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Slave revolts and conspiracies in seventeenth-century Barbados

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## SLAVE REVOLTS AND CONSPIRACIES IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY BARBADOS<sup>1</sup>

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### INTRODUCTION

For the somewhat more than two centuries that constituted the slave period in Barbados, the island experienced only one actual slave uprising. This erupted on the night of Easter Sunday on April 14, 1816, but it lasted no more than a day or two. Prior to the 1816 uprising, the last recorded serious alarm of Barbados's whites concerning the possibility of an insurrection occurred in late 1701. During the latter half of the 17th century, however, white fears of possible rebellion were common, several serious alarms occurred, and in 1675 and 1692 major insurrectionary plots were discovered before the plans could be realized.

Some or most of these plots and alleged plots are often noted in modern works of scholarship treating the early history of the British West Indies or its slave revolts, but they are usually only briefly mentioned or, at best, only cursorily described. Moreover, with occasional major exceptions, scholars who have written at length about slave resistance and rebellion in the British Caribbean have tended to emphasize actual uprisings, rather than aborted plots or conspiracies, and the 17th century has generally

evoked considerably less attention than the 18th century and pre-emancipation decades of the 19th (CRATON 1979, 1980; GASPAR 1978, 1979a, 1979b; PATTERSON 1970; RECKORD 1968; SCHULER 1966, 1970a, 1970b; SHERIDAN 1976). Modern scholars have tended to focus on actual uprisings, perhaps because of the lack of detailed source materials on conspiracies, as well as their inclination to view uprisings as more dramatic and successful expressions of slave resistance; the difficulty of assessing "how many of these [conspiracies] are simply the product of nervous or malicious rumor-mongers" has been explicitly stated as another reason (SCHULER 1970b: 378). The focus on the 18th and early 19th centuries is probably due to the greater frequency, intensity, and scale of major uprisings, with the concomitant relative richness of primary source materials. Whatever the reasons for these scholarly interests in subject and time period (as BARRY GASPAR [1978] and RICHARD SHERIDAN [1976] have clearly illustrated in their studies, respectively, of an Antigua slave conspiracy in 1736 and one in Jamaica in 1776), insurrectionary attempts or conspiracies — whether real, imagined, or exaggerated by whites — reflect and reveal a variety of features of the slave society as well as various dimensions of the slaves' sociocultural life. This is no less true for Barbados.

The main purpose of this paper is to document and describe the major forms and incidents of collective slave resistance, or group actions or intentions of violence, against white authority during the formative years of Barbadian slave society. In addition, I seek to indicate some of the collective responses of whites to such resistance: the reprisals against slaves alleged to have been involved in conspiracies or other incidents; the major legislative enactments passed in the aftermath of real or imagined conspiracies; and incidents and alleged conspiracies which reflected the continuing fear of whites over the possibility of large-scale slave revolts.

## REVOLTS, RUNAWAYS, AND MARRONAGE

In Barbados's early history, white indentured servants, particularly the Irish, often resisted the harsh conditions under which they lived, and on at least two occasions, in late 1633 or early 1634 and in the late 1640s, they planned revolts which were aborted before the plans could be put into effect (WHITE 1874; LIGON 1657: 45-46; HALL 1764: 461). The proximity of indentured servants and slaves, the similarity of the harsh treatment both groups experienced, and their shared mistrust and animosity toward their masters probably resulted in a mutual influencing of the forms of resistance that both groups took. The hostility of Irish servants toward their masters was also manifest in the apparent involvement of some in later slave plots or alleged plots, as well as being reflected in various precautions that planters took against the possibility of revolt, both by servants and slaves. For example, RICHARD LIGON (who lived in Barbados from 1647 to 1650) reported (1657: 29, 70) that plantation houses were built with gutters which carried rainwater into cisterns: the cisterns were "within the limits of their houses, many of which are built in manner of fortifications, and have lines, bulwarks, and bastions to defend themselves in case there should be any uproar or commotion . . . either by the Christian servants, or Negro slaves." Easy access to water cisterns would permit whites to have drinking water "whilst they are besieged; as also, to throw down upon the naked bodies of the Negroes, scalding hot; which is as good a defence against their underminings as any other weapon."

These precautions were not merely idle moves, for threatening, albeit relatively small, incidents involving slaves had apparently occurred, although the documentation on such incidents is limited. For example, in addition to a conspiracy of white servants, LIGON (1657: 53-54) reported another incident which involved slaves. This apparently occurred sometime during or shortly before his residence in Barbados, but prior to 1649, at a time "when victuals were scarce." On one, unnamed, plantation "some" of the slaves planned to set fire to the boiling house and make it appear to have been an accident. However, the night

before the plan was to have been put into effect it was discovered by other of the plantation's slaves who divulged what they had learned to their master; the conspirators were then "forc't to confesse" what they had intended to do. Similar incidents may have taken place during this and earlier periods that are not reported in the available sources. Moreover, it is difficult to believe that talk of insurrection, or plots involving some form of collective aggression against white property or persons, did not occur more frequently in the earlier periods than was either discovered by whites or reported in the sources.

However, that there were no large-scale revolts caused some puzzlement. For LIGON (1657: 46), in an often quoted passage, it "has been accounted a strange thing that the Negroes, being more than double the numbers of the Christians . . . and . . . accounted a bloody people where they think they have power or advantages . . . should not commit some horrid massacre upon the Christians, thereby to enfranchise themselves and become masters of the island". LIGON offered three reasons why he or others believed a revolt had not taken place: 1) "they are not suffered to touch or handle any weapons"; 2) "they are held in such awe and slavery as they are fearful to appear in any daring act, and seeing the mustering of our men, and hearing their gunshot . . . their spirits are subjugated to so low a condition as they dare not look up to any bold attempt"; 3) "they are fetch'd from several parts of Africa, who speak several languages, and by that means one of them understands not another."

Factors such as those LIGON mentions were undeniably operative in inhibiting large-scale revolts. Nonetheless, as indicated above, during his day whites not only feared the possibility of insurrection from slaves on their plantations, but also saw the potential for organized insurrection in the runaway slaves who, as LIGON wrote (1657: 98), "harbour themselves in woods and caves, living upon pillage for many months together." "These caves are very frequent," he noted (1657: 105),

some small, others extreamly large and capacious. The runaway Negroes often shelter themselves in these coverts, for a long time, and in the night range abroad the cuntry, and steale pigs, plantins, potatoes, and pullin, and bring it there; and feast all day, upon what they stole the night before; and the nights being dark, and their bodies black, they scape undiscern'd.

An English visitor to Barbados (PLANTAGENET 1648), perhaps overstating the numbers, reported on the "many hundreds of rebel Negro slaves in the woods," and in 1655 the Barbados Council (1655a, 1655b) learned that "there are several Irish servants and Negroes out in rebellion" and that "several murders and enormities have been committed by several Negroes in this island." In June 1657, the Council (1657a) received a complaint "that divers rebellious and run away Negroes lie lurking in woods and secret places . . . committing many violences and attempting to assassinate people to their great terror and disturbance of the inhabitants," and a few months later the legislature requested (Barb. Council 1657b) the governor to appoint "a certain day" and "issue commissions for a general hunting of . . . the great number of Negroes that are out in rebellion committing murders, robberies, and divers other mischiefs."

