

Jamaica Overview

- [Environment](#)
- [Peoples](#)
- [History](#)
- [Governance](#)
- [Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples](#)

Environment

Jamaica is the third largest island of the Greater Antilles chain. It is located south of Cuba in the Caribbean Sea. The total land area is 10,991 sq km.

Peoples

Main languages: English, patois

Main religions: Christianity (Anglican, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian), Rastafarianism (Boba Shanti, Nyahbingi, Twelve Tribes)

Main minority groups: Rastafari (10%, source: <http://www.religiousintelligence.co.uk/>)

The majority of the population (90 per cent, 2006 Census) is of Jamaica is of West African origin. The rest are people of mixed heritage with combinations that include European-African, Afro-indigenous, Chinese-African and East Indian-African.

There are also small well-established minority populations of Lebanese, Syrians, Cubans, Europeans and South Asians, some of whom wield significant political and economic influence in the country. About half the population lives in rural areas.

The legacy of slavery is evident in the existence of three small communities of Maroons, the descendants of Africans who escaped from enslavement and established independent settlements in isolated rural districts.

There are also Rastafari who live among the general population and also in their own communities. It is difficult to estimate how many 'true' Rastafarians exist since the outward trappings have now been adopted and adapted locally and internationally as part of the fashion vernacular.

History

Pre-colonial

The original inhabitants of Jamaica were the indigenous Taíno, an Arawak-speaking people who began arriving on Hispaniola by canoe from the Belize and the Yucatan peninsula sometime before 2000 BCE. From there they colonized the large islands like Jamaica and the rest of the Caribbean in conjunction with waves of indigenous people who had also sailed up from the Orinoco/Amazon region of South America. The name Jamaica is derived from Xaymaca, the Taíno-Arawak name for the island, which translates, as 'isle of springs'.

Early colonial

Jamaica was charted by Christopher Columbus during his second voyage and the first Europeans to arrive on the island were the Spanish in 1509. With no obvious gold reserves to be mined, the Spanish were slow to settle the territory. Nevertheless it was well populated so the Spanish made Xaymaca a major location for 'slaving' expeditions to capture the indigenous inhabitants. From there they were taken as forced labourers to mine whatever gold could be found on Hispaniola (see Dominican Republic).

The first Spanish settlement on Xaymaca was finally established in 1523. The area is still known as Spanish Town.

Jamaica became a Spanish agricultural colony, producing crops that were indigenous to the island. As fledgling cacao and tobacco industries grew there was a need for labour. The shortfall was met by importing Africans captured on the West African coast. Over time some of these new imports also escaped into the mountains.

Maroons

The largest early single exodus of Africans away from slavery came when the British invaded Jamaica in 1655 and expelled the Spanish. A large number of Africans escaped into the hills and mountains and linked up with the indigenous Taíno thereby laying the foundations for the formation of the Maroon settlements.

The name 'Maroon' comes from the Spanish word cimarrón, roughly translated as 'wild' or 'untamed'. Over time the Maroons came to control large areas of the Jamaican interior and from their hide-outs would regularly descend to raid the plantations.

Jamaica was formally ceded to England in 1670 under the provisions of the Treaty of Madrid. During the late 1600s growing numbers of English immigrants arrived. The sugar, cacao, forest and other agricultural industries initiated by the Spanish were rapidly expanded; creating an ever-increasing demand for plantation labour.

This led to the large-scale importation of hundreds of thousands of Africans in chains to provide forced labour. Jamaica soon developed into one of the principal slave-trading centres in the Caribbean. In 1692 Port Royal, the main Jamaican slave market, was destroyed by an earthquake. Kingston was established nearby shortly thereafter and slave trading continued. So did maroonage.

Maroons had well-organized communities based on traditional African structures and over the centuries developed a good knowledge of the island's terrain. As a result many Africans seeking to escape plantation slavery sought sanctuary with them and constantly enlarged their numbers. The two main Maroon groups were the Trelawny Town Maroons – led by Cudjoe – and the Windward Maroons – led by Queen Nanny and Quao.

