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Changes in Social Welfare of Caribbean Families

by

Evanel R. Terrell

It has long been felt that family social welfare patterns of community life could experience group improvement if a study were made on numerous social fronts. Box Elder, County, Utah, Obion County, Tennessee, Toledo, Ohio and Wichita, Kansas conducted experiments in strengthening family living through cooperative community action. The findings of these communities evoked interest for a study in this area by the Home Economics Department of Savannah State College.

Since these programs served as forerunners, the thread of interest was carried into the Caribbeans where home economics specialists from the United States and other designated persons and organizations had been hard at work initiating and developing home economics since 1952. A summary of the far reaching influence of home economics was reported by the Caribbean commission. This is significant because family living is dependent upon the skills in food preparation, clothing, housing and home management of a people.

During the summer of 1960, a group of home economists under the leadership of this writer made a study tour of the Caribbean Islands. The tour was an integral part of the Savannah State College’s summer session. Because we were concerned about the home and family life of our neighbors to the South, the touring home economists were especially eager to ascertain how family life patterns in the neighboring communities compared with our own.

The following countries were selected for visitation: the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Jamaica. Permission was granted for visitation by the Secretary General of the Caribbean Commission. Other countries served by the commission were Antigua, British Guiana, British Honduras, Grenada, Martinique, St. Lucia, Trinidad and Tobaga. The Dominican Republic and Haiti are not participating countries with the Caribbean Commission, but the Dominican Republic sent Dr. Amada Nivar de Pittaluga as an observer to the Second Conference on Home Economics in 1958.

Figure 1 shows Haiti and the Dominican Republic located to the southeast of Cuba and the Bahama Islands. It can be noted that Port-au-Prince is in the southern part of Haiti while Ciudad Trujillo is on the southern coast of the Dominican Republic. Puerto Rico is due east of these two republics and the Virgin Islands almost form a semi-circle between this country and the South American coast.

It was with a great deal of historical romanticism that the group made preparation to visit the countries of the Greater and Lesser Antilles which had figured so greatly in the illicit slave trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of the New World and which are
now bright jewels of tourism in the Caribbean. Our aesthetic emotions were further stirred as these huge highly mechanized airliners circled and trembled like a delicate and graceful ballet dancer before they dipped and glided off into the blue.

Emphasis in this paper will concern itself primarily with the sociological background of these countries, some problems and progress in education, promotion of better housing programs and methods of up-grading living and economic conditions of the people.

Caribbean orientation and tour programs were prepared for the group by the following:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Virgin Islands</th>
<th>Dr. Andrew C. Preston, Commissioner of Education</th>
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<td>Miss Jane E. Tuitt, Assistant Commissioner of Education</td>
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<td>Mr. Raphael Whestley, coordinator, Vocational Education</td>
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<td>Mrs. Eldra M. Schulterbrandt, Director of Social Welfare</td>
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<td>Virgin Islands Department of Tourism</td>
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<td>Puerto Rico</td>
<td>Mr. A. Cheneka, Secretary of State</td>
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<td>Dr. Lydia Roberts, Special Home Economics Consultant to Puerto Rico and the Caribbean Commission</td>
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<td>Dr. Luisa Stefani, Head, Department of Home Economics, University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras</td>
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<td>Dominican Republic</td>
<td>Dr. Amada Nivar Vda Pittaluga, President of the National Council of Women, Inc.</td>
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<td>Dr. Josefina Pimental Boves, Mayor, San Cristobal</td>
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<td>Dr. Franklin Dominquez Hernandez, Director, Education</td>
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<td>Haiti</td>
<td>Father John Papaillon, Minister of Education (by special permission of Pope John XXIII)</td>
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<td>Mr. Frederick G. Desvarierix, Secretary of State, Labor and Social Welfare</td>
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<td>M. Max A. Antoine, General Director of the Bureau of Labor</td>
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<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>Mr. A. McNair, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Housing and Social Welfare</td>
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<td>Mrs. Sybil Francis, Department of Housing and Social Welfare, Member of Board of Directors, Jamaican Social Welfare Commission</td>
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<td>Mrs. Evadne Ford, Chief Home Economics Officers and Secretary</td>
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<td>Kingston Department of Tourism</td>
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Historical Portrait of the Caribbean Islands

A very distinguished group of panelists awaited us in Kingston, Jamaica. This group gave a general historical and sociological background of all the Caribbean countries. Those who served on the panel were Mr. A. McNair, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Housing and Social Welfare, Miss Mavis Burke, Historian, UCWI, Dr. M. G. Smith, Research Fellow Institute of Social and Economic Research, UCWI, Mr. C. Dowdy, Assistant Secretary Manager, Jamaica Social Welfare Commission, Mr. R. M. Bent, M. A. Chief Officer, Ministry of Education and Mr. Arthur Brown, Director, Central Planning Unit.

