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2. Linkages, Lineage, and Kinship in the Anglo-Caribbean Family Experience: A Genealogical Case Study

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Introduction

The study of the social structure of societies has been undertaken by social anthropologists for decades. To do so effectively, cultural traits and practices are examined. Invariably, this leads to a more complete appreciation of how the society functions. A major component of anthropological research includes the analysis of a society’s lineage, kinship patterns, and cultural traits. These areas also fall within the scope of genealogical research. Genealogy is essentially “a line of descent traced continuously from an ancestor” and “the identification, examination and collection of names, events, dates and the corresponding relationships” (Pearsall 1998, 763). The genealogists endeavor to trace family lineage by consulting official records which capture the rites of passage—birth, marriage, and death—and by so doing, place individuals historically in a specific place and time. This clearly shows the interlocking and supportive nature of the disciplines of anthropology and genealogy in relation to the study of society, culture, and kinship patterns. In the early 1900s, anthropologists introduced the collection of genealogical data as part of the research process as it proved beneficial to the study of societies and kinship. Today it is regarded as an essential component of research and described as a “technique of anthropology which involves collecting and compiling pedigrees into tables of genealogy in order to determine kinship systems and the nature of institutions” (Winick 1977, 358).

The collection of genealogical information requires the identification and consultation of both primary and secondary sources. This material can be arranged under two main headings: data collection via an oral method or from written sources (Pine 2015). In the early twentieth century, genealogical researchers focused on tracing lineage based on the availability of written records. Emphasis was given to identifying family crests and coats of arms as these were considered essential aspects of genealogy. While seeking to establish a pedigree line is one approach, contemporary genealogical research...
encourages enquiry into the lives of ancestors who straddle the social strata and cultures, and are both Western and non-Western in origin. The availability of written records provides essential support to family research by revealing lineage and kinship linkages. Additionally, capturing the oral, nonwritten account is also an important part of the research process and is critical to the collection and documentation of family information on non-Western societies. Family stories are passed orally from one generation to another, thereby ensuring the survival of information on kinship and lineage. This use of an oral account is ably illustrated in Alex Haley’s publication *Roots*, which documents his family’s history from an oral account of the capture, transport, and enslavement of his ancestor in America. This story is retold and passed on to several generations of Haley’s family. When tracing his ancestry in Africa, the *griots* in the Gambia, responsible for preserving the oral record of families, recount the circumstances of Haley’s ancestor’s disappearance, thereby supporting the oral account which had been passed down from one generation to another. The survival of this record allowed him to successfully trace his ancestry back to a village in Africa (Haley 1978, 8, 626, 629).

The *New Oxford Dictionary of English* defines culture as “the attitudes and behavior characteristic of a particular social group” (Pearsall 1998, 447). Anglo-Caribbean culture is a blend of those attitudes, behaviors, and customs of peoples from three continents: Europe, Africa, and Asia. The socioeconomic factors which led to their relocation to the Caribbean contributed to the blending of those cultures which gave rise to contemporary Caribbean society and culture.

The countries categorized as the Anglo-Caribbean are all former British colonies and share similar social, economic, and cultural experiences. Geographically, the region includes islands and mainland territories. It stretches from Belize in Central America, continues southward in an arc shape, and incorporates all the English-speaking islands in the Caribbean Sea until it reaches Trinidad and Tobago. Guyana, the only English-speaking country in South America, is also included in one definition of the Anglo-Caribbean. The territories were originally inhabited by Amerindians, but since the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492, they became home to Europeans, African slave labor and, later, Asian and European indentured laborers. The economies of the regions were agriculturally based and, at varying times, cultivated the cash crops of tobacco, sugar, bananas, and cocoa.

Tracing Anglo-Caribbean ancestral lineage can be challenging if the researcher does not have an appreciation of the social, cultural, and economic issues which influenced the lives of the inhabitants of the region approximately two hundred years ago. Consequently, before embarking on this explorative journey, the researcher should become acquainted with the social nuances that shaped colonial Caribbean society, in order to develop an appreciation for the social component of genealogical research. This paper will focus on the factors
that shaped Anglo-Caribbean culture by exploring those issues that existed in a highly stratified society, such as phenotype, social class, kinship, religion, and education. Biographical sketches are included which will provide further insight into those issues which affect family relationships, illustrate the social hierarchy created by categorization according to skin tone and social class, and provide greater insight and appreciation of the social issues which contributed to the formation of Anglo-Caribbean culture.

