number of absentee owners led to an important eighteenth century development in the ever evolving Jamaican business culture – the rise of the professional attorney.
- The professional attorney cemented the divide between owner and management. The attorney was based on the steward in England and in Ireland the agent would act for an absentee landowner.
- As reputations were increasingly important in acquiring additional employment, some attorneys would act more scrupulously
- The eighteenth century therefore represented not only the maturation of sugar production but also management.
- Slave laws, largely based on the Barbadian Slave Code, would create a repressive slave system and a business culture that ensured black brutality. Nonetheless, slave laws and practice created a dichotomy between the enslaved as human and non-human.
- The enslaved people never accepted their plight passively.



# Summing Up Jamaica's Business Culture

- ▶ The Jamaican business culture would demonstrate its ability to evolve and adapt to rapidly changing geopolitical environment in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The response was often a combination of retrenchment/conservatism and adaptability/innovation as planters responded out of fear and uncertainty.
- ▶ Their relationship with the Royal government changed; they were to reinforce their allegiance to the mother country.
- ▶ Early Jamaican settlers had to contend with uncertain weather, shipping, plant disease and warfare. They did this through self sufficiency and ingenuity. A culture was established of entrepreneurs and enslaved Africans who valiantly sought to assert their independence against a dominant mother country and brutal enslavers respectively. In the island's business culture were elements of desperation, independence, creativity, adaptability, and ingenuity, particularly up to 1775. However, after 1775, these features would now be combined with conservatism and retrenchment.



# Implications for Today's Economy

- Many of you are familiar with works by George Beckford and others which seek to place the root of the island's underdevelopment on its colonial past, in particular the plantation economy model. This has some merit if we consider the following:
  - The island's plantation business culture was formulated around sugar production as implicit in the legislations passed by the early government. In the post-slavery period when bananas took off, that would be given pride of place. While the island was not strictly a monoculture, one must consider that undue focus was given by the government to sugar and sugar production. Is this not akin to the emphasis given to tourism today?
  - Laws such as the Navigation Laws tied us to external bodies and external arrangements and created a cycle of dependency which planters raged against but eventually caved in to. Consider our relationships without outside entities more powerful than us; do we have equal bargaining privileges?
  - The business culture of the planters promoted hiring people that they knew – patronage – does this still happen in our businesses in Jamaica? This also carried over in government. The patent system allowed unqualified persons not resident in the island to hold office – does this still stand as true?
  - The early business culture of the island demonstrated that capital could be obtained through scrupulous and unscrupulous means – both displaying elements of opportunity rather than careful structure and planning. Consider how many individuals acquire wealth? Compare scamming to buccaneering/piracy/privateering.
  - The business culture of the planters possessed elements of innovation and forward thinking which is present in many of today's companies. However, when faced with difficulties, the business culture during slavery dictated retrenchment/conservation amongst many. Consider how companies have reacted to the recent global recession and crises.
  - Enslaved and indentured workers were badly treated by management; their needs often ignored. We have to ask ourselves; how are workers treated today despite the development of trade unions? How many people are on contracts without benefits? How many times do workers suffer so more profit can be eked out?
  - Issues of expenditure formed part of the island's business culture. Do the rich still eke out immense profit to spend lavishly? What divides much of Jamaica's society? Does excessive consumption still mark our general characteristics?
  - These are pertinent questions connecting the present and the past



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