Incidents such as the above, which seem to have involved marauding bands of runaway slaves, or maroons, were apparently not perceived by whites as organized conspiracies for large-scale risings, yet they clearly had that potential and can be considered as a form of revolt. The concern over runaways and the uncontrolled or unauthorized movement of slaves off their plantations is well reflected in Barbados's early laws. Several of those relating to slaves detail the mechanisms for apprehending and prosecuting runaways and those who wittingly or unwittingly aided and abetted them. For example, most of the clauses in a major slave law, passed in 1661 (Barb. Ass. and Council 1661), directly or indirectly relate to runaways; and its 19th clause specifically observes that "diverse Negroes are and long since have been runaway into woods and other fastness of the Island do continually much mischief . . . hiding themselves, sometimes in one place and sometimes in another, so that with much difficulty they are to be found, unless by some sudden surprise." The law enabled the raising of armed patrols to take such runaways "either alive or dead" and offered 500 pounds of sugar for the capture alive of slaves who had been absent for over six months; double that amount was given for capturing those who had been absent for over a year – suggesting the lengths of time that runaways could exist and avoid capture. Concerns with runaways were also

expressed in other early laws<sup>2</sup> and in general runaways were a major concern to Barbados's whites during the colony's early years. They directly challenged the authority system not only by the mere act of unauthorized absence from their masters, but also by engaging in direct action against white persons and their property. They reduced a slaveowner's work force, were not easy to locate, lived off food they stole from white lands and could incite or encourage other slaves to run away. They were clearly a threat to the public order and their gathering in maroon bands offered opportunities, as noted in the 1661 law, "for raising mutinies or rebellion."

Barbados could not effectively provide the stable kind of "almost inaccessible" and "inhospitable, out-of-the-way areas" required for the development of "viable maroon communities" that could exist more or less independent of plantations (PRICE 1979: 5), but in the early years the island contained sufficient places of refuge for groups of runaway slaves. Although life for these slaves must have been extremely harsh, caves, some relatively large (*e.g.* LANGE & HANDLER 1980; GURNEE 1980), were scattered about the island, there were the hills and ravines of the Scotland District, and Barbados was densely forested. Early farming settlements were primarily along the western or leeward coast, but as the population expanded and especially with the growth of sugar plantations in the 1640s, forests were more extensively cleared. Most were destroyed in the 1650s and 1660s while the economy was being rapidly transformed, and by the mid-1660s "all but the smallest traces of forest had been removed through felling or burning" (WATTS 1966: 62). Although most of the maroon bands that inhabited the forested interior were probably very small and only survived for relatively short periods of time, the depletion of the forests seriously altered and decreased one major form that running away assumed by considerably reducing an important source of refuge for the maroon groups that had formed within them; the caves, too, became more accessible to white patrols.

This is not to say that running away ceased to be a form of slave resistance, that whites were no longer concerned with the problems that runaways caused, or that small maroon bands were

entirely eliminated. In 1668, for example, a major slave law (RAWLIN 1699: 163-164) repeated the phraseology, quoted above, of the 1661 law and referred to slaves who "have been long since run away into woods and other fastness of this island," also offering rewards for the capture of six month and twelve month absentees. In Barbados, as in 17th-century Antigua where it became "increasingly difficult for slaves to remain at large," slaves continued to run away, and "curbing the activities of runaways continued to be a major concern" (GASPAR 1979b: 9, 10). In fact, the situation in Barbados appears to have been very similar to Antigua which, though somewhat smaller than Barbados, is nonetheless comparable in some key geographic features and in the way plantation agriculture spread in the 17th century. During the last half of that century, as the slave population grew, "Antigua experienced," GASPAR (1979b: 3; 1979a: 5) writes, "a maroon phase of slave resistance. Most of the slaves during this period were African born, and many of them ran away seeking refuge in the as yet uncleared interior of the island . . . as the area of sugar cultivation expanded inland, there was no place for the maroons to live undisturbed"; other slaves engaged in *petit marronage*, wherein they "absented themselves only temporarily."

Whether mere temporary absence or running away which involved short-term goals such as visiting friends or relations on other plantations can be viewed as *petit marronage* has been convincingly challenged by LESLIE MANIGAT. He argues that such forms of behavior constitute "short-lived absenteeism" and lacked the goal "to run for freedom," of attempting "to live another life outside of the social order of the plantation as a 'savage'"; for MANIGAT (1977: 423) the word *marronage* should specifically convey "the wild life in the woods and the idea of running wild. Without the decision to run wild, there is no *marronage* at all." "Short-lived absenteeism" in one form or another, and for various reasons of individual motivation, was a constant feature of Barbados (as in other slave societies) throughout the slave period and was also well evident during the early part of the 17th century. Yet, during this early period *marronage* also occurred.

On the basis of available evidence, however, it is difficult to neatly place Barbados's early bands of runaways into the con-



ventional typology of *petit* and *grand marronage*. Although "this distinction . . . does not preclude the existence of borderline cases and the possibility of a shift from one to the other" (MANIGAT 1977: 423), the typology implies or requires an imputation of motives to the slaves who ran away as well as an assessment of the objective behaviors in which they engaged. Whether *petit marronage* is viewed from the perspective of DEBIEN (1979: 111) as "an act of individuals or at most of very small groups" who stayed close to the plantations from which they had escaped and "subsisted not by systematically pillaging crops but by stealing small amounts of food and committing minor thefts, in a kind of symbiosis with the plantation," or, as for MANIGAT (1977: 423), as a condition "in which the fugitive slave runs wild spontaneously," remains at large for only "a few days . . . [and] always leaves open the possibility of a quick return at the most propitious moment," it is clear that the term is applicable to what sometimes occurred among Barbados's early runaways.

However, during the early years, as discussed above, although the island's geography and demographic factors of white settlement and population combined to prevent the substantial "marronage on the grand scale" that occurred in other New World areas and which involved the formation of "independent communities . . . that struck directly at the foundations of the plantation system" (PRICE 1979: 3), it appears that at least some of the early bands in Barbados approached more a form of *grand marronage*, that is, "flight from the plantation with no intention of ever returning" (DEBIEN 1979: 107). However unrealistic Barbados's early maroon bands may have been in judging what kind of refuge the island could ultimately provide, and however short-lived the existence of many, the actions of these bands, as suggested by the sources, indicate that the runaways *perceived* their absenteeism as something more than mere temporary escape and had a goal "to stay [free] as long as possible . . . at least to the limit of human resistance" (MANIGAT 1977: 423). As time progressed, in Barbados, as in Antigua (GASPAR 1979b: 13) during the early 18th century, "few could expect to remain at large for long . . . [but] expecting capture sooner or later, enjoyed freedom while it lasted by openly defying the authorities." DEBIEN's (1979: 107, 111) characterization of *grand marronage* in the French Antilles, while

certainly not entirely applicable to Barbados, nonetheless seems relevant to viewing the general features of at least some of the island's maroon groups during the early period:

Usually, such fugitives fled alone, sometimes in twos or threes. Some lived for long periods in isolation, but others more or less quickly formed bands . . . or joined a band that was already established . . . . They . . . terrorized certain areas, or at least created an atmosphere of anxiety . . . . mounted police were sent out against them, and sometimes the militia . . . In the settlers' eyes collective marronage, involving organized and supposedly armed bands, constituted sedition and a serious crime.

As late as 1692, shortly after a major slave conspiracy was discovered (see below), Barbados's legislature passed a law (HALL 1764: 130-131) which emphasized how slaves could successfully run away for extended periods "and by their long absence from the service of their owners, they become desperate, and daily plot and commit felonies and other enormities . . . [to] the danger of the island in general."

