

COMMEMORATION OF THE ABOLITION OF THE SLAVE TRADE 2007

3rd - 6th December 2007, Half Moon Hotel, Montego Bay, Jamaica

An Auto-ethnographic Journey of Reconciliation Shame, Pride and Celebration of Identity on reflections of the Bicentenary

'To forget one's ancestors is to be a Brook without a source, a tree without roots'

Chinese Proverb

In this Bicentenary year, my reflections are on a different stage as Britain shouts the praises of Wilberforce through songs, films, documentaries, everywhere there are ears to listen. The media hypes Wilberforce as a Saviour and Redeemer of Slavery, the confusion and blurred lines cannot often tell the differences between what he actually did and did not do. Jamaicans on the other hand rebel against such media frenzy with phrases such as; "our ancestors were the real abolitionists", some people not wanting to participate and burying the past under the carpet as we usually do when we cannot face reality, while other unsung heroes just fall through the cracks. One Parish Councillor for St. Elizabeth said 'we should not look back at our shame' (Sunday March 12, 2006). Well, it depends on which direction one is looking back at.

My thoughts are with the real descendants of enslaved people who cannot voice their opinions one way or another. However, they may have thought throughout this year, 'thank God my ancestors were strong enough to survive the slavery caravans, the long stay in the pit of Ghana's Cape Castle, the ships with rolling oceans and plantation hell, to enable me to be alive today". What character, strength of mind and body those ancestors must have had to endure.

As a product of enslaver and the enslaved, within my DNA run the genes of many who were enslavers in the parish of St. Elizabeth on both sides of my parents. My St. Beth African matriarchs may have arrived back in the early 1700s and my enslaved ancestors hailed from Manchester/Clarendon. I stand in the imagery of a black woman who believes firmly that our ancestors should have an identity within our individual family history and trace them as far back as we can whether they were 'bonded or free'. Why? Because family was important to them and it was all they had that would last, no matter where they lived or to whom they were sold as enslaved people. We here today of Caribbean heritage, especially Jamaicans, are all living proof that if our African ancestors did not survive the caravans and transportation, we would not be here to have a motto which states, 'out of many one people'.

We now know that the 1807 Abolition Act was the beginning of an administrative process, as Plantation owners only started accounting for their enslaved workers in 1817. 10 years was a long time for a system of accountability to be enforced. During that time, within my own ancestral past, my fore-grandparents (along with many others) found a way of ensuring Politics did not affect their ambitions of becoming rich from coffee, maintaining their prosperity or retaining their almost white heritage, forgetting in the process that they too had maternal African blood running in their veins.

Using researched archival records of past lives (Deeds, wills, plantation records, government returns, compensation claims, almanacs and newspapers) linked with historical research of the time, I have

produced an auto-ethnographic and biographic narrative to tell the story of some of my Jamaican fore-grand mothers who participated in enslaving people on their own plantations. To build a sense of pride from some shameful actions during enslavement, the narratives will aim to give a voice to those enslaved women who were present on these plantations in my family history and give hope to the descendants of the enslaved.

Giving a few of these enslaved women a voice with their names, gives them an identity, as, their descendants are alive today walking the streets among us breathing in the freedom of life that their ancestors never had the chance to do. Let us reflect on these women and feel the sense of pride that they must have had in their families.

The following narrative gives a poignant view of the evolving stories of some of these enslaved women;

'.....Afric's daughter lies panting, weeping. Agony, pain and the thoughts of motherland floats through her teenage mind as she lies whilst giving birth to her first child who is automatically enslaved. Her mother Fanny, a 42-year-old African woman is not here to mop her brows, as Fanny is enslaved on the neighbouring plantation owned by the mistress' mother.

Her mistress, Margaret P.B. awaits another plantation babe, already counting her increase. 'A boy would be strong to reap coffee and a girl would be handy around the house'.

The year is 1817. The 18-year-old sambo Creole is Rachel and her newborn daughter is Sophia. Margaret P.B. is my third and fourth Great grandmother.

Rachel has hope that one day her daughter Sophia will be free. That one day she herself would experience waking up with redemption songs on her lips, a smile on her dark cheeks, walking through St. Beth's plains with the sunshine on her face. Free to face the day, to manage her own affairs and complete her daily chores without fear of the whip, fear of being raped, fear of being sold, fear of death.

On another plantation in St. Beth, another teenager, Phoebe aged 19, is also giving birth to her first baby girl Maryann. Phoebe would have the same feelings and emotions for herself and Maryann, as she gently rocks and cuddles her newborn baby, whilst Sarah, plantation owner, counts her increase. This Sarah is my third great-grandaunt 3 times and a fourth great-grandaunt, the year is 1820.

10 years earlier, the master had left Jamaica to return to Scotland, as his wife was preparing for birth. The illegitimate children of his common-law mulatto/quadroon wife, Judith, sat around as the deeds are read pertaining to their inheritance. 'Dad gave me Phibby/Phoebe and she is 9 nine years old' says Sarah, a 13-year-old quadroon girl. Phoebe is the same age as my son, what can a 13-year-old do with a slave child? David the eldest quadroon boy gets Barbara a 1-year baby and no mention of her mummy, whilst the other three children get various ages of slaves as if they were dolls at Christmas.

Rolling forward to summer 1829, Phoebe is 29 years old. Her hands and back are sore and she worries constantly about her growing girls. Maryann is now 8 years old, about the same age when she was given away as a present to her mistress Sarah. 'At least we are all together' she thinks, as she bathes her other two girls, Maria aged 6 and Margaret aged 4, whilst being weary from another days toil in the house and the hot summer field. What will the future hold for my girls? Will there be a brighter future? Will we be free? The Slave Trade has ended but nothing has changed for me. As a matter of fact it got worse, I became more valuable to Sarah and being the only woman on this plantation, I have to do everything, with Maryann helping where she can, while I tend to the girls and watch their every move'.