In order to be productive and successful, the researcher should seek answers to several burning questions: How was the society structured? What were the major religious denominations? What were the cultural norms and practices? What types of family structure existed and what were the prevailing social and economic conditions? These questions, along with those prompted by reading official records of birth, marriage, and death, will require the researcher to become acquainted with cultural and social issues which helped shape the society. These include kinship patterns, marriage practices, relationships in families and households, social customs, race and class structure, and general living conditions of the period under study. To support this process, knowledge of the legislation, occupations, educational opportunities, social statuses, and migratory patterns would provide a better understanding of the prevailing social climate, and ultimately lead to a more rewarding genealogical research experience.

**Kinship and Family Structure**

Kinship and marriage are regarded by social anthropologists as key components that determine how a society functions. Both foster harmonious relationships and encourage the establishment of functional alliances. Persons are recognized as kin when the line of descent can be traced directly from one to another (Kuper 1997, 190). Kinship establishes links between various groups of people and is regarded as the social tool that assists in the creation of customs and cultural practices as persons “cooperate with one another in an orderly social life” (Kuper 1997, 189).

The existence of both elementary and compound family structures in African society provides some insight into lineage, kinship, and family structures in Anglo-Caribbean society. Africans transported to the Caribbean brought their cultures and customs with them. The system of plantation slavery in the new world discouraged the establishment of the elementary family unit. Anthropologists acknowledge the existence of other family units such as the polygamous family unit; however, the traditional and compound family units are two structures prevalent among African societies. The traditional or elementary family unit is comprised of a father, mother, and their children and is regarded as the main unit in the kinship structure, while the compound family unit occurs when the male has children with two or more wives (Kuper 1997, 191). Higman (1975), in his paper on the slave family and households
in the British West Indies, 1800–1834, argues that both cultural and economic circumstances contributed to the development of West Indian family structure. He supports the findings of eminent Caribbean historians and sociologists on the slave family structure; for example, Goveia’s description of a slave family supports a widely held view on the Caribbean slave family:

The slave family consisted effectively of the mother and her children who all belonged to the mother’s owner though they might be born of different fathers. If a “husband” belonged to the same plantation, he could reside with his wife and their children, but in other circumstances it might be impossible for him to do so. In either case, it was the link with the mother which provided the basis for the existence of the slave family. The fact that the father was not even needed as a bread winner further reduced the importance of his role, and made it possible for the slave women to dispense completely with any form of stable union if they so desired. (Quoted in Higman 1975, 262)

The historical circumstances that shaped the lives of the peoples of the Caribbean are inextricably linked to race and social class. The establishment of the plantation system, and the introduction of African slaves as its labor, saw the evolution of a social structure that distinguished different groups. The family structure of the Afro-Caribbean family in the postemancipation era also differs from that of the traditional Eurocentric family unit of a male-headed, two-parent household with children all related to each other by blood or marriage. Some explanations include the survival of the African family structure, the institution of slavery, and the perpetuation of the plantation system, which discouraged the establishment of the elementary family unit. Michael G. Smith’s analysis of the postemancipation Caribbean family structure illustrates this:

In this region, family life is extremely unstable, marriage rates are low, especially during the earlier phases of adult life, and illegitimacy rates have always been high. Many households contain single individuals while others with female heads consist of women, their children and/or their grandchildren. The picture is further complicated by variations in the type and local distribution of alternative conjugal forms; and, characteristically, differing communities, social classes and ethnic groups institutionalize differing combinations of them. Excluding legal marriage, mating is brittle, diverse in form and consensual in base among these Creole or Negroid populations. (Quoted in Barrow 1996, 2)