Such sentiments were even more pronounced in earlier years when runaway bands were perceived as a serious and continuing threat to the whites' notion of public order as well as being the possible nuclei for large-scale risings. It was not only maroon groups, however, but also slaves who remained on their plantations who were viewed as potential fomenters and participants in insurrectionary attempts. The possibility of slave insurrection was never far from the minds of whites, and by the middle of the 1660s, there was growing official concern that Barbados's weakened military state, caused primarily by the exodus of poorer whites, was not only making it more vulnerable to foreign attack but also to "insurrection of slaves" (WILLOUGHBY 1666, 1668; cf. HANDLER 1982a).

#### CONSPIRACIES AND ALLEGED CONSPIRACIES

##### *The 1675 conspiracy*

These fears were realized within a few years when, in May 1675, "came the Negro insurrection which interrupted all other public

affairs" (ATKINS 1680). This "insurrection," however, was never realized, the plot having been "miraculously discovered eight days before the intended murder should have been acted" in the area of Speightstown (Cont. of State 1676: 19; Gr. Newes 1676: 10-12).

Several months afterward, a contemporary (Cont. of State 1676: 19) related how the plot was planned and discovered and, in so doing, gave expression to one reason why runaway slaves were perceived as especially threatening for the fomenting of revolts:

A Negroe man belonging to Mr. [Gyles] Hall senior, being absented from his said master, among several other Negroes who had a hand in the plot. In a council among them, they did contrive . . . to kill their masters and mistresses with their overseers; this foresaid Negro of Mr. Halls (though one of the chief plotters) . . . would by no means consent to the killing of his master, and upon refusal was much threatened; and being afraid of his life, makes his escape and returns home.

While working in his master's garden one day, the slave, a young man of about eighteen years from the Gold Coast, was overhead conversing with a fellow countryman and relating the plans for the insurrection. The eavesdropper to this conversation was a personal servant to Gyles Hall's wife, a domestic slave by the name of Anna or Fortunna (Cont. of State 1676: 19; Gr. Newes 1676: 10-11; Barb. Ass. 1675); or, as was not uncommon, she easily could have been known by both names. She notified her master and, upon being questioned, the slave divulged the plans as well as, apparently, the names of other conspirators on Hall's plantation and an adjacent one. Hall told the governor who mobilized several militia companies and had the named participants arrested. Ultimately, an "abundance" of slaves was arrested and at least 107 were implicated (Cont. of State 1676: 19; Gr. Newes 1676: 10-12).

The arrested slaves were arraigned before a court martial appointed by the governor and composed of four militia officers. Seventeen were rapidly found guilty and all were executed: six were burned alive and eleven beheaded, "their dead bodies being dragged through the streets" at Speightstown and afterwards burned with those who were burned alive; five other slaves "hanged themselves, because they would not stand trial" (Gr. News 1676: 11-12). Another twenty-five were executed after the

first group of seventeen, but by the end of November 1675, only "some" of the alleged participants had been executed, "the rest [being] kept in a more stricter manner" (Cont. of State 1676: 19; Barb. Ass. 1675).

On November 24, 1675, the House of Assembly (Barb. Ass. 1675) decided to consider the manumission of Fortunna as a reward for "her eminent service to the good of this country in discovering the intended plotted rebellion of the Negroes." The "plotted rebellion" that she had brought to the attention of her master involved only African-born male plantation slaves and not creole ones (ATKINS 1675; Gr. Newes 1676: 9-11; Cont. of State 1676: 19; GODWYN 1680: 130-131). It apparently had been "hatched by the Cormantee or Gold-Coast Negro's" who, as Governor ATKINS (1675) reported, "are much the greater number [in Barbados] from any one country, and are a warlike and robust people." Although "Cormantee" Africans were a majority of those implicated and most, if not all, of them were probably Akan-speakers — a prominent group in Caribbean slave rebellions from the 17th through the 19th centuries (SCHULER 1970a) — other African-born slaves appear to have been involved as well.

The revolt had been planned for "about three years" and was "cunningly and clandestinely carried, and kept secret, even from the knowledge of their own wife" (Gr. Newes 1676: 9). Slaves from several plantations were involved, although Governor ATKIN's (1675) report that the plot "had spread over most of the plantations" may have been exaggerated to impress the English government with the potential danger of what was felt to be the weakened state of the island's militia (*cf.* Gr. Newes 1676: 10-11; Cont. of State 1676: 19). "In the dead time of the night," the plan called for "trumpets . . . of elephants teeth and gourdes to be sounded on several hills, to give notice of their general rising." With this signal, which was to be given simultaneously in different locales, the cane fields were to be burned, and the insurrectionists on each plantation were to attack their masters, "cut their throats," and ultimately kill all of the island's whites "within a fortnight" (Gr. News 1676: 9-11; Cont. of State 1676: 19).

The author who provides the most details on this plot reports that some people in Barbados claimed that the slaves "intended to

spare the lives of the fairest and handsomest [white] women . . . to be converted to their own use. But some others affirm the contrary." As can be expected, however, the slaves' actual intentions are difficult to ascertain although the same author reported that "their grand design was to choose them a King, one Coffee [sic], an ancient Gold-Coast Negro who should have been crowned the 12th of June [1675] . . . in a chair of state exquisitely wrought and carved after their mode; with bowes and arrowes to be likewise carried in state before his Majesty, their intended king" (Gr. Newes 1676: 9, 10).

The "chair of state," or stool, was of fundamental significance to the Ashanti and other Akan peoples as a symbol of political authority and group permanence and identity, and the 1675 insurrectionists may have, indeed, aimed at establishing an "Asante-type kingdom" under a slave king, as was expressed in, for example, the Akan-dominated conspiracy discovered in Antigua in 1736 (CRATON 1980: 6). "Coffee," or Cuffy (derived from the West African or Akan day name for Friday), may have been an Obeah man, a prominent figure among Barbados's plantation slaves as well as among plantation slaves elsewhere in the Caribbean; obeahmen were also prominent in Akan or Akan-dominated revolts and conspiracies in general (GASPAR 1978: 321-322; SCHULER 1970a: 16-17; cf. HANDLER & LANGE 1978: 32-33). Nothing, however, is known about Cuffy and his role, if any, in the planning or formulating of the plot.

In any case, the plot, as well as the one in 1692 (see below), was, as in Antigua in 1736 (GASPAR 1978: 319), "clearly a collective effort to seize control of the island"; Barbados's whites certainly took it seriously and found "one more thorough inquiry," as the governor noted (ATKINS 1675), that it had been "far more dangerous than was at first thought" although, also as in Antigua (GASPAR 1978: 311), "public excitement may have blown it out of proportion."

After the plot's discovery, several laws were enacted which were in direct reaction to it. These were largely designed to prohibit or curtail behaviors that the plantocracy believed could threaten the island's security as well as encourage measures that would strengthen it. An act reinforcing the militia organization was

passed in September 1675 (HALL 1764: 479), and the plot also prodded the plantocracy into a major reconsideration of the existing slave laws; this led to the passage, in April of the following year, of a detailed act that was the first major slave law passed since 1661.

