Pioneers in post emancipation history
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(Copyright – Part of a forthcoming book on the Village movement)

This article was read in August 2010 at the celebration by Buxton villagers of the 170th anniversary of the village.

According to Allan Young, using and official estimates, during the first decade of the village movement the land bought and the houses built and improved both in the Victoria type 25 collective and in the Queenstown type villages made a total investment of some $2.5 million of African savings at a time when there was no lender. Collective labour for village purposes must have added another value to total investment.

There are mainly two ways of approaching and seeing village history in Guyana. One is to study villages one by one. We shall find that the oldest villages were those of the indigenous people whom we call Amerindians. Their names are often noteworthy, helping to preserve ancient languages. They are about the only villages with this cultural distinction.

There are a large number of African villages, the great a majority of which have Dutch, French or mostly English names which had some significance when they were chosen. There are lastly a large number of Indian villages, with names not far different from the African villages. If we taught history in our schools the finding of meanings of names and reasons for naming will be an interesting project for schools and pupils or students of all races and classes. It would be one step in the direction of a good place to go.

There are several villages over many years that have celebrated their anniversaries. The celebrations were either at home or abroad where our people have gone. Last year (2009) the first Village, Victoria, celebrated its birthday. There are three publications on this village one by a long gone schoolmaster Mr. Arno. The second is a booklet by Mr Rupert Dowden, “The First Village”, written in days of the PNC which had come out in favour of cooperatives. The third other was by this writer. They should still be available in Victoria.

My forthcoming book will approach village history, not village by village but by discussing the Village Movement. It is my view and I have proclaimed it since reading Allan Younge’s “Approaches to Local Self Government in British Guiana”, that the Village movement was a period of,
about fifty years, during which Guyana went through its most significant period of lasting social change. This is part of the reason that some feel strongly about people who misguide themselves and violate the people’s reputation for freedom by using their inherited lands for purposes of unprovoked attacks, not against a hostile government, but against unarmed persons who might be its supporters. In carrying out these acts of brutality they also corrupted the village inwardly, holding the unarmed villagers under a rule of fear and every form of suffering which war imposes. The insanity allowed the expansion of a drug financed and government-backed force called the Phantom whose self-confessed leader has been convicted and jailed in the USA on drug charges.

That period roughly from 2001 to 2007 was an unnecessary and unproductive anti-development interruption of the history of at least a small number of villages, including Buxton and Agricola.

We regard Haiti as being in a class by itself, where ex-slaves moved from rebellion through to independence, however, there is no known story of what the formerly enslaved Africans in this hemisphere did after their enslavement, equal or similar to the village movement in British Guiana. Moreover, they were acting, planning, cutting corners, within a colonial system hostile to them. One thing was in their favour: A section of the dominant class wanted to get rid of their estates and scuttle the ship. Our ex-enslaved and ex-apprentice fore parents saw their advantage.

There are great stories, but not similar. Let us face the fact that the enslaved Africans became legally persons in 1834 on August first. This is where the sanctity of First of August comes from. The change was the result first of African revolt and non-cooperation, of the support of some Christian activists in the UK and also of economic changes in Europe where the new class of factory owners employing their own people to produce consumers’ goods began to see unpaid slave men, women and children as future consumers earning wages and able to buy cloth, metal goods and whole range of commodities or goods. These people did something humanly positive and necessary in supporting emancipation, whatever they meant by it. However, they were not a class of angels. In their own countries, England at least they were employing their “own” children, seven years old and younger fourteen hours a day in factories. Women who resisted were sometimes burned as witches.
In 1834, not on all plantations was the Emancipation Act trusted as perfect. The great majority of the enslaved labourers rejoiced. Georgetown had been surrounded with number plantations like Abertown and Thomas. And with good reason in Georgetown the St George’s Church of England cathedral was packed. The priest clearly had a message. *Let every soul be subject to the higher powers.* (From Paul’s Epistle to the Romans). That letter goes on to say - *The powers that are there are ordained by God. Therefore, who resists the power is resisting God.*

Change the scene to La Belle Alliance, Essequibo. Hugh Payne, (Tommy) a Buxton villager, has written the leading book on what happened there on the first First of August. It is full of government documents of that time and is called “*Ten days that changed the world*”.

The story of Damon is the story of a group of people who were well in advance of the MPs in England who tried to mystify them with the word “emancipation.” Naturally people welcomed the chance to become recognised as even partly human, but the front lines of African thought were lines at Essequibo and it is there a revolt took place against the forced labour that went along with “emancipation.” The spies of that time decided that Damon, a plantation enslaved labor had rioted by leading the people in a passive resistance. They tried him, hanged him and banished some of his colleagues. The tradition that executed Walter Rodney was set then. It was how an old order felt like dealing with surprising political intelligence from below. Later some Independence rulers have followed in that path, beginning with colonial governors. They also executed riotous workers, mainly, but not only, indentured Indians.

The emancipation law ordered forced labour after enslavement, and the front lines of freedom in those times, Essequibo resisted. They asked what the real difference between slavery and forced labour was. They held a passive resistance struggle bringing many plantation people to La Belle Alliance churchyard. They were speaking for all the enslaved of the British Empire.