Smith’s observations echo the sentiments of other studies conducted on the Caribbean family. Most notably, his earlier work (Smith 1962) and that of Raymond T. Smith (1956) on the composition and structure of the Anglo-Caribbean family in the postemancipation era recognized the continuation of common-law unions and the predominance of female-headed households. Smith (1962, 11) examines the difference between family structure and
domestic organization and defines a household as “consisting of those persons who habitually share a common shelter and food.” He further states that while a household may include cohabiting couples, it may not have an elementary family structure but more that of a compound family. Essentially, while households can be considered domestic units, they are not always domestic family units and can vary in kinship structure between the elementary family structure and the compound or extended family structure. For the genealogists familiar with tracing lineage through the male, the structure of a compound or matrilineal family presents something different. Smith describes the West Indies as a “culturally heterogeneous society which is subject to generalizations regarding family relations.” The person considered the head of the household may not always be male but is seen as “the person whom the community as well as the household members regard as the head of the domestic group” (Smith 1962, 12, 15).

Raymond T. Smith, in his seminal work, The Negro Family in British Guiana, supports these views and goes further by examining the economic functions of the households and describing the activities undertaken by male- and female-headed households. In his analysis, he suggests that eleven different types of households can exist and provides a detailed discussion on their individual compositions and areas of overlap (Smith 1956, 75–78, 96–97).

Given scholars’ observations and the influence of slavery on family structure, the role of marriage versus common-law unions has generated much discussion. It is interesting that studies conducted on family life in Jamaica and Guyana showed that visiting, common-law unions, illegitimate births, and legal marriage occurred at all levels of society, regardless of race or class (Barrow 1996, 165). No matter the level, the children of these illegitimate unions invariably resided with their mother. In some instances, illegitimacy also signaled a common-law relationship in which the father of the child was from a higher class (Barrow 1996, 175). This structure and stratification of plantation society are succinctly captured in the following passage:

By the late eighteenth century when the Caribbean slave society attained its highest stage of development, it has assumed a distinctive form. Masters and slaves, merchants and shippers, rulers and ruled, free and nonfree, white and nonwhite all constituted a closely integrated mutually interdependent grouping of distinct castes and classes. (Knight 1990, 121)

This social structure, along with its lines of delineation developed during plantation slavery, continued into the postemancipation colonial period. The economic and social benefits derived from slavery ensured that the planter class enjoyed dominance over the nonwhite population (Smith 1996, 143). Children, whether legitimate or illegitimate, were subject to a society in which the white culture was the dominant one and consequently defined social status (Barrow 1996, 177). The system of slavery and the dominance of the slave
master over female slaves resulted in a hierarchical stratification of the population based on social class and color of skin. Skin tone became linked to social class, with persons with lighter complexions feeling socially superior to those with a darker skin tone. Categorization according to skin color continued into the postemancipation period and gave rise to a complex classification of skin tone based on the percentage of negro blood. Smith (1988, 156, described in Barrow 1996, 178) provides a vivid description of societal structure:

The turnover of white employees on sugar estates was remarkably high…. The life of the white staff was organized around the overseer’s house and catered to by cooks, washers and cleaning servants provided by the estate, but it was customary for white men to form semi-permanent attachments to women—slave or free—who provided services beyond those laid down in the estate code.

The racial mixtures of offspring from relationships between the Creole population and individuals of the colonial administration were often captured in birth records (see, for example, Figure 1). Inclusion of these details in the official records is extremely useful for genealogists since it helps them to ascertain both the racial composition and social position of individuals.

Figure 1
Religion and Education

Since slaves were considered property, slave owners were not required by law to record births and deaths of slaves. Consequently, researchers may need to consult plantation inventory records to ascertain whether the names of slaves were included among property holdings. In the postemancipation period the church played a pivotal role in the religious and educational lives of the local population and their records provide vital genealogical information. Missions were established to convert the slaves in British Guiana and the London Missionary Society was one of the early ones. Many churches established schools and trained teachers (Rodney 1981, 114–15).