Maroon communities were an enormous threat to Jamaican plantation society and economic security. Since slaves were 'purchased', the need to retrieve the disappearing 'investments' prompted the British to seek solutions as far away as the Central American coast. In 1720 the British signed a treaty with the King of the Miskito Coast of Nicaragua to provide 50 able-bodied men to assist the Jamaican plantation owners in their struggle against runaway slaves (see Nicaragua). Ultimately the British were forced to send an army into the hills to destroy the Maroon settlements.

Maroon War

The Maroon War (1730–39) demonstrated the difficulty in trying to remove the Maroons. The conflict only ended when Maroon leaders agreed to a truce. It allowed them to keep their own autonomous region of the island. The Maroons gained control of large areas of land, however the deal also included an agreement to return runaway slaves and to help to the British in putting down revolts or outside invasions from colonial rivals.

A major dissenter was Queen Nanny of the Windward Maroons. This famous female Maroon military leader disagreed with the degree of control the British had gained since it ended the option of sanctuary to those still enslaved. Queen Nanny was an Ashanti from West Africa who, along with her five brothers, had escaped from enslavement soon after arriving in Jamaica. Much of the wartime Maroon leadership came from this Ashanti warrior family including Accompong, Cuffy, Johnny and the two signatories to the agreement Cudjoe and Quao.

The truce meant that from then on any escapees would be forced to seek sanctuary off the island. Options that existed were the coast of Central America and Puerto Rico, where the Spanish offered runaways asylum and land in exchange for defending the island against the British (see Puerto Rico).

With the Maroon problem largely settled, British sugar interests made vast fortunes. Over a million Africans were taken to Jamaica and enslaved. Moreover, having controlled maroonage, the British were able to avoid any build-up to events like the rebellion that took place in Haiti (1801).

Abolition

As a consequence the anti-slavery fight in Jamaica was left largely in the hands of religious organizations and abolitionists. The next major uprising did not take place until 1831 when a 31-year-old Jamaican born Baptist preacher and abolitionist named Sam Sharpe organized a general strike against slavery in the western parishes.

The draconian response led to an eight-day upheaval resulting in the deaths of 14 white planters/overseers and over 180 Africans. In addition to the brutal reprisal, the courts handed out 138 death sentences. After being hanged, the convicted were decapitated and their heads placed in conspicuous spots on their plantations as a further deterrent.

Slavery in Jamaica was abolished in 1833 by an act of the British Parliament that made US \$30 million available as compensation to slave owners. In contrast it required that the nearly 310,000 liberated slaves provide an extra six years of compulsory but paid labour, which was termed 'apprenticeship'. The system proved unmanageable and apprenticeship was prematurely terminated in 1838.

Free villages

Following abolition, many Afro-Jamaicans sought land holdings of their own on which to establish their

lives and these became the basis for the establishment of the free villages and townships.

This search for autonomy was stimulated by the harsh treatment doled out to former slaves by resentful planters. In many cases wages were low and they charged high rents making payment difficult and leading to eviction from plantation buildings.

With the money accumulated through apprenticeship some newly liberated Afro-Jamaicans either bought random sections of land that had been subdivided for sale by planters who needed money quickly, or obtained lots from planters who had abandoned their properties and hoped to recover some of their losses.

Lots were purchased collectively under the leadership of Protestant missions such as the Baptist, Moravian, Presbyterian and Methodist denominations. These faith-based groups then sold small lots to their congregation.

Many free Africans who had no money simply became squatters on vacant lands and continued the cultivation of many of the food crops the colonial government had exported before emancipation. Free villages grew rapidly in Jamaica from 2,014 in 1838 to over 7,800 in 1840 and more than 50,000 in 1859.

Indentureship

With African forced labour no longer readily available, Jamaican plantation owners looked for alternatives and were encouraged by British colonial authorities to import indentured labourers from India, China and Africa.

Under the indentureship system the labourer worked for a specified time (five years) in return for wages and free passage. After this period the individual was free to repatriate or find other work.