The 1676 act (Barb. Ass. and Council 1676) essentially ratified and confirmed the one of 1661, but based on experiences which culminated in the discovery of the 1675 plot, it also attempted to rectify deficiencies in the 1661 law by adding new features and specifying in greater detail judicial mechanisms and sanctions for particular crimes. Various provisions well reveal the forms that slave resistance could take, and the behaviors that the plantocracy believed were particularly threatening to the island's security and white privilege. The 1676 act treated such issues as slave assaults on whites, the theft and destruction of white property, and the effects of such actions, as well as the involvement of slaves in the skilled "arts and trades," on discouraging poor whites from coming to and remaining in Barbados (and the implications of this for weakening the potential manpower of the militia). Also reflecting the plantocracy's great concern with the large slave population and its internal movement, which facilitated contact among persons from different plantations, the act attempted to regulate the number of slaves hired out, for because of their movements "from plantation to plantation" they "have more opportunity of contriving mischief and rebellion than the Negroes employed only in their master's plantations." The act also established mechanisms "to restrain the wanderings and meetings of Negroes at all times, especially on Saturday nights, Sundays, or other holy days," and ordered regular searches of slave houses for runaways, "clubs, wooden swords, or other mischievous weapons," stolen goods, and "drums, horns, shells, or other loud instruments which may call [them] together to give sign or notice to one another of their wicked designs and purposes." Slaveowners were also fined if they permitted slaves "to beat drums, blow shells, or use any other loud instrument," and were especially heavily fined if they permitted "any public meeting or feasting of strange Negroes in their plantations." Finally, although the 1661 law had dealt at length with runaways, and all of its clauses were in effect in 1676, the

1676 law emphasized the "great mischief [that] arise from the frequent running away and hiding out of Negroes . . . [who] become desperate rogues to the terror of the neighborhood and danger of the whole island," and provided the death penalty for certain categories of runaways.

The obvious fears and frustrations over the 1675 plot had exacerbated the plantocracy's already existing hostility toward the Quakers for their reluctance to participate in the militia, for their objections to paying taxes used for the salaries of Anglican clergymen, and for their refusal to swear oaths in the courts; Quakers who brought slaves to their meetings in an effort to convert them to Christianity were also accused of teaching "the Negars to rebel" (Fox 1672: 69-70). Thus, in seeking measures to increase internal security, the legislature also passed (RAWLIN 1699: 120-121), on the same day as the 1676 law above, an act prohibiting "Quakers from bringing Negroes to their meetings" which emphasized how "the safety of this island may be much hazarded" by exposing slaves to Quaker "doctrine and principles."

The edginess over the possibility of slave insurrection was also manifest in another law, passed close to two months later, relating to Amerindians. There were few Amerindian slaves in Barbados during the 17th century, and the island's economy was in no way dependent on their labor. Most had come from other Caribbean islands and the northern coast of South America, but some had also been brought from New England and probably other continental colonies as well (HANDLER 1969, 1970). Barbadians were aware of "King Philip's War" in New England and had received news of Indian attacks on white settlements in Maryland and Virginia (ATKINS 1676). Reacting to these events in the wake of the 1675 plot, the Barbados legislature enacted provisions prohibiting the importation of "Indian slaves and as well to send away . . . those already brought to this island from New England and the adjacent colonies, being thought a people of too subtle, bloody and dangerous nature and inclination to be and remain here" (Barb. Ass. 1676b, also 1676a; HALL 1764: 479).

Several other laws passed during 1676 and 1677 were also directly or indirectly related to the 1675 plot, including one which

observed that “sundry Negroes . . . have of late in an insolent rebellion and cruel manner assaulted, beaten, and dangerously wounded some Christian inhabitants to the great hazard of their lives and to the disturbing the quiet and safety of this place” (Barb. Ass. and Council 1677b).<sup>3</sup> Although these laws, as well as the others noted above, were intended to remedy what the plantocracy believed were gaps or potential gaps in the island’s security system, they were either not enforced with regularity or could not be enforced, and slaves often continued to engage in activities or behavior that the laws were designed to curtail or eliminate. Whatever the case, these laws (as well as those passed in later times) reflected the whites’ continuing perception of the potential for slave revolts and the laws themselves did not assuage white fears; the possibility of a slave uprising continued to generate anxiety.

#### *The 1683 and 1685 alarms*

Sometimes white concerns were reflected in official pronouncements over the weakened state of the militia; at other times they were manifest when slaves gathered in relatively large numbers. As noted above, the 1676 slave law had forbidden slave masters from permitting the gathering “or feasting of strange Negroes in their plantations,” although the law did not prohibit the weekend dances — one of the most important of the slaves’ social diversions (HANDLER & FRISBIE 1972). Nonetheless, revolt plots throughout the Caribbean were frequently hatched “under cover of dancing and feasting” (SCHULER 1970a: 21) and large groups of slaves gathering under such conditions were also feared to have the potential for disrupting the public order. Thus, in May 1683, Barbados’s governor (DUTTON 1683) urged the mounted militia to diligently patrol on Saturday evenings and on Sundays “to prevent the disorderly meeting of Negroes who assemble in several places in great numbers at those times, to the terror of the inhabitants”; and the edginess of whites was also well reflected in an incident that occurred several months later.

At the end of November, 1683, an “alarm” in the Bridgetown



area was based on rumors that "all the leeward parts of the island were in arms . . . occasioned by some Negroes being in rebellion . . . and a discovery . . . of their design to rise upon and destroy the Christians." The militia was immediately alerted, but "strict inquiry . . . could find no cause for the alarm" (Extract of letter 1683). SCHULER (1966: 194) has noted how in general "it did not take much to constitute a conspiracy in the minds of the white colonists"; "even idle talk by some indiscreet or rash slaves might be interpreted as evidence of a carefully formed plot." And in Barbados in 1683, all that was discovered was that there had been "some insolent bold Negroes." The whites were so tense, however, that "four or five for examples sake were well whipped for terror to others, and one old Negro man . . . was . . . burned alive for uttering some insolent words upon the Christians beating some Negroes, which struck much terror into his mistress" (Extract of letter 1683).

A few years later, in late 1685 or within the first month or two of 1686, rumors again circulated of a "rising designed by the Negroes," but this time in "combination with the Irish servants . . . to destroy all masters and mistresses" (Barb. Council 1686a, 1686b). The Barbados Council found that there was sufficient evidence to justify beliefs that a revolt was, indeed, being planned. The authorities believed the alleged plot had spread among plantation slaves in the six northern parishes of St. James, St. Thomas, St. Peter, St. Lucy, St. Andrew, and St. Joseph. Justices of the Peace in these parishes were ordered to organize searches of all slave houses "for arms, ammunition or other dangerous weapons," to confiscate whatever was found, to strictly investigate how the arms were acquired, and to arrest any slaves suspected of being involved. As a further precaution, plantation owners and managers in the parishes were required to scrutinize "their Negroes both day and night," and were particularly urged to do so on the Sunday night following the Council meeting which produced the above orders. It was believed that on that night, toward the end of February, the slaves "designed a great many of them to meet in sundry places in order to consult and contrive their carrying on their bloody design in a short time from that." It was also ordered that slaves should be carefully watched by white

servants who the planters "can well trust and confide in," implying a suspected proximity between various servants and slaves. However, further investigation found that "no great progress" had been made in planning the alleged revolt, and "that it was only a discourse moved amongst some of them." Moreover, although within a month of the Council meeting "some" Irish servants had been jailed and "others" were out on bail, it was also found that the implicated servants were not as guilty as initially believed; nonetheless, some of them were put on trial (Barb. Council 1686a, 1686b).

