Remembering the Village Movement: A Significant Afro Guyanese Achievement

- By Cecilia McAlmont - Stabroek News - September 29, 2005

On August 1 every year for the past one hundred and seventy-one years, Guyanese, but especially Guyanese of African descent together with their counterparts in the rest of the English speaking Caribbean, celebrate the end of chattel slavery. However, it was to be four more years of semi-slavery, known as apprenticeship, before they were truly free.

The end of apprenticeship ushered in what could easily be regarded as the most significant decade of Afro Guyanese achievement. The purpose of this article is to remember that achievement and to narrate how it happened particularly for the benefit of our uniformed young men and women.

Caribbean historians describe the village movement and the rise of the black peasantry in British Guiana and elsewhere as a continuation and an extension of the struggle and resistance against the domination and the exploitation of the planters. In British Guiana as elsewhere that resistance had taken place throughout the period of slavery.

The attempts of the enslaved peoples especially at active resistance - revolts, running away and attempts to set up Maroon settlements, as their Jamaican counterparts had done, and even attempts to squat on crown land and up the numerous rivers and creeks proved to be largely un successful. The dominant planter class felt that because of the availability of Crown land and abandoned estates, when apprenticeship ended the ex apprentices would abandon the sugar estates and this would lead to a labour shortage, the collapse of the sugar economy and by implication, the end of 'civilised society.'

To forestall this eventuality, the planters used their control over the political institutions of the colony to put in place measures which would keep the apprentices landless. To prevent squatting, an apprenticeship Order-in-Council was passed. It stated that an apprentice who was found five miles from his own plantation was subject to arrest. If he occupied wasteland without permission, he could be sent to prison for three months with hard labour. Additionally, about a month before the end of apprenticeship in 1838, a Vagrancy Act, a Police and Poor Law Act were passed. Their primary purpose was to restrict the freedom of movement of the soon to be ex apprentices. To further put the purchase of land out of the apprentices' reach, crown lands had to be purchased in blocks of 100 acres at one pound sterling per acre. (In today's dollars, it was like saying that we can only purchase land if we were prepared to buy 100 acres at hundreds of thousands of dollars an acre.)

Not all of the planters agreed with that policy. The shrewder amongst them recognized that if the ex apprentices could live on land on or near the plantation, enough to satisfy their desire
for a home but not enough to grow food to support their families, then they would have to continue to work on the nearby plantation. By the end of the first year after apprenticeship about 267 cottages had been constructed on plots half to one third of an acre in size. As expected, the ex apprentices continued to work on the nearby estates. A planter, Carberry, realized the income-earning potential of the phenomenon and cashed in on it. In 1840, he purchased three adjoining estates on the Essequibo coast, Dageraad, Mocha and Westfield and created a small town. He put in streets, divided the front lands into half acre lots which he sold for $100, $150 and $220 each depending on their location in the town.

These sold like the proverbial hot cakes. On September 25, 1841, at the request of the villagers it was christened, Queenstown, by Governor Sir Henry Light. This was the beginning of the proprietary village system under which each villager held title to his individual plot of land. This initial success led other planters to follow suit. By the end of 1841 about 18 plantations were offering land for sale or lease on the Essequibo coast and the practice soon spread to the counties of Demerara and Berbice.

However, the attitude of the majority of the planters caused the fear of the loss of labour to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. After a brief vacation at the end of apprenticeship, many of the now ex apprentices returned to the plantations where they had laboured during slavery and apprenticeship, but they were demanding different conditions of service. While, for the most part, they themselves were prepared to continue to work on the estates, they wanted their wives to remain at home and take care of their families. They wanted their children to attend the schools which were being set up for that purpose. Additionally, those who had acquired specific skills wanted to negotiate better wages. This led to confrontation with the planters who refused to accept their former slaves as citizens and free labourers with the rights and privileges which went with that status.

As a consequence, many of the ex-slaves sought to underscore their status as freeman and their independence from the plantations on which they had endured so much humiliation and suffered so many indignities. They demonstrated this by purchasing some of the over 50 mainly cotton estates that had been abandoned. The first such purchase was made on November 2, 1839 when 83 labourers from five estates - Dochfour, Ann’s Grove, Hope, Paradise and Enmore together purchased plantation Northbrook for $10,000. Among the purchasers were several women including Maria Grant, Belinda Hopkinson, Catherine Thom, Molly Archer, and Hanna Foster. Their initial down payment was $6,000. Much of it was in the form of coins which they had zealously hoarded from their meagre earnings during their free time during apprenticeship or from the sale of produce from their provision grounds during slavery. The money was placed in wheel barrows which they enthusiastically pushed through the streets of Georgetown to
where the money had to be deposited. The rest of the purchase price was paid off within three weeks.

This was the first of the dozens of Communal villages that were to be set up. They were so called because, unlike the Proprietary village, there was one common title for all of the proprietors. In the case of the first village, the title was vested in the names of six of the most prominent of the purchasers with the understanding that each of the subscribers was entitled to one undivided eighty-third share of the entire plantation. This system which was initially the basic strength of the village movement turned out to be the greatest threat to its economic viability and prosperity.

It was the beginnings of what we know today as "children property" because proprietorship was passed down to all heirs "share and share alike." In the early years the growth of many claimants made very difficult the management of flood control and other important business decisions. It also contributed to the problem of fragmentation and with it the loss of economic viability of the holding. Despite its obviously negative effects the term "share and share alike" still appears in the Wills of our parents and grandparents, that is to say, the Wills of those who make them since many of them like many of us will, die intestate.

The new proprietors submitted a petition to Queen Victoria requesting the Royal name of Victoria be given to the new plantation village. It was granted. The establishment of Victoria was the beginning of the establishment of Communal villages throughout the colony. By 1840, four communal villages were established in West Coast Berbice through the purchase of estates. Golden Grove, 500 acres, was purchased by 14 labourers for $1,716; St John, 252 acres was purchased by 46 labourers for $5,000; E half of Perseverance, 250 acres was purchased by 109 labourers for $2,000 and Lichfield, 500 acres, was purchased by one labourer, Cudjoe McPherson for $3,000. He immediately divided it into 12 shares and sold them. At about the same time, five Proprietary villages were established at Zuid Holland, Pleyt Anker and Zuid Aan Vleyt on the Canje, Fyrish on the Corentyne River and The Three Sisters on the Berbice River.

These purchases led to severe inflation. It was realized that the ex-apprentices had a great hunger for land. But more importantly and surprisingly to the planters, the former enslaved peoples had money with which to purchase the land. The consequences of this realization and the other developments in the unfolding of the village movement will be the subject of the next article.