Margaret F., another plantation owner watches with a frown and furrowed brows over Mary, her sambo Creole slave also called 'Punny'. Mary is a young girl but 'she always weak and lazy, not strong

enough to work in the house or in the field. She must have developed a weakness from all those beatings she's had from being too stubborn'. As Mary is so feeble, Margaret contemplates quickly getting a return from her and prepares Mary for sale.

Mary just smiles to herself. 'One day God will take me away from this place and take me home where I'll be surrounded by love, where I'll see glimpses of my homeland as I travel through the passage of life to death into eternal light and glory. Angels, The Saviour, Mamma and Papa will be there to meet me and my friends left behind will sing of Afric's far away land'.

On the day of the sale, as Margaret prepares to make her returns of her increase, amongst her family and friends, Mary's heart gives way to gladness and travels to heaven rather than to another plantation hell. Loving hands smooth her sable hair, as her brow and eyes relax into peace, never to suffer again in St. Beth's flat plains. Mary's family and friends mourn her with envy, as they must toil on with hope and prayer of freedom for another day. The year is 1829'. Margaret F. is another fourth great grandmother.....

Judith, a plantation owner herself of mixed parentage has enslaved Patty, a 26-year-old African woman and Nelly, a 15-year-old Creole who just gave birth to her first daughter, Cynthia in 1810. Patty takes care of the younger girl and thinks of her own newborn son Richard. The two struck up a bond and friendship, which saw them through another 11 years of motherhood and births, highs and lows, as Nelly gave birth to Tum, Phillis, Joseph, Elizabeth and Abraham. They also both experienced the tragedy of losing Elizabeth as a 3 year old in September 1826 and Richard, Patty's son is taken to the neighbouring plantation. Having a close-knit family was important for Patty, as she had no one but herself from her lineage. Therefore, she would have taught Nelly, African songs and stories, dances and herbal medicines, the hair care rituals for her children and themselves. The funeral would have had some African rites, which they hid from the mistress and performed sacred rites and rituals to mark the passing of a sweet child's spirit into the eternities.

Unfortunately, nothing lasts forever, as in summer 1826, Judith became sickly and decided that Nelly and her family be sold to her daughter Jane, on the same neighbouring plantation where Patty's son Richard lives. Patty although not well herself will lose the only family she has had since being brought to the Island. It breaks her heart to see them go and hugs them with all the love she has in her soul and body. Being the only person left on the plantation, by the time Patty is 41, she dies of a broken heart and dropsy related diseases on the 5th December 1828. Nelly goes on to have more children, this time, twins Edward and Susan in 1830. Judith is my fifth great-grandmother and my fourth great-grandmother three times.

Do we remember Rachel who started the narrative? Well, Rachel gave birth to William, Margaret, Henry and Mulvina (all with the surname of the real father). Rachel also experienced the tragedy of losing Margaret aged 3 in 1823. They spent many years on this plantation until Margaret P.B. had financial difficulties and her plantation was levied. Her husband who had another plantation, purchased Rachel's whole family and placed them on his daughter's plantation where they remained up to 1834 and the plantation records ceased. There are records of their baptism, marriage and deaths that exist. Today, this family exists in the same area and the same place where their ancestors were enslaved. Rachel's descendants did get to sing songs of freedom, join in the Abolition celebrations and today are alive to link their family if they want to do so as well as the other families mentioned in this narrative.

If we are to learn anything from this year and look to the future, we need to communicate with our children, grandchildren and our youth by passing on the traditional stories and family links of our lives and pursue our family history within our homes and wider family, even though it was broken by an evil man-made institution. Family were all our enslaved people had. The time they had to spend with them was short. No one can see within the pages of these historical books how much family was treasured, because they never knew when calamity was going to strike. Take time to enhance our own family lives in education, family values and family bonding, no matter what our economic backgrounds, as 'No success can compensate for failure in the home'.

You may ask how I feel about being in the middle of the enslaver /enslaved triangle. Once my DNA results said I was of 70% Sub-Saharan African heritage I knew exactly who I was (with 19% European and 11% Chinese heritage) and what I would tell my grandchildren. I may not have been born in Africa but Africa was born in me leaving my colour, hips and attitude to tell the rest of the story. My genealogical history has been traced back to the 1600s. I am not ashamed to have had enslaver or enslaved ancestors; however, I am ashamed of their decision making and their participation in enslaving people. I am ashamed of those today who failed to participate in remembering the enslaved by giving them an identity. Living in a social setting of pigmentocracy, where the colour of the skin denotes white, does not make one identify them as being any less of African heritage and more Scottish/Welsh/Irish or English heritage. For us to be true Jamaicans, accepting all of whom we are and our identity is vastly important. Let us get rid of 'mi never come from slavery because mi grandfather was a white man'. Unless we have done our genealogical research, we best start forgetting those claims and do not pass them down to the children unless substantiated. This attitude is what encourages shame of being black. Pride enables us to hold our heads high and say 'yes, my ancestors were enslaved but they survived and what a journey they had to enable me to be here'.

Some of us may not be around for the commemoration of the Abolition of Slavery in 2034 - 2038, so now is important to forge those genealogical links. The books in the archives both here in Jamaica and in the UK are fraying at the edges. The slavery records at the National Archives are not as yet digitised and the books have a limited life span. We need to capture the data of these named African and Creole men, women and children as they are our family, they are our past and we are their future. We are now living in that future our enslaved ancestors dreamed about and they will want to be remembered.

Thank you