The history of the Aborigines of this area reveals that the population was made up of Arawak Indians. These people were clear brown in color, short and slightly built but well shaped with straight coarse black hair, broad faces and flat wide noses. The Spaniards did not consider them beautiful, owing chiefly to their custom of flattening the foreheads of children in infancy by tying boards to the frontal bones. One effect of this was to make the skull so hard that it was invincible against primitive weapons and even Spanish swords are supposed to have been blunted and broken on Arawak skulls. These peaceful loving Indians were soon exterminated through brutality, death and disease by the Spaniards, because they would not submit to slavery.

Concurrently, the English, French, Dutch and Portuguese, and a few Jewish families from Portugal were seeking economic opportunities in the new world. Within two centuries the English were able to claim Jamaica. Haiti is the western mountainous third of Hispaniola which was won through war by France. Spain conquered and controlled the eastern two thirds which is now the Dominican Republic. Spain dominated Puerto Rico, the Danes controlled the Virgin Islands and the French and Dutch, took over many of the smaller islands of the Lesser Antilles.

These new settlers attempted to make a success in their new colonies with the use of indentured servants from the homeland as laborers. It was soon found that the Europeans could not stand the hot tropical climate and hard labor. This fact opened the opportunity for the rich slave trade which was to follow.

Beginning in 1703 the Treaty of Utrecht provided England with the opportunity for the large scale supply of slaves to be provided to the Spanish settlements in the new world for thirty years. In the English footsteps came the Portuguese, and later other European nations, as the trade in slaves grew from the African gold coast with the rapidly expanding cultivation of the sugar cane.

The decline of the plantation system and slavery in the West Indies was in 1848. During this period the Negroes outnumbered the
whites almost twenty to one. In addition, there was a free coloured group who also outnumbered the white ruling class. The free coloured were the offspring from a white planter and a Negro slave. Many of these folk took up professions, went into the trades or engaged in the cultivation of sugar or coffee.

At the close of this period there was recognition of three distinct groups in the population; (1) the planter class (2) the free coloured land owner, the emancipated slaves and the Jews. Family life for the slave had been a factor of disregard because of the plantation system.

Even in the beginning, the transitional period to any type of social and economic unity was slow because of the following:

(1) the habit of absolute authority on the part of the planter
(2) the habit of irresponsibility among the laborers
(3) the lessening of the incentives for advancement as the leaders of the emancipation period died out and as new opportunities for material failed to appear
(4) Neglect of the physical welfare of the laboring population contributed towards its ineffectiveness and hampered its progress

**Changes in Forms of Government**

Over a period of years following Emancipation, the fact was recognized by the separate West Indian territories that they were closely linked historically and economically, and that a federation of the Leeward and the Windward Islands with Trinidad would benefit their progress economically and socially. The Leeward Islands were first federated in 1871 and a union with the Windward Islands was effected in 1936. Further progress toward the long needed social and economic development of the West Indies was the establishment of the Anglo-American Commission in 1942 and later reorganized as the Caribbean Commission in 1946. On June 21, 1960, the Caribbean organization was formed representing self governing units. The organization existed for the purpose of furthering regional cooperation in social cultural, and economic matters of common interest in the area, particularly, agriculture, communications, education, fisheries, health, housing, industry, labor, music and the arts, social welfare and trade. Headquarters transferred from Port-au-Spain, Trinidad, to San Juan, Puerto Rico.

**Family Social Patterns and Class Structure**

With the exception of Puerto Rico and Cuba, where a large number of Europeans settled and made their homes, the family has inherited from the past a number of characteristics. There was no room during slavery for the family as a parent-child group. The father’s place in the home was never secure. He had no sanctioned authority over it and could at any time be removed. His role primarily ended with procreation. At the end of slavery, the Crown governments were not
concerned or prepared to interfere with the new social and economic adjustments created. Thus, there has been the perpetuation of the following:

a. concubinage as a substitute for marriage  
b. maternal family head  
c. high rates of illiteracy

Family patterns are also prescribed by certain ways of earning a living, e.g.:

a. land ownership and marriage are associated with the highest social status  
b. manual labor or working for wages as a common laborer, is associated with the lowest status

The coloured middle class was elevated in status as a result of children born from white planter and Negro mistress parentage. This group has always aligned itself with the white upperclass and stands aloof from the peasantry and labor class.