Tracing Lineage

Early census records provide details on households and often include information on race and occupation. Colonial office reports give a level of detail on government operations that can be extremely useful. Early newspapers impart useful genealogical information, often listing the names of persons purchasing land and the sale and transfer of property. Details, including the name and race of persons entering and leaving the jurisdiction, are often included. Newspaper notices and obituaries also provide fascinating detail on weddings and funerals. Maps and early photographs should also be included in the search since they assist in the location of early settlements, plantations, and villages. Two biographical sketches are provided to illustrate actual experiences, kinship patterns, and social practices which occurred in Anglo-Caribbean colonial society.

Biographical Sketch: Catherine Clementson

Born in 1874 in British Guiana, to a father who had migrated to Demerara from the island of Dominica and a Creole mother, she was raised in a coastal village. The second of three daughters, Catherine enjoyed a comfortable upbringing as her father was the village dispenser and her mother a nurse in the village hospital. She was of mixed race, her father being a mixture of Carib Indian and white and her mother colored, a mixture of negro and white. She was baptized in the Roman Catholic Church and attended the village primary school. At seventeen, Catherine was employed as a seamstress in the home of the plantation manager of an adjoining plantation. Originally from the island of Barbados, he was married and had three children. As a white employee of the colonial government, the manager was part of the colonial ruling class. Shortly after the death of his wife, the manager approached Catherine’s parents and expressed his intention to start a relationship with her. They gave their consent and the manager made arrangements to purchase land and build a house in the village where Catherine’s parents resided. It is interesting to note that one of the signatures on the manager’s receipt for the land is Catherine’s father. This suggests that Catherine may have been the unwilling subject of an
arrangement sealed between two men. As a young woman in that era she was in no position to object. The wide age difference between Catherine and the manager also suggested that this relationship may not have been fully consensual. She was twenty-two when her first child was born and he, forty-nine. Oral accounts indicate that the manager never lived in the home he built but would visit often. Their union produced four children (see Figure 2). Although Catherine was unmarried and her children illegitimate, the complexion of her children gained them social acceptance and upward mobility. They attended secondary schools that did not enroll students of a dark complexion at that time. In contrast, her sister’s offspring of a legal marriage were of a dark complexion and could not attend the same school. Catherine’s relationship with the manager ended several years later and she began a relationship with a fellow villager. They married and lived in the house built for her by the manager, who eventually returned to Barbados after retiring from government service. Catherine lived her entire life in the same village until her death at the age of sixty-three. A newspaper clipping of her obituary in June 1938 indicates that her funeral was well attended. The house and land where she spent most of her life were inherited by Catherine’s children and remained in their possession for almost fifty years before being sold.
Biographical Sketch: Murry Cummins

Murry Cummins was born a slave in Demerara, British Guiana around 1818. His exact date of birth remains sketchy since there were no official records for slaves. Based on his burial record, Murry Cummins was in his twenties at the time of the emancipation from slavery and his apprenticeship in 1838. Oral accounts indicate that he was a member of the Anglican Church and married with one child, a daughter. British colonial papers record that he resided at Plantation Non-Pareil on the east coast of Demerara. Murry was one of the original purchasers of Plantation New Orange Nassau, the second plantation purchased by former slaves in 1840, just six years after emancipation. Colonial records indicate that about 133 former slaves pooled their savings to purchase the plantation for $50,000. The records list the contribution made by each person to the purchase and the plantation where each purchaser resided. Murry Cummins contributed $250 towards the purchase of Plantation New Orange Nassau (British Parliamentary Papers 1841, 120). Shortly after it was bought, Murry moved with his wife and daughter to the newly purchased plantation, now renamed Buxton by its new owners. Unfortunately, he died at the young age of thirty-eight, just a few years after the establishment of Buxton Village. He was buried in the churchyard of St. Augustine Anglican Church at Buxton. Although illiterate, Murry left a will, dated August 26, 1950 and signed with an “X,” in which his land and property are bequeathed to his daughter. Oral accounts indicate that his daughter, Martha, managed her father’s property and appeared to be very active in village life. There is a street there named Cummins but it is unclear whether it is named after her or her father. Martha never married but had three daughters through different liaisons. One daughter married a sugar factory worker from Barbados. Their union produced six children. The land which Murry Cummins saved to purchase is now lost to his descendants.