Few details are available on the aftermath and consequences of the alleged plot. Despite the fact that the authorities believed planning had not gone very far, the prospects of a possible revolt were still alarming enough and additional precautionary measures were taken. Although there is no information on the slaves who were implicated or their alleged plans, several were executed, but the actual number cannot be ascertained (Barb. Council 1685, 1686c, 1686d, 1687).<sup>4</sup>

Barbados's whites were apparently not as frightened in 1685-1686 as they had been in 1675, but, as in the aftermath of the 1675 plot, the possibility of revolt had been sufficiently alarming. One consequence of this was a reassessment of the island's slave laws, and by July 1688 this assessment resulted in the major "act for the governing of Negroes."<sup>5</sup> This law repealed all previous slave laws, including the ones of 1661 and 1676, but repeated or modified many of their major features, often employing the same phraseology. In its essential elements, the 1688 law did not go far beyond earlier laws and did not reflect any consequential changes or new ways of looking at what were, from the plantocracy's perception, old problems. The 1688 law mainly concerned itself, often in great detail, with regulating various forms of slave behavior and with the mechanisms of arrest, trial, and confinement and the sanctions against slaves who committed or were accused of having committed various "crimes and misdemeanors." In one form or another, most of the law's clauses were to persist, although enforced with variable regularity and consistency, until the island's entire slave code received a major overhaul in 1826 with final passage of the "slave consolidation act" (HANDLER 1974: 97-98).

Although the 1688 law was the major legislative action to follow as a direct consequence of the plot scare of 1685–1686, another one passed in 1688 also appears to have had bearing on the scare, particularly when viewed against the larger issue of the island's security and the strength of its militia. Concern with the militia's strength was a constant feature of the Barbados government during the last half of the 17th century. The militia had been considerably depleted by a very large exodus of poorer whites who had constituted its backbone; in addition, as the years passed the immigration of whites, particularly indentured servants, was significantly reduced. Despite the alleged involvement of indentured servants in the events of 1685–1686, the plantocracy continued to be worried that the island was not receiving sufficient servants and not retaining those whose terms had expired (HANDLER 1982a). Thus, in December 1688, the legislature revived an act (HALL 1764: 483, 485), initially passed in 1682, "to encourage the importation of Christian servants, and for retaining them within the island"; it was hoped this act would help strengthen the militia as well as afford "an effectual counterpoise to that preponderance which the Negroes must necessarily possess in scale of numbers" (POYER 1808: 126). Such concerns were to continue and dramatically increase within but a few years with the discovery of another slave conspiracy.

### *The 1692 conspiracy*

During the early part of September in 1692, while England and France warred in the Caribbean, Barbados's whites again feared they were "in extreme danger both from the enemy and from the Negroes" (Barb. Agents 1692). By October 11 their fears were realized with "the discovery of a Negro plot" which was to have been put into effect on Friday, the 21st of October (Barb. Council 1692a; Brief Rel. 1693).

There is no information on where the plot was discovered and who initially reported it (although the informer may have been a slave), but two slaves, Ben and Sambo, had been overheard discussing "their wicked design." The conversation was relayed to the authorities, and Ben and Sambo were arrested and jailed.

Hammon, another slave, somehow managed to gain access to Ben and Sambo and tried to convince them not to divulge anything further about the plot, but Hammon himself was arrested. Meanwhile, the governor had appointed four militia officers, prominent members of the plantocracy, to constitute the court martial to try “Negroes who shall be impeached for consulting and contriving mutiny, rebellion, or insurrection” (FRERE et al. 1692; Brief Rel. 1693).

On or about October 10, 1692, Hammon was questioned. Upon a promise that his life would be spared if he confessed his participation and gave evidence on the participation of others, he admitted that he was the one who had initially proposed a plan for an insurrection, and he also further implicated Ben, Sambo, and a third slave by the name of Samson. As a result of Hammon’s confession, the three slaves were sentenced to death unless they would divulge the names of other conspirators. Each was to be “hung in chains on a gibbet until you have starved to death, after which your head is to be severed from your body and put on a pole on said gibbet, your body cut in quarters and burned to ashes under said gibbet.” The slaves are reported to have received this sentence “patiently . . . without being in any ways moved” (FRERE et al. 1692; also, Barb. Council 1692a).

Samson was executed, but Ben and Sambo resisted naming the other conspirators and were able to endure the gibbeting for four days; with the effects of the torture, however, and “finding no relief from their expected confederates (which was often promised before and after imprisonment),” Ben and Sambo decided to confess. Released from the gibbet, Sambo died, but through Ben’s “confession” the court martial discovered the names of other participants and “most of the chief officers” (FRERE et al. 1692; also Barb. Council 1692a). As a result of various confessions, “between two and three hundred” slaves were arrested for their alleged roles, but apparently fewer were actually tried and only about thirty were considered major conspirators (Brief Rel. 1693; FRERE et al. 1692).

The trials took place over at least a 12-day period, from October 10 to October 22, 1692 (Barb. Council 1692a, 1692b). Of the slaves arrested, the court martial “condemned many,” and of

these "many were hang'd, and a great many burn'd. And (for a terror to others)," as of the last day or so of the court martial, "seven [were] hanging in chains alive, and so starving to death" (Brief Rel. 1693). By November 2nd or 3rd, "many" of the alleged leaders had been executed and others were soon to follow. This, it was believed, was "the properest method to make public examples of those which have been the authors and drawers in of the rest for terror to posterity" (FRERE et al. 1692). In addition, one Alice Mills was ultimately paid ten guineas "for castrating forty-two Negroes, according to the sentence of the commissioners for trial of rebellious Negroes" (Barb. Council 1693).

At the early part of November, when the court martial submitted its report to the governor, some of the slaves implicated by their peers' confessions were still at large; however, the court martial was confident that they were so disheartened that they would not attempt to proceed with their original plans (FRERE et al. 1692). The governor (KENDALL 1692) also hoped that with the "severe punishment of the leading conspirators . . . the island is now secure."

Unlike the 1675 plot, which included the African-born, the one in 1692 "was formed by the Negro's that were born in the island" (Brief Rel. 1693). And, as was not uncommon in later slave rebellions and conspiracies elsewhere in the British Caribbean, the Barbados court martial established that "most" of the major conspirators were "overseers, carpenters, brick layers, wheelwrights, sawyers, blacksmiths, grooms and such others that have more favour shown them by their masters, which adds abundantly to their crimes" (FRERE et al.; cf. CRATON 1979; GASPARD 1978; SCHULER 1970b).

There is no information on what whites believed were the slaves' specific motivations to revolt, but for three years they had managed to keep their "wicked and bloody design . . . very secret" (Brief Rel. 1693; cf. HALL 1764: 129). Whatever awareness Barbadian slaves had of the 1688 law discussed above, it clearly did not curtail the illegal acts of conspiracy in which they engaged. Although they had seriously discussed the plot among themselves for a relatively long period, during this period the uprising apparently had been intended to occur at least three

times; it was to have coincided with the weakened state of the island's defenses as a result of military expeditions sent against the French islands. On each occasion, however, events had intervened which caused a delay in effecting the plans. On the first two occasions, plans were changed with the unanticipated arrival of large English fleets that greatly augmented the island's military forces. A third date for the uprising was set after another major expedition was to have left Barbados for Martinique in the fall of 1692. However, before these plans could be realized Ben and Sambo were arrested, and the other leaders, fearing that "their times drew nigh for being made examples of," decided to move up the date. The confessions extracted from Ben and Sambo aborted these plans (FRERE et al. 1692; also, KENDALL 1692; Barb. Council 1694).