**Household Constituencies**

The types of family households commonly found are:

a. extended family household including the grandmother, outside children of either the father or mother, or any other related members  
b. divided family which is explained as a household with only one parent present  
c. sibling households in which adult brothers and sisters live under one roof  
d. single person household and households where unrelated men or women live together and share a room

**The Influence of Home Economics in the Caribbean**

The tradition of promiscuity, family instability, the incomplete family, the mother at the center combined with low wages, ignorance and a large measure of illiteracy challenged the home economics experts.

Until 1950 the greatest level of home economics development had taken place in the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and in the Virgin Islands of the United States. In an effort to foster the regional and international approach for extending training which will ultimately enhance family and community benefits to all, the Food and Agricultural organizations and the Caribbean Commission brought representatives of all the countries together for a conference on Home Economics and Education in Nutrition in 1952.

Following this conference, a three months training course in home economics was held at the University of Puerto Rico for twenty five
workers representing ten countries. The conference was sponsored by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, the Caribbean Commission and the University of Puerto Rico. Dr. Lydia J. Roberts, international consultant in Nutrition was the leader.

The program was planned to provide information on the various aspects of family life and to provide an opportunity for practice in the techniques needed to improve family living.

The subjects offered included nutrition, home food production, food preservation, housing and sanitation, home mechanics, clothing, home care of the sick, family relations, family economics, home economics education and lettering.

To extend the service and the quality of work to be accomplished, it was decided that a conference on home economics be held every three years in order to facilitate the exchange of views and experiences between technicians actively engaged in the work.

To reach rural families, home demonstration agents and extension agents are yet to be trained. In the Virgin Islands and Surinam, a team of workers for rural areas composed of a social worker, a teacher, an agricultural extension worker and a nurse have been recommended. These persons would be under the joint responsibility of the Departments of Health, Education, Social Welfare and Agriculture. The social worker would be related to a coordinating Council of Social Agencies including representatives of education, health, housing and the clergy.

Many agencies within these countries are helping to support the nation-wide program in family life education. A few of the agencies actively engaged in this work in the various countries are as follows:

Jamaica—
- The Jamaica Agricultural Society
- The Sugar Industry Labor Welfare Board
- The Jamaica Welfare Commission
- The Jamaica Women's Federation
  (Noteworthy service during the 1959-60 year to promote the sanctity of marriage was to provide over 100 wedding rings to couples)

Virgin Islands—
- The Women's League
  (Works hard in promoting marriage and reducing illegitimacy which has been as high as 50 per cent of children born)

Dominican Republic—National Council of Women takes a leadership role outside of educational and social agencies they sponsored by the Trujillo government

Haiti—
- International Cooperative Assistance at Damel takes the leadership role. Missionaries of Baptist and Methodist faith are active agencies in improving family life.
The Department of Labor and Social Welfare is hard at work on reforms but has been inhibited by constant changes in government leadership.

Puerto Rico— A commonwealth territory of the United States, so it is therefore ahead of sister Caribbean countries in agencies and monies available for population betterment.

Education

The educational system throughout the Caribbean, with the exception of the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico is patterned after the European plan. Schooling is offered, but not compulsory up through high school. The students are then screened through a mass examination and only those who pass may go to college. To illustrate this point, we observed two thousand students in Port-au-Prince who were being given their baccalaureate examinations (comparable to the U. S. high school), July, 1960. The examination covered a period of one week. The examiners predicted that only four hundred (400) of these would pass. The sixteen hundred (1600) would then be turned loose as laborers or find menial jobs paying low wages.

President Francois Du Valier of Haiti has instituted a national program of “each one teach one.” Every person who has evidence that he has taught another to read during the course of a year is given a certificate of merit. In the rural areas, travelers can observe sign posts at intervals which direct one to local buildings for adult education. These classes are offered at night.

Some of the prevalent practices in Education in several countries are listed below:

Virgin Islands— Attendance of children through high school is not compulsory. At present there is no institution of higher learning on the island. Those who wish or can afford it, may come to the United States or go to Europe for college training. At present, there is a projected program on foot under the leadership of Dr. Alonzo Moron, former president of Hampton Institute who is studying the feasibility of establishing a junior college at St. Thomas.

Dominican Republic—There is no compulsory form of education for all classes of people. However, in Ciudad Trujillo, the Women’s University offers curricula in home economics and business training. An opportunity was offered to see the Polytechnic Institute for Women in Santiago, and the Loyola Institute for young men in San Cristobal. A rural normal school was visited in Licey al Medio and a typical public school at Higuey.
The Polytechnic School for Women and the National school of art and manual labor are located in Ciudad Trujillo.

Of particular interest was the graduation program at the Cultural Institute. One of the major requirements of these high school graduates is that they must write a paper of high merit in English. One of the graduates was an adult whom the American Oil Company had selected to take an orientation course in England. It was obvious that class, caste, and social practice were part of the social scheme. Guests from the embassies along with persons from the profession were the only ones present.