Between 1838 and 1917, 21,500 East Indians from colonial India immigrated to Jamaica. However, apart from wages and the legally defined service period, East Indian indentured labourers were treated just as harshly as the enslaved Africans they replaced. Nevertheless, after their contracts the majority remained in the country adding to the multicultural mix.

In addition to East Indians about 5,000 Chinese indentured labourers also immigrated to Jamaica between 1860 and 1893. They quickly moved off the estates at the end of their contracts and became mainly engaged in small commerce and food services. Also, between 1841 and 1867, about 32,000 more West Africans came to Jamaica, but as indentured labourers (see also British Guiana).

Insurrections

Social and economic conditions for emancipated Africans did not improve. A combination of limited local employment, plantation closures and declining international trade resulted in an economic crisis. Oppressive tax laws, discrimination in the courts, and land-exclusion also caused continuing Afro-Jamaican discontent.

This ultimately caused a widespread insurrection in October 1865 that began as a peaceful demonstration at the Morant Bay Court House. It was led by an Afro-Jamaican landowner Paul Bogle, who was protesting against an unjust trial. The militia fired on the crowd and a riot ensued. In the unrest that followed martial law was imposed and brutal reprisals were inflicted. Thousands of houses were

burnt, and 489 of the protestors, including Paul Bogle, were later tried and hanged for treason.

Nevertheless these events did prompt further change. Shortly thereafter Britain took over more direct control of the island. Jamaica was made a Crown colony, thereby losing the considerable degree of self-government that had existed since the late 1600s.

Marcus Garvey

The situation at home caused Afro-Jamaicans to look abroad for opportunities, thus initiating the so-called 'Jamaican Diaspora' that has continued ever since. In the late 1800s Afro-Jamaican males began leaving in considerable numbers. They became the bulk of the Afro-Caribbean workforce involved in building the railways in the Central American states, developing the banana plantation industry and constructing the Panama Canal.

One of those who travelled abroad at this time was journalist and orator Marcus Garvey, who made an investigative visit to many of the places in Central and South America to which Caribbean workers had migrated. As a result he formed the internationally significant Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Garvey became one of the most influential African nationalist leaders of the twentieth century, and a major inspiration for African independence and the creation of the Rastafarian movement.

Jamaica was one of the key participants in the creation of the Federation of the West Indies in January 1958. In the end it was disagreement over the role of Jamaica that would lead to the break-up of the federation in 1962. Jamaica gained its independence on 6 August 1962.

Governance

Jamaica essentially has a two-party political system consisting of the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP), which supports free enterprise in a mixed economy, and the People's National Party (PNP), which is more left leaning. Other minor parties, such as the Workers' Party of Jamaica, and the Jamaica American Party, which favours US statehood for Jamaica, have limited political participation.

The head of state is the British monarch represented by a governor-general; however the head of the government is the prime minister. Executive power is vested in a two-chamber, 60-member House of Representatives popularly elected for terms of up to five years. The governor-general appoints the 21 members of the Senate.

Jamaica has a very large overseas population. Over the past several decades, hundreds of thousands of Jamaicans have emigrated, especially to the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada, and other countries. Canada also has a Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (guest workers) that attracts workers from the Caribbean and especially from Jamaica.

Many thousands of Haitian refugees have been arriving in Jamaica by boat each year. In June 2005, the Jamaican authorities repatriated 309 Haitians whose requests for political asylum were rejected. Over 2,000 had been repatriated in 2004.

Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

Rastafarianism is no longer just a local phenomenon. From its humble beginnings among the dispossessed and disenfranchised Afro-Jamaican population it increasingly began to attract the attention

of the young radical university-based intelligentsia in the 1960s.

It has since spread to other Caribbean islands and to communities in Britain, the USA, Canada and other countries where there is a significant Afro-Caribbean population.

It is difficult to estimate how many 'true' Rastafarians exist since many people adopt the outward trappings of the religion as a fashion gesture. The movement has also undergone various theological modifications over time and there now exist three distinct orders, each with its own beliefs and symbols. However, two common principles held by all Rastafari include; the exalted status of Haile Selassie I and the rejection of white Eurocentric images of divinity.