Over the three-month period prior to the plot's discovery, the leaders were "most active and industrious in gaining men to their party." Recruits were required to take an "oath for secrecy," and the court martial reported that the slave leaders "asked none that refused them"; so seriously was the oath regarded that only under torture did some, such as Ben and Sambo, divulge the plans for the rising (FRERE et al. 1692). (The oath was an important dimension of Barbados slave life and was directly influenced by African traditions. Although oaths are not reported for the 1675 plot, they were probably administered, and were a common feature of revolts or conspiracies in other Caribbean islands.)

The insurrection was elaborately planned and involved considerable organization. Familiar with the island's militia, which occasionally provided for their recruitment, the slaves may have modelled their organization after it; at the time the plot was discovered, they had sufficient people for "four regiments of foot, and two regiments of horse; the latter were to be got out of their masters' stables" (FRERE et al. 1692). The revolt was intended to have first broken out in the rural areas. It is difficult, however, to ascertain precisely how widely the plot extended, although it had spread to a number of plantations. Appended to the court martial report is a list of thirty slaves who were tried as leaders or major participants, and the names of 21 plantations to which they belonged. Using various sources, a tentative parish location can

be given for most of the plantations (HANDLER 1982b). The alleged ringleaders came from plantations located in several parishes: apparently mainly from St. Michael and to some extent the adjacent parishes of Christ Church, St. George, St. Thomas, and St. James — a few may also have come from St. John, St. Joseph, and St. Andrew. About 69 percent of the slaves seem to have belonged to plantations in the St. Michael, Christ Church, and St. George areas. The plot does not seem to have spread to the areas furthest from St. Michael, such as the northern parishes of St. Peter and St. Lucy, and the southern one of St. Philp. Whatever the case, the plot included slaves from different areas and was clearly not restricted to one small locale or a handful of plantations immediately adjacent to one another.

On each plantation whose slaves were to be involved in the rising, “four or five of the most capable and . . . most trusted . . . were secretly, in the dead of night, first to kill their masters; from thence go to the assistance of those in the next plantation and so forward towards the town, near which they had appointed their place of rendezvous.” Having seized whatever arms they could from their masters, their major supply of arms was to come from the magazine in Bridgetown. A “Negro” (slave or free?) armourer in the magazine had joined the plot, and had promised to supply the insurrectionists with 400 barrels of powder, 300 “small arms,” 160 swords, and 280 “cateaux [cartridge?] boxes”; these materials were to be readied “on any night they would appoint giving him a night’s notice” (FRERE et al. 1692). It is unknown if each person was to receive more than one weapon, but taking these numbers, the number of plantations involved, and the figure that “between two and three hundred” slaves were arrested, it appears that many slaves were to have been involved in the initial rising; moreover the leaders undoubtedly counted on gaining more adherents to their cause as the revolt unfolded.

On the night of the revolt, the plan called for gaining access to the magazine through a door which was to have been opened by the “Negro armourer.” Upon acquiring arms, the next step was “gaining the fort.” The insurrectionists had planned to enlist “four or five Irish men” who were to go into the fort and get the matrosses drunk. One of the Irishmen was then to have opened the

door of the fort and signalled the slaves, who were to be waiting outside. With the conquest of the fort, the slaves planned to use its guns to destroy all ships in the harbor while setting fires in several areas of Bridgetown. Upon taking the town, they intended to "keep as many of the best houses as would be convenient for their purposes," and "the first effect of their malice" was to be the governor whose "flesh [was] to be scattered on the earth" (FRERE et al. 1692).

The insurrectionists aimed not only "to kill the governour and all the planters," but also "to destroy the government . . . and to set up a new governour and government of their own" (Brief Rel. 1693). More specifically,

they design'd to have taken up the surnames and offices of the principal planters and men in the island, to have enslaved all the black men and women to them, and to have taken the white women for their wives . . . no imported Negro was to have been admitted to partake of the freedom they intended to gain, till he had been made free by them, who should have been their masters. The old women (both black and white) were to have been their cooks, and servants in other capacities. And they had chosen a governour among themselves

The court martial (FRERE et al. 1692) reported that "some" of the implicated slaves believed "that after the conquest over the white people they should have met a worse enemy amongst themselves; that it would be impossible for them to have agreed in the disposal of the government, the estates of their masters, of plunder, and (what was most desirable) the white women; they were to make wives of the handsomest, whores, cooks and chambermaids of others".

Whatever were the actual specific aims of this apparently well-organized and large-scale planned insurrection, its "suppression," noted the Barbados legislature (Barb. Council and Ass. 1696), cost the government "many thousands pounds" and, as Governor KENDALL (1692) reported, it "put the inhabitants into so strong a consternation and so plainly demonstrated to me our extreme weakness, of which those villians are but too sensible." The governor pointed not only to the fear and tensions generated by the plot but also to how the uprising was planned to take advantage, as noted earlier, of the weakened state of the island's military defenses. Writing over a century later, JOHN POYER



(1808: 154-155) observed how the "calamities of war" were added to "by the ravages of pestilence" that took a heavy toll of life. He believed "the public distress" encouraged the slaves to develop their plans "for exterminating the white inhabitants, whose numbers were considerably diminished by the contagious distemper which prevailed."

As in the aftermath of the 1675 plot and the scare of 1685-1686, the Barbados legislature passed several laws which, in one way or another, were in direct reaction to the 1692 conspiracy. The "confessions" of various slaves before and during the court martial, the role of an apparent slave informer in first divulging the plot, and earlier experiences with slave informers confirmed for the Barbados plantocracy, as whites discovered in other Caribbean areas, the useful role that slave informers could play in checking rebellions. Not long after the termination of the court martial, on October 27, 1692, the legislature passed (HALL 1764: 129-130) "an act for the encouragement of all Negroes and slaves, that shall discover any conspiracy." The act offered manumission to the informer, who was to be transported from Barbados to any place of his choice, or a monetary reward if he chose to remain on the island as a slave. It is tempting to speculate that the option of transportation was afforded to secure the safety of the informer against possible reprisals by other slaves.

Four other bills were passed on the same day as further measures to reduce the possibility of the revolt materializing or to help prevent future ones. There was "an act appointing persons to ride armed" (HALL 1764:487; also, Barb. Council 1701a), and one which prohibited slaves from buying rum "or other strong liquors" which noted the "many enormities . . . committed, and mischiefs hatched and contrived . . . when opportunities have been given of meeting, and excessive drinking thereat" (HALL 1764:131). A third law revived an earlier clause concerning the execution of long-term runaway slaves who "by their long absence from the service of their owners . . . become desperate and daily plot and commit felonies and other enormities . . . [to] the danger of the island in general" (HALL 1764:130-131). The final enactment on October 27, 1692, was designed to strengthen Barbados's military forces which had been weakened by the recent epidemic

and by the great reduction in white servant immigration: the English crown was requested to station a regiment of soldiers on the island and guarantees were given for the regiment's "free-quarters" (RAWLIN 1699:189). The last official measure concerning the 1692 plot appears to have occurred on December 14, 1692, when the legislature enacted mechanisms for "defraying the charge of accomodating the court-martial and officers appointed for the trial of Negroes" (HALL 1764:487). And it was not until close to a decade later that officials reacted to another alarm which arose among the island's whites.

Based on news conveyed by the wife of a white fisherman, on December 16, 1701 the Barbados Council (1701a) concluded that there was "just suspicion that some Negroes are conspiring and plotting mutiny and rebellion." Although various precautionary measures were taken over the next week or so, the suspected plot does not appear to have stimulated any great panic or concern, certainly nothing on the order of what had occurred in 1675 and 1692 (Barb. Ass. 1701, 1702; Barb. Council 1701b, 1702a, 1702b).