We shall see how the slaves made free by an Act of Parliament in 1834 became apprentices and laboured without pay just as under slavery, with one exception. Any apprentice who worked for than 7-1/2 hour on anyone day was entitled to payment for overtime work only.
Frank Fyffe, a bauxite worker and a poet of our people wrote recently that his colleague, Desmond Moffat refused overtime work at the bauxite company, while he was in the forefront of the free workers’ movement there – Mr. Fyffe’s right. The country needs to know about Mr Moffatt.

The majority of apprentices worked and saved out of their overtime pay and the cultivation and rice beds and provision farming they were able to do; they saved and saved until the day came. On 1st August 1838 all apprentices again benefited from a U.K. law ending that system of forced labour. The Governor of Antigua never made that apprenticeship law. The apprenticeship period was supposed to last six years. Payne argues that the Damon rebellion caused the British to reduce the period from six years to four. They should have known what happened in Haiti when Napoleon tried to reintroduce slavery in a more frontal and military way.

The village movement in Guyana, then, was part of a world wide, post-enslavement movement that took various forms in various places, always tied to the domestic situation. In Guyana it took its most self-empowering form but was limited by the overarching colonial empire system, which it also affected and reformed internally. Because the former apprentices won a number of unique class rights, or rights for ordinary working people, the movement also felt a hype of freedom that was less rich than it appeared to be.

The British Guiana government had made laws as Alan Young says to keep the Africans landless. No person could buy less than 100 acres of Crown Land at $28.80 per acre. To overcome this ban they fell back on a memory of collective landowning in Africa. (This is my reasoning). They kept a sharp alert for news of bankrupt plantations anxious to sell out. It took a lot of groundings, discussions, calculation, moving from estate to estate to make up a certain number of share holders, who had enough savings, patience, decision making, trust of one another, honesty of representatives to make it a reality. Each had to try working out a constitution, which most borrowed from wise Northbrook, Victoria. Above all, they needed the will to leave to cover of the plantation and go out on their own. It was a peaceful upheaval. It shows how much can be done by brain power and mind power once armed force does not panic.

For its time, the right buy and own land by title in the face of governmental resistance, was very advanced. So also were the right of all shareholders to
vote in their villages, and the right of women to vote and be elected in their villages to self-made village management committees, forerunners of the village councils.

The movement was so much opposed to the old slave system that the British newspaper London Times referred to it often and described it as “little bands of socialists living in communities.” It was of British Empire and also of global significance, just before the publication of the Communist Manifesto in 1848. Jamaica had its own pattern of village development, the free villages, which took a different path and had its own strengths. The cooperative or collectivist villages were conceived and launched by the British Guiana apprentices (1840) before the British cooperators founded in 1844 the world famous Rockdale principles, which governed or influenced cooperatives all over the world until now.

These were not the only post emancipation villages in the country. In Essequibo coast, still in shock from the Damon repression, the plantation owners did not allow for empowerment from below to come into play. Plantation owner Carberry read the signs of the times and introduced change from above. He set aside lands in the front of his plantations, subdivided and surveyed them and sold them to apprentices, person by person. So the villages like Queenstown came into being. In both cases the source of the purchase money was the overtime wages and crop sales during the period of forced labour 1834 to 1838.

Sugar estates in the post Enmore (1948) strike and shooting and resulting Venn Commission days experienced the updating of housing on the existing estates. This went beyond Carberry establishing housing as a right under new laws establishing the sugar industry special funds. One of the funds was the Sugar Industry Labour Welfare Fund (SILWF). Even so, none of the governments following the Venn Commission administered these funds according to the strict law, so far as cane farmers, mostly resident in villages, or renting village farm beds, were concerned.

In his booklet “From Nigger Yard to Village,” the historian and revolutionary activist Walter Rodney pointed to the class transformation from enslaved plantation labourers to free labourers who assumed, invented and practiced the subversive right to bargain for wages. Whereas I have stressed the village movement as the start of coastal peasant farming, in Guyana, the historian has stressed rather that it was a new free laboring class doing
farming in its off time. In any case it was the first big coastal challenge to the old sugar based economy, introducing new commodities and a small holder’s economy and allowing women to blossom as free producers. While the ruling groups proclaimed that the pioneering Africans hurt the country’s development, Moohr, a British economist has shown, using GDP and GNP calculations how in the same period production outside of sugar actually increased. This shows that the ex apprentices had established the beginnings of a competitive economy of their own. (see Buxton-Friendship in Print and Memory)

The celebration of the 170th anniversary of a village, in this case Buxton, is bound to recall and the amazing village movement and cause serious people to attempt to give it its place in history of the hemisphere. The celebration of individuals can be just as historical and uplifting. Bachelors Adventure recently celebration to the 100th birth anniversary of Mother Elodea Hector who was born in a time when the villages had started new efforts as they began to decline.

In his History of the Guyanese Working People 1880-1905” Rodney describes many of the commercial classes in the city that serviced the sugar estates mainly. Simmons of the University of Guyana has researched a pioneering movement of financial self organisation, the Cooperative Credit Banks. Forbs Deon Abrams has written numerous articles in the former Guyana Review on individual villages along the coast. Most recently Weir Mohammed, writing on the history of Rice in Guyana noted that the post emancipation villages were severely limited in expansion possibilities because of the land policy climate in which they arose. Kimani Nehusi has written on the importance of writing village history.