

Culture, Migration and Caribbean Nationhood: Barbados and Empire 1937-1967

Professor Mary Chamberlain, Oxford Brookes University

Research Questions:

Regarded as the 'slum of the Empire', by the turn of the twentieth century the neglect of the West Indies had resulted in chronic poverty, widespread under and un-employment and high levels of migration. The primary sympathies of the colonial government lay with the sugar producers, a small, powerful white elite. The region erupted in riots in the 1930s. By 1938, over thirty people were dead, and nearly a thousand people injured and imprisoned. The British Government set up a Royal Commission, under the chairmanship of Lord Moyne, to investigate the social and economic conditions in the region and to make recommendations. It was too little, too late. By then, ideas of self government through Federation had begun to capture the political imaginary of its largely disenfranchised population and the movement towards decolonisation and independence in the West Indies had begun. Under leaders such as Adams, Manley and Williams, it culminated in the Federation of the West Indies whose collapse, in 1961, after only three years, precipitated the region into independence.

Unlike decolonisation movements in Africa, India and Asia, where there was an idea of an original and authentic hinterland, nation building in the British West Indies was beset by dilemmas: how to build a nation when, as a result of its origins in slavery and forced migration, there were no roots, no pre-history upon which to build, when its history, society and culture were assumed, by both the British authorities and West Indians alike, to be derivative, rather than original, and when its citizenry were divided by race, colour and class? What kind of a 'nation' could be envisaged in, or of, the collectivity of the West Indies? Where could national belonging be located when migration linked and extended national borders, and Pan-Africanism hovered?

Using as a case study Barbados which, in the 1930s, was the most economically impoverished, socially disadvantaged and politically conservative of the British West Indian colonies (although now the most economically successful and politically stable of them all), the project will address the following research questions:

1. What social, cultural and other resources were West Indians able to draw on to imagine sovereignty and create a sense of nationhood? What mechanisms operated in West Indian society to subvert colonial authority? What role did migration play in generating a West Indian national, and transnational, identity and the creation of black cultural consciousness?
2. To what extent did British attitudes impede, or permit, the growth of national identity and a narrative of nationhood? Did United States policy in the region, before the Second World War, and after, during the Cold War, influence British colonial policy?
3. What was envisaged by 'nation'? What was the excitement of federation? Did men and women have different understandings and expectations of nationhood and national belonging? How did Barbados effect the transition from Federation member to Independent nation state five years later?

Aims

This research aims to provide an oral, social and cultural history of decolonisation and nation building in the West Indies. It will:

1. Examine British colonial policy to a) the riots of 1937 and their aftermath b) the Federation of the West Indies, and c) Independence.
2. Investigate ways in which West Indian cultural formations and social organisations envisaged sovereignty and challenged and subverted colonial authority before and after the riots of 1937.
3. Examine the concept of a West Indian nation/federation and explore the role of migration and culture in the intellectual, political and cultural formation of nationalism and nation building before and after World War II.
4. Examine the post-Federation adjustments to, and expectations, of Independence.

Its expected outcomes and objectives are:

- a) to yield new insights into the historical development and social context of West Indian nationalism and decolonisation, the break up of the British Empire, and the impact (through migration) of the Caribbean on Britain.
- b) to generate methodological and theoretical insights into the study of nationalism
- c) to build an oral history data base of the decolonisation period 1937-1967

Research Context

While the rebellions which punctuated the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the West Indies have been documented (Bolland, Heuman; Wilmott) the non-violent and often subtle opposition to planter and colonial rule in the period - what Marshall (1978) described as 'emancipation by action' - has been less so. Operating for the most part below the colonial radar, signs of resistance could be detected in domestic organisation and village life, in songs, banter and creole, in migration and return, faith practices and peasantries. The structures of survival were also those of subversion and were to emerge, after 1937, as articulators of national and transnational belongings.

There has been considerable research on the decolonisation movements in Africa, India, and Asia, but that on the West Indies is more piecemeal. The formation and collapse of the Federation of the West Indies has merited attention (Braithwaite, Lowenthal, Mordecai), as have the 1937/8 riots and their aftermath (Browne, Post, Ryan), the Moyne Commission (LaGuerre, Johnson), the impact of migration before World War II (Richardson) and after (Chamberlain, Thomas Hope), and the activities and impact of Marcus Garvey, the UNIA and other political activists (Benn, Stein, Warner Lewis). A few studies of decolonisation focus on constitutional and political issues (Fraser, Lewis, Killingray, Munroe), or are part of a latter day narrative of nationhood (Beckles). There has been no social history of the region in this period, nor one which examines the movements towards independence and nation building from a social historical perspective. Some of the pressing social issues of the 1950s and 1960s were examined contemporaneously by historians who highlighted the legacies of slave society (Patterson, Goveia) or the positive processes of creolisation (Braithwaite). The role which West Indian art and literature played in the period before and after Independence in the creation of nationhood has had some examination, (Walmsley, Harney) and recently there is an interest in the role of Caribbean intellectuals in generating a sense of nationhood and an ideology of independence (Schwarz, Benn, Henry). There has been no study

which examines decolonisation from both the West Indian and British perspective, nor one which examines the social history of decolonisation and the ways in which nation building was able to draw on creole social and cultural formations to create independence 'in action'.

This study will redress this imbalance by providing a social and cultural history of the independence period 1937-1967. While a history of decolonisation in the West Indies would provide a useful overview, the different demographic and political circumstances of each island would inhibit a more detailed examination of the processes involved. An in-depth study would enable a comprehensive examination of British policy of decolonisation in the West Indies and an analysis of the subtle ways in which resistance to colonial authority was manifested, then channelled into a sense of national belonging. Barbados has been chosen as a case study since it exemplifies best these issues. Unlike Jamaica or Trinidad, Barbados remained British throughout its history, retained its Legislative Assembly and avoided the imposition of Crown Colony rule. It was identified during slavery by its lack of revolts, and by the largest creole slave population in the region and after, by draconian labour/land laws imposed in 1840 (not repealed until 1937) but undermined and negotiated by social practices and informal local sanctions (Chamberlain) and high levels of migration. At the start of our period, it had the largest white population, was the most populated and impoverished of the West Indies, with the most conservative governing elite. It also had the highest literacy rates and the largest proportion of its citizens living abroad. When the riots broke out in 1937, they were amongst the most bloody and widespread in the region. Yet the post-independence stability and growth of Barbados suggests that it was able to build on considerable, but hidden, social and cultural resources.

This research will be of interest to scholars of the Caribbean, as well as to those of the British Empire, and decolonisation. Its methodology (below) will also be of interest to oral historians.

Research Methods

A RA will be appointed for one year. The methods combine archive research, assisted by RA, and oral history interviews, conducted by Chamberlain. A high quality digital tape recorder will be required equipment. A specialist transcriber will be employed to provide transcripts of the interviews (see Special Costs).

Archive research: Archive research will focus primarily on British policy towards the West Indies, although archive material in the United States on the political activities and organisations of migrants and nationals will also be consulted. To date, the following files have been identified: *Barbados:* Government House (GH), Colonial Secretary (CS) & Confidential series; Official Gazettes & House of Assembly Minutes; Police Department Files; Democratic League papers; Barbados Progressive League & Barbados Labour Party papers; *New York:* (Public Library) papers relating to Barbadian migrants 1930-52; UNIA; West Indian Progressive Society; League Against Imperialism; *London:* National Archive, CO 28, CO 30, CO 31, CO 32, CO 33, (Barbados) CO 950 (Moyne Commission) and other relevant CO and FO files, DO 136, DO 139, DO 35; relevant Cabinet, Command and Parliamentary papers. British Library, Colindale, Barbados newspapers. The RA will conduct archive work in UK and Barbados. Separate funding will be sought if further archive work in USA is necessary.

Oral history: While data on health, poverty etc is available from official reports and surveys, how people responded to their social conditions, what strategies of survival were employed, and what cultural resources were developed and utilised, is less well documented. Given that the focus of this research is on the subtle and undocumented forms of colonial resistance, and how they played into establishing a West Indian consciousness and confidence, oral history methods are particularly apposite. Oral history is now an established methodological tool (Perks & Thomson; Thompson; Plummer; Bornat et al; Chamberlain & Thompson); there is no other which can elicit the data, nor permit its interrogation both during the interview, and in later analysis, nor allow for analysis of subjectivities and shifting memories (Chamberlain, Hodgkin & Radstone, Passerini). Chamberlain has long experience of oral history collection and analysis in the Caribbean, focusing on narrative analysis and social and cultural resistance. A quota sample of approximately thirty respondents, balanced by gender, occupation and class, will be utilised. This will supplement interview material collected by me in 1993-5 for *Narratives of Exile and Return* (1997) and data on the 1937 riots lodged in the Barbados National Oral History Project. The interviews will use a life story approach with an open ended interview guide.

Research Outcome: The primary outcome will be a book and a launch symposium. In addition, the research will generate an oral history archive of the period 1937-1967 which will be deposited either with the AHDS or National Life Story Collection; it is hoped that a copy can also be deposited with the Barbados National Oral History Project.

Time table

Preliminary archive research in Barbados (GH, CS and Confidential Series) the United States and at the National Archives will be undertaken prior to the formal start of the project, and it is anticipated that drafts of 2 chapters (on social conditions in the BWI & Barbados and migration and political resistance 1937-1947) will also have been completed.

Year 1

- Employ RA 1/9/05 -31/7/06. RA London. Archive research.
- 1/6/06-31/7/06 RA Barbados. Locate informants; complete archive research Barbados

Year 2,

- 1/7/06 – 1/9/06 Term break - Chamberlain Barbados fieldwork.
- 1/9/06 – 21/12/06 –transcription; start analysis of interviews. Draft chapter on narratives of resistance.
- 20/01/07 – 31/8/07. Draft chapters on cultural challenge and renewal; cultural awakenings and national belongings; colonial policy 1937-1947; federation and Independence 1947-1966. Research leave semester 2 (to be applied for)

Year 3,

- (NB AHRB Research Leave will be applied for) 1 September – 21 December. Draft Conclusion and Introduction and revise chapters for publication. Submit to publisher.

Project Management: RA to be set monthly targets and timetables by Chamberlain; monitored with weekly meetings and feedback London & Barbados.

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