Both biographies illustrate the socio-economic stratification and circumstances that existed at the time. They also illustrate the challenges that researchers will encounter when conducting family history research on the Anglo-Caribbean family. The critical roles played by gender, education, religious affiliation, and social status in society are evident. The existence of inter-island migration among British Caribbean colonies is captured along with the ethnic diversity of the migrants. While a dominant male presence in society is evident in both cases, the position of women ranges from one of subservience to that of main breadwinner and head of household. Catherine Clementon’s life story illustrates the impact of the social conditions that existed in post-emancipation colonial society. Her life was shaped by race, gender, and social class. Although the manager was in a position to remarry, he chose instead to enter into a visiting relationship. The woman in the relationship appeared to have little control over her life and was subject to the will of her father and
partner. Although her children were the result of an illegitimate union, their physical appearance qualified them for higher social acceptability. The family name or surname also played a critical role when tracing lineage. In the case of Catherine, her children assumed the name of their father, while Martha Cummins’s children, also born out of wedlock, bore her surname.

The biographies also demonstrate the importance of orally transmitted family information in tracing lineage and kinship patterns. Often relayed anecdotally, the oral record is a useful source for acquiring essential information on family members, for often the first clues regarding family linkages, migration, and miscegenation are obtained through conversation. Murry Cummins’s role as one of the original purchasers of Plantation New Orange Nassau was often recounted by his descendants but could only be verified once the colonial record of his name was found among other details. The entrepreneurial spirit of recently freed slaves is captured in the second biographical sketch and also serves to demonstrate their desire for economic independence within a rigid social structure.

Family structure and kinship linkages define all societies and are the foundation of genealogical exploration. Genealogy also relies on an understanding and appreciation of the social and economic circumstances of the period. Researchers often face a paucity of data or records, for many have been lost as a result of destruction from natural disasters, or social incidents such as riots and rebellions. Additionally, a tropical environment often hastens the deterioration of paper-based records. Preserving the history of our ancestors ensures that future generations understand the struggles their forebears encountered, and that they seek to develop a greater awareness of their lives. Ultimately, this will lead to a greater appreciation of identity and heritage, of who we are and where we have come from.

Undertaking genealogical research presents many challenges to both the seasoned as well as the novice researcher. Success depends on the existence of pertinent records but also on an understanding of the culture and society under study. The researcher also needs to adopt a critical and analytical approach to the task and to employ the technique of delving beyond and beneath written sources to discover hidden truths. Often frustrating, it demands the adoption of a methodical approach to research, an inordinate amount of patience, and an unwavering commitment to checking and rechecking records. However, after sources are verified, questions answered, and previously unknown records identified, this painstaking research evolves into an exercise that is both satisfying and rewarding.

NOTES
1. The countries of the Anglo-Caribbean are Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, British Virgin Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, St. Kitts, Nevis, Saint Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, and Turks and Caicos.
2. See also Greenfield (1959) and Herskovits and Herskovits (1947).

3. The different households identified are married (legally), common-law married, single mother or single father, single (no children, never married), widower, widow, common-law widower, common-law widow, separated, common-law separated, divorced.

4. Distinctions in skin tone were based on the percentage of the mixture with negro ancestry. Terms used included Mulatto (one-half black ancestry), Quadroon (one-quarter black ancestry), Octoroon (one-eighth black ancestry), and Sambo (three-quarters black ancestry). See the Multiple Heritage Project’s terminology list at http://www.mix-d.org/files/resources/Terminology_Chat_09.pdf

5. Demerara slave registers exist for the years 1817, 1820, 1823, 1826, and 1832. Slave registers also exist for several Anglo-Caribbean islands.

6. The Church census for Demerara was conducted c1830–1840, and records the names, ages and races of inhabitants in the colony.

7. Examples can be found in the Essequibo and Demerary Royal Gazette, 1815.

8. Births, marriages, and deaths are recorded in colonial newspapers. A popular newspaper in the 1800s was the Colonist of British Guiana.

9. Biographical sketches included in the paper are taken from genealogical research undertaken by the author on her maternal and paternal family line.

REFERENCES