**Housing**

Housing is the key to good family living in all parts of the world. Throughout the Caribbean, housing programs sponsored privately and through government subsidy are greatly in evidence.

Extensive developments in housing have gone on and are still underway in Puerto Rico and Jamaica. Haiti with her extremely low economy is making a fine showing. The Virgin Islands and the Dominican Republic have excellent programs. The housing situation in many of the countries is as follows:

Jamaica—A tour of the Jamaican housing developments showed six types of plans:

a. Government Housing Scheme  
b. Middle Income Housing Scheme  
c. Farm House Scheme  
d. Owner-occupier Scheme  
e. Ex-Service Men Scheme  
f. Indigent Scheme

The middle income scheme represents three bedrooms, living room, dining room, bath and toilet. A prospective owner may secure a twenty year loan to complete payment. This scheme may also provide a maid’s room if desired. The prices for these homes range between $10,000 and $14,000. Low income schemes are three room structures, equipped with modern sanitary conveniences and a kitchen with a sink and a concrete drain board. These homes are priced at $2,000 on a long term basis. Ex-service men may borrow government funds not to exceed $1,000 for home ownership. Farmers are helped by being able to obtain loans to buy a house foundation already laid with a skeleton super structure for $50 to $120 depending on the size. For transients and truck gardeners emergency housing made of wattle and daub at $1.00 a month is available.

Housing for Puerto Ricans has gone forward under federal housing programs. The Puerto Rican Housing Authority and private enterprise have combined their efforts in providing adequate housing. Over 17,000 dwellings have been built by FHA mortgages.
The funds invested in the slum clearance and Urban Renewal Programs represent an investment of fifty million dollars. Thirty-two million represent federal allotments and the remainder as grants from the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

These homes represent housing projects, apartment houses, single and duplex houses, each with a parcel of land to cultivate vegetables. The building lots are sold on twenty year terms, other homes are for rent. Other modern community facilities are provided for recreation, community and commercial centers.

Under the guidance of Dr. Esther Zayas of the University of Puerto Rico, the Aided Self Help plan for rural communities was observed. The Puerto Rican Housing Authority provides technical assistance, building materials and the lot to be paid in 10 to 20 installments, according to the families’ income. Under this plan, the families in the community furnish building labor in their spare time.

Of credit to low income housing is a demonstration house on the West Indies University campus which was planned and constructed under the leadership of Queen E. Shoutes, FAO Home Economics Development Economist and now Dean of the School of Home Economics, Tuskegee Institute.

Another aspect of community development was the technical assistance that is given to women to learn crafts which will enable them to make saleable articles out of native materials. Strengthening the economic well being of the people through vocational education will in the long run alleviate much of the suffering and poverty.

Since the era of slavery and sugar cane has passed, noteworthy improvements and developments have been made to make the Island countries independent. Economists had said “this is how you are, and this is how you will be.” However, tourism has contributed immeasurably to the economy of the region. The economy is now bolstered by the following:

1. Tourism is the number one money making business throughout the Caribbean.
   a. Bauxite mining is recognized as a world industry in Jamaica.

2. Business men from other countries have been invited to come to the Islands to develop the natural resources.

3. Manufacturing industries are on the increase in Jamaica, Haiti and the Dominican Republic.
   a. shoes and boots
   b. shirts
   c. yard goods
   d. natural craft articles on a large scale

4. Housecraft Training Centre in Kingston Jamaica trains young women to make an independent and satisfactory living.

5. The business men and women in the iron market in Haiti and the Victoria Crafts market in Kingston, Jamaica are upgrading
community life through new practices in crafts. In addition, new techniques in sales of the things that they produce seem to indicate that this instruction has enhanced their ability.

The crowning experience of the whole human relations venture was the tour and lecture by the Curator of the Art Museum in Kingston, Jamaica. During the tour, many art classes of children were observed. The Curator stated that the dramatic developments which have occurred in the progress of Caribbean countries cannot only be attributed to a wave of nationalism, but a deeper force which springs from a personal identification with one's own country and finding increasing ways of expressing the relationship in art, literature, a sense of pride in the islands' traditions, folklore and history, and in the evidences of that history—the archives, monuments, buildings—as parts of a living and continuing process towards still prouder achievements.

All in all, the members of the tour gained a lasting appreciation of Caribbean culture, as well as became cognizant of the efforts to better family life in terms of world standards. American Home Economists can contribute immeasurably to a program which will aid our Caribbean neighbors in improving their nations through the education of families in the modern techniques of home, family and community living. Families must be educated, but in the final analysis, we must educate the women, for when we educate the women, we educate the nation.

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