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Jamaican Hands Across the Atlantic (review)

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were full of hope.

The book presented to us and edited by Clive Cheesman, is a powerful document, one that facilitates certain kinds of discourses in Haitian history and historiography, and also in those of Africa and its diaspora, and in the history of Latin America in general. Monsieur Cheesman is to be lauded for having pursued this task singlemindedly, despite the odds that conspired to keep a part of Haitian history buried in the bowels of the Royal College of Arms in London. This is a magnificently produced volume!

Reference

Bellegarde-Smith, Patrick. 1985. *In the Shadow of Powers: Dantes Bellegarde in Haitian Social Thought*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press.

Elaine Bauer and Paul Thompson. 2006. *Jamaican Hands Across the Atlantic*. Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers. 243 pp. ISBN: 978-976-637-246-0/976-637-246-2.

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This work explores the Jamaican-Atlantic field of family relations that has emerged in connection with Jamaican emigration to Britain, the United States and Canada since the 1950s. The book is the result of collaboration between Elaine Bauer, an emigrant Jamaican anthropologist, and Paul Thompson, a British sociologist/social historian. Bauer recently received her Ph.D. on mixed race couples and their families and her life exemplifies the significance of the trans-Atlantic social field explored in the book. She was born and raised in Jamaica, spent her youth and early adulthood in Canada and is now living in England. Thompson is a sociologist/social historian who has worked for many years with oral history in a European context. He was instrumental in showing that oral testimony provides essential data when doing research on social and cultural processes of the past as experienced by ordinary people. Together these two scholars therefore combine a keen awareness that migration, and with it trans-Atlantic families, is a condition of life affecting most Caribbean people, with a fine grasp of oral history

interviews as a rich source of data on migration processes as experienced by those involved in them.

Bauer and Thompson characterize Jamaican family relations as pliable networks of relations “empowered by their pragmatism and informality.” This, they suggest, inheres in Jamaican kinship being “based on shared experience,” not on “formal blood relationships” (p. 4). Thus while shared biological substance is acknowledged as a basis of kinship, kin relations “need to become real through significant social contact and potential or actual exchanges of help” (p. 5). Since Jamaicans engage in multiple partnerships that often result in the birth of children, there is a large field of potential relations that can be asserted. As the authors put it, referring to a female interviewee, “there is always the possibility of unfinished business in setting out these kin patterns: someone unexpected who may suddenly be discovered, or come ‘knocking at her door’” (p. 3). Thus the Jamaican system of family and kinship constitutes both a selected field of ongoing social relations operating between individuals, or clusters of relatives, and a more diffuse potentiality of relations that may appear or be activated for various reasons.

The authors describe family and kin relations as the sinews of the Jamaican-Atlantic world, constituting both the motor of migratory moves and a source of belonging and identification providing the migrants with a stable framework and purpose of life. Their analysis of the life story interviews clearly documents the central role of family and kin relations in migratory moves. It becomes apparent that two-thirds of the migrants came from propertied families who had the resources to finance a long-distance move (p. 68). Furthermore, about half of the migrants did not see themselves as “active agents of their own migration” (p. 72), explaining that it was various family members’ decision that they migrate, not theirs. Women played a central role as facilitators of moves, whether as mothers seeing in migration a better life for their offspring, as “stayees” willing to care for children left behind by emigrant relatives, or as emigrant women sending organizing the migration of close relatives. The authors are careful to point out that while migration took place within the context of family networks, and in many ways reinforced relations in the networks, it often involved painful “partings and reunions.” Thus, “[c]hildren had to not only lose carers such as grandparents whom they loved and trusted, but readjust to parents who in the years apart had become strangers” (p. 91).

If kinship constitutes a vital backbone in the Jamaican-Atlantic field of relations, this does not mean that Jamaican migrants have moved within closed networks. On the contrary, an important aspect of Jamaican family networks’ flexibility concerns their openness to engaging with others. For the interviewed migrants, the desired others seem to have

been, to a great extent, the white receiving population. In Britain and Canada most of them settled in multi-racial or primarily white areas, and they had made a concerted effort to “engage socially with their new neighbours and workmates” (p. 103). Furthermore, a quarter of the interviewed in Britain and a third of the interviewed in Canada had white spouses (p. 102). In these countries, the authors note, Jamaicans had become “crucial pioneers of cultural mixing and complex identities” (p. 107).

