K. Olwig

The struggle for respectability: Methodism and Afro-Caribbean culture on 19th century Nevis

In: New West Indian Guide/ Nieuwe West-Indische Gids 64