However, between December 23 and on or before December 28, 1701, "some houses" in Bridgetown were burned (Barb. Council 1701b; Barb. Ass. 1701). An investigation implicated "some" slaves who confessed that the fires had "been wilfully done by Negroes" (Barb. Council 1701b). This further confirmed white suspicions that a revolt was being planned or, at least, that there was a "designe to burn the Bridgetown, and to attempt some other violences" (Barb. Council 1702a). Yet the court martial that investigated the fires did not find "reasons enough to think their design was a general insurrection, as some persons have feared" (Barb. Council 1702a). Nonetheless, a few slaves were tried for the Bridgetown arson and no more than two or three were "found guilty and executed" (Barb. Council 1702a, 1702c).

Arson, it can be noted, was a common act among Barbados (and Caribbean) slaves, and as illustrated in the 1675 and 1692 plots, as elsewhere in the Caribbean, it was often "the preliminary to revolt" (SCHULER 1966: 24, 194). But in Barbados in 1701 there appears to have been no conspiracy for an insurrection, and modern references to the events as a "slave upheaval" (CRATON 1979: 101), an "abortive Negro outbreak" (BENNETT 1958: 28) or

“a conspiracy to burn Bridgetown” (SCHULER 1966: 194) are overstatements. Whatever transpired appears to have been confined to Bridgetown despite the initial fears of the authorities, for which no evidence was found, that a plot may have extended to the rural areas as well.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The 1701 events were the last in the 18th century to cause whites to seriously entertain the possibility that a slave insurrection was actually being planned. As the years passed, although specific legislative and other measures were occasionally taken that reflect white concerns with internal security matters respecting the slaves, a general view seems to have evolved that Barbados's slaves were not apt to organize rebellions. This is not to say that Barbados's slaves were complacent or non-resistant. Individual acts (or attempts) of murder, poisoning, theft, property destruction, running away, arson, and labor negligence occurred. There were also a number of cases when small groups of slaves were accused of assaulting whites and even convicted of murdering them, as well as occasional incidents when a group of plantation slaves reacted to their harsh labor conditions and inadequate material treatment; and slaves were accused of “pilfering” and “plundering” after a major fire in Bridgetown in 1766 and a massive 1780 hurricane. However, there is no indication that such incidents, despite the concern they may have awakened, were perceived as particularly threatening to Barbados's general security or were viewed as containing the seeds for large-scale insurrection (e.g. Barb. Council 1702e; HUGHES 1750: 123-124; DICKSON 1789: 18-21; BENNETT 1958: 28-29; PINFOLD 1766; FOWLER 1781:31; POYER 1808: 453-454). Although Barbados's whites never seem to have entirely discounted the possibility of revolt and were aware of the many revolts and conspiracies elsewhere in the British and non-British Caribbean during the 18th century, as WILLIAM DICKSON (1789: 93), an astute and knowledgeable observer of Barbados reported, “no prophesies of war and bloodshed have been uttered by the [white] people of

Barbados . . . their general behavior shows but little of that corporal dread of the blacks which seems to pervade some of the islands."<sup>6</sup>

Whatever were the reasons for this relative sense of security as well as the lack of large-scale collective resistance to slavery during the 18th century, for whites the 17th century was clearly marked by a very different attitude and they never felt completely free of the threat of a slave rebellion. During the early period, roughly prior to the 1660s, there were various incidents in which groups of slaves reacted against particular masters, but marronage appears to have been the major form of collective revolt. Although individual slaves ran away or absented themselves, sometimes temporarily, marronage involved small bands of runaways who hid themselves in the forested interior, living off the land and committing acts of violence against white persons and property. These maroon bands seem to have been almost haphazard reactions to the slave system. They do not appear to have coalesced into organizations for large-scale revolts, but whites perceived them as having that potential and constant efforts were made to eliminate the bands. With the depletion of the forests as the sugar plantation system expanded, marronage decreased and was ultimately eliminated, although individual acts of running away continued throughout the slave period. As marronage all but disappeared, it appears that the major collective alternative reaction to slavery, as perceived by slaves, was the possibility of large-scale revolt; this alternative was expressed in the conspiracies of 1675 and 1692.

The specific motivations that precipitated these plots and the reasons why particular slaves chose to participate are impossible to establish with certainty. Although one can reasonably assume such broad general causes of dissatisfaction as hunger, severe labor conditions, and harsh disciplinary measures, it is also probably true, as SCHULER (1970b: 380) has written about Caribbean slave rebellions in general, that "grievances were quite precise, and the slaves' assessment of their condition and of the chance for improving it tended to be specific rather than general."<sup>7</sup>

It is important to keep in mind that because of the nature of the source materials, all of which were produced by whites, and the conditions under which they were written, there is a real problem

in determining the motivations, aims, and ultimate aspirations of slave conspirators and alleged conspirators. The determination of whites to exert stringent measures and powerful retribution against conspirators, the nature of confessions extracted under torture, the willingness of authorities to rely on single informants, their interests in establishing guilt (rather than proving innocence), and in providing self-serving justifications for their fears and mistrust of slaves can, among other factors, raise legitimate questions about slaves accused of being major ringleaders or participants as well as about various details on the conspiracies they are reported to have divulged; add to this list the profound racism and ethnocentrism of white society, and it becomes clear that many features of slave values and aspirations must remain obscure.

One consequence of the limitations and sparsity of the source materials is that it is difficult to be certain about the short range goals and ultimate aims of the plots. Both involved notions of armed conflict, bloodshed, and property destruction, but available information prevents saying if the slaves viewed these goals as primary or secondary — that is, as legitimate ends in themselves or as necessary means to achieve ultimate objectives (cf. KILSON 1964). Both plots intended to destroy slave holders, perhaps white property holders in general (white women were ostensibly to be spared, but one can really never know how much white women played a role, if any, in slave plans), and to some extent white property. Although both plots apparently involved the formulation of ultimate goals, the definition of these goals and their specific content, as so much else relating to slave motivations and values, must largely remain problematical.

The general goals of the 1675 and 1692 plots apparently were the overthrow of white society and the establishment of some form of black state or government. The 1675 plot, which involved African-born, largely Akan-speaking, slaves may have aimed at establishing some type of kingdom, a not uncommon model in the formation of early maroon communities in various New World areas (PRICE 1979: 20). The aims of the 1692 creole plot were generally stated as the establishment of an undefined slave government, headed by a governor, and perhaps loosely modelled

after the white regime itself. It was also indicated that the 1692 conspirators intended to establish a type of society wherein other slaves, particularly the African-born, were to be kept in slavery and were only to be granted their freedom at the pleasure of the successful creole rebels. This aim may have been exaggerated in the white sources, but it may have reflected the traditional friction between creole and African-born slaves which was also expressed in other Caribbean slave rebellions and conspiracies (CRATON 1980: 7; SCHULER 1970a; *cf.* DIRKS 1978: 156-158).

Clearly a major goal of the conspiracies was freedom, but the specific form that the free society was to take is another matter. CRATON (1979: 119) confronted this issue in his study of slave rebellions in the British West Indies during the early 19th century, but even more so than in the period that he discusses, in 17th century Barbados, as noted above, the specific and ultimate aspirations of slave plots in general are obscured "because the slaves were virtually mute and the literature was dominated by white writers." As CRATON (1980: 18) has written more generally elsewhere, the aim of the slaves in rebelling or conspiring to rebel was "freedom to make, or recreate, a life of their own." Although the precise nature of this "life of their own" cannot be effectively determined from the documented slave conspiracies in Barbados, it may also be that Barbados's slaves, like other rebels elsewhere in other periods of history, had not formulated in detail the type of society and life they wished to create, but rather had concentrated their efforts on planning the tactics for overthrowing the white regime.

Whatever were the details and specific long-range objectives of the conspiracies, the risings seem to have been carefully formulated and had been planned for several years. Both plots apparently placed emphasis on gaining recruits as the uprisings unfolded, although there are no data on how much this expectation was an essential feature of the planning process. The 1692 conspiracy appears to have involved a greater degree of systematic planning and organization than the one in 1675, including the allocation of tasks to various groups and individuals and the definition of individuals who could be relied on for the initial rising, but this conclusion, as with others, may be influenced by

the comparatively greater richness of information on the 1692 plot, rather than being a function of what actually transpired.

The long periods during which the plots were formulated increased the likelihood of their discovery before plans could be realized, but during the several years of planning the slaves managed to keep their intentions secret until word inadvertently leaked to the authorities. That these plots "came so close to fruition, after a long gestation," as GASPAR (1978: 317) observed with respect to Antigua in 1736 but in a comment equally applicable to Barbados, "attests to how successfully the leaders, and indeed the followers, played their roles in maintaining solidarity." A sense of group consciousness, a collective self-identification against a common oppressor, and the power of oaths were probably instrumental in helping Barbados's slaves maintain solidarity, but this solidarity, as well as the ability to formulate plans for uprisings involving different plantations, also reflects the important role of slave leadership.

In his analysis of slave revolts in the United States, KILSON (1964: 183) stresses how the preconditions for revolt in any area were not sufficient for the revolt to take place, "rather there must be a catalyst in the form of an individual or individuals." Leadership was crucial to slave revolts in general, and again GASPAR's (1978: 319, 322) observations on the 1736 Antiguan conspiracy can be applied to Barbados, particularly the 1692 conspiracy:

The real responsibility for the plot's success . . . lay with the ringleaders who had painstakingly laid plans and recruited followers . . . The plot could only have been developed by slaves who had resided there for years, who understood the weaknesses of the whites, and who could be reasonably confident of their ability to mobilize a sufficient number of highly motivated followers.

In a more general vein, in her discussion of slave leadership in 18th-century British Caribbean revolts, SCHULER (1970b: 382) rightfully stresses the major importance to rebellions of having "leaders capable of interpreting the signs of European weakness and convincing the slaves of their own potential strength. In the rebellions and conspiracies for which we have the most information, the activity of slave leaders seems to have been the most significant factor. One cannot escape the importance of leadership

in giving direction to the yearnings of the slaves for something more than the frustrations and disappointments of day-to-day resistance or of simply doing nothing" (*cf.* SCHULER 1966: 226, 233-238; CRATON 1979: 116).

In Barbados the reprisals against slaves who were alleged leaders in conspiracies, or who were accused of participating in other incidents which threatened or appeared to threaten white authority, were swift and brutal, though perhaps not uncharacteristic of the age. Slaves were burned alive, gibbeted, beheaded, and castrated, and one can, perhaps, assume that the violent and public nature of such punishments was sufficient to cause slaves to carefully consider the implications of conspiring to revolt. That is, the physical reaction of whites to alleged leaders or conspirators was extreme. This was one form of reaction. Others were the propensity to become aroused over the possibility of revolt as well as the laws that were enacted as a result of rebellious behaviors, such as marronage, or in the aftermath of discovered conspiracies or alleged conspiracies.

These laws were supposed to tighten the island's security system, but it is difficult to determine the precise effect they and their enforcement had on inhibiting rebellious acts; the laws, however, often reflected that the behaviors they were designed to eliminate or curtail in fact continued. Although the laws prohibited such actions as running away, and other forms of absenteeism, theft and destruction of white property, assaults on whites and so forth, slaves continued to engage in these actions; although slaves were prohibited the use of various musical instruments, they continued to play drums throughout the slave period. The laws called for slave houses to be regularly searched for weapons, but it is unknown to what extent such searches were carried out, especially after the initial scares of conspiracy had passed; it is also unknown, for example, to what extent, if any, the law which was intended to encourage slaves to inform on conspiratorial designs inhibited such designs. In general, the laws were probably enforced with variable frequency and regularity and although the penalties for transgressing on legally-defined norms continued to be severe, it cannot be determined to what extent such penalties were factors in inhibiting revolts or conspiracies.



During the 17th century, then, Barbados's slaves participated in a rebellious tradition that characterized other islands and territories of England's Caribbean empire. Although Barbados lacked large-scale collective and violent reactions to slavery during the 18th century, an ideology of resistance and freedom was kept alive by internal conditions which were also influenced by, among other factors, events elsewhere in the Caribbean. The revolt in St. Domingue, for example, had widespread impact in the Caribbean and it, as well as other revolts and conspiracies, were discussed in Barbados. As the years progressed into the 19th century, and with a new generation of slaves that was virtually entirely creole, the island's atmosphere became more charged as a result of growing pressures from Britain for slave amelioration and particularly because of controversies surrounding the "slave registry bill." Yet on April 13, 1816, a very prominent member of Barbados's plantocracy was able to write to an absentee plantation owner in England: "The slaves of this island were never so happy since it was a colony as at this moment" (HAYNES 1816). He reflected the views of many defenders of Barbados's slave system. It is no small wonder, then, that they were largely, if not entirely, unsuspecting when, only one day later — on the night of Easter Sunday — their complacency was shattered with an uprising that was the first actual large-scale slave rebellion in Barbados's then over one-hundred-and-eighty-year colonial history.

## NOTES

1. This is a reduced and revised version of a paper, "Slave Insurrectionary Attempts in Seventeenth-Century Barbados", first presented at the 13th Conference of Caribbean Historians in Guadeloupe, April 1981. I am grateful to STANLEY ENGERMAN, BARRY GASPAN, and ANGEL CALDERON-CRUZ for their helpful suggestions. Historical research was supported by grants and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Science Foundation, National Institute of Mental Health, American Philosophical Society, and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research.
2. See, for example, titles of acts passed in 1646, 1649, 1651, 1652, 1653, and 1655 in HALL (1764: 460-467) and clauses and acts enacted prior to 1653 in JENNINGS (1654: 20-21, 43-45, 81-83, 146-148).
3. See also, titles of laws in HALL (1764: 480) and Barbados Assembly and Council (1677a).
4. Over a century later a local historian wrote: "about twenty of the most daring conspirators were sacrificed to the public safety," but his source is not given and he errs in dating these events at 1688 (POYER 1808: 128).
5. Published in RAWLIN (1699: 156-164) and HALL (1764: 112-121); there are some minor variations in wording between these two versions. For the connections between this law and the plot scare, see comments by POYER (1808: 128), H. FRERE (1768: 40), and OLDMIXON (1741; 2:43).
6. In questioning why "nothing like an insurrection has taken place [in Barbados] . . . for many years," DICKSON (1789: 92-93) offered several reasons, but a consideration of these as well as the views of modern scholars which may help to account for the absence of large-scale conspiracies or revolts in Barbados during the eighteenth century is outside the scope of this paper. I hope to deal with these reasons at length in a book currently under preparation.
7. For a novel line of reasoning, involving food supplies and labor demands, respecting the general underlying causes of many revolts or conspiracies in the British West Indies, see DIRKS (1978).

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