In the United States, however, racial barriers prevented this mixing and, apart from “one high-earning professional,” all were living in “non-white” neighborhoods (p. 101). Few reported having white friends, the only migrants who had close contact with whites being those who worked as domestic help in private homes (p. 103). Nevertheless, the Jamaicans in the United States did better in terms of educational achievement and income than the Jamaicans in Britain and Canada. The relative positive social and economic mobility enjoyed in the United States, however, did not outweigh the negative experience of segregation. Thus, the Jamaicans in the United States complained about being discriminated against and refused to identify themselves as Americans. Jamaicans in Britain and Canada, on the other hand, expressed relatively positive feelings about living in these countries and identifying themselves as British or Canadian. This leads the authors to conclude that “it is not just the social structure, but also how people feel about it, which shapes evolving identities” (p. 108). They might have gone further, however, and analyzed in more detail why people have such strong feelings about this “social structure.” Why is mixing with the white population so important that it overshadows achievements measured in terms of education and income? How is this mixing articulated with the ambitions and goals behind the migratory moves and the family networks orchestrating these moves? The authors say little about this. It is clear, however, that there is an association between past upward mobility and racial mixing. Thus, the authors show that stories of family origins are only popular among those who can assert a middle-class status through a story of origins from a white ancestor, “usually a plantation owner or overseer” (p. 31). There are no stories depicting origins from a black slave (p. 33). The stories of mixing as a desired mode of social mobility in the past as well as the present suggest that societal power structures have had an important bearing on the shaping of family relations and the notions of improvement that they nourish and attempt to realize through migration.

More generally, the impact of Western ideas of social and economic mobility on Jamaican society is not thoroughly investigated. We learn that migration is related to a “global vision” of a better future for the children entailing, as one interviewee expressed it, that they “go to the

city, go to the best schools, so that we could make the best of our lives when we grow up” (p. 83). We also hear about women who are particularly active in defining and implementing these visions because of the historically grounded “belief by Jamaican women that they should *think and plan*” (p. 84). But there is little analysis of the historical, social and cultural significance of “the city” and “the best schools” as avenues of improvement within the context of Jamaican thinking and planning, or of the ways in which the values of urban and educated lives may shape Jamaican family networks and their attempts to pursue social mobility through physical mobility.

In this study, Jamaican family relations and their strategies for mobility tend not to be described in their own right, but in contrast to the Western family. We learn, for example, that Jamaican families “mobilize aid through the kin network in ways which we suggest would be much less likely with white Anglo-American families” (p. 213). And we are told about a woman who “keeps her own four children in touch with her ex-husband’s son by another mother, and especially notably, invites both this child and his mother to family social occasions—although by white English conventions neither mother nor child would be regarded as kin” (pp. 200-201). The presentation of this study’s rich material would have been stronger if there was less reliance upon such comparisons, and more use was made of the extensive literature on Jamaican, and Caribbean, family and kinship to which they refer (in note 21, chapter two) or recent anthropological kinship theory on relatedness (see, for example, Carsten 2000). This theory is highly relevant because it critiques common-sense Western understandings of kinship and points to the need to examine how notions of relatedness are created through social practice.

Compared with the formal patriarchal family structures that have been dominant in Western societies for several centuries, Caribbean family relations may seem “essentially informal, non-hierarchical and gender-neutral,” bonding being based on “shared experience, rather than formal blood relations” (p. 14). When Caribbean modes of bonding are subjected to close scrutiny it becomes apparent, however, that shared experience does not preclude hierarchy or gender bias. Indeed the ethnographic data and analysis in the book show otherwise. Thus, it is quite clear that if family networks are effective as organizers of migration this is because they do not constitute communities of egalitarian individuals making decisions for themselves. Rather, they embody power structures that give certain family members the authority and ability to move individuals within the network. As noted, about half the migrants stated that they had not been the main agents of their own migration—they had been “encouraged” to migrate by the family. Some elaborated that

they did not want to leave, but were obliged to do so. One woman even stated that she “felt she was being pushed out” (p. 73). The authority of the family to organize and carry out such moves does not derive from a formal power system, but rather from the informal, but not less effective, system of inter-generational rights and obligations operating within the kin networks. It is the parents’ duty to care for and rear their children in the best way possible—indeed, this is what makes them proper parents and gives them the right to call themselves parents. It is, in turn, the children’s duty to obey their parents and help them in any way possible—this is what gives them the right to consider themselves part of a family. In a Caribbean context coming of age, in the sense of assuming responsibility for looking after one’s parents and providing for one’s own children, has come to involve “‘traveling’ abroad” (p. 11). Thus, by being physically absent it is possible to develop a strong presence, and position of respect, within the kin group.

Since women are most active within the kin group in terms of caring and providing for the children and giving them a proper upbringing, they are the ones in a position of authority to organize and implement migratory moves. This explains why they are “more represented than men among the activators of migration,” sometimes even acting “with little male support,” as the authors note (p. 80). And this is why the migrants’ memories of their mothers are so “complex,” depicting images of both a loving, caring, dedicated person who would do anything for her children, and a controlling, strict, even harsh disciplinarian who was the effective leader in the family (pp. 46-47). The fathers, by contrast, are described as either playing “the soft parental role” offering “crucial emotional and communicative support” (p. 43), or as a totally absent person—no less than “a quarter of our migrants had no contact and no support from their fathers” (p. 122). This is hardly a description of egalitarian kin relations or a gender-neutral system of kinship!

Despite these limitations in the analysis, the book offers an interesting new approach to the study of Jamaican migration. By focusing on life trajectories and family relations within the framework of the Jamaican-Atlantic social field, the authors succeed at doing an insightful study of migration as a cultural practice deeply embedded in Caribbean life. They thereby offer an important contribution to the study of Caribbean migration.

Reference

- Carsten, Janet, ed. 2000. *Cultures of Relatedness: New Approaches to the Study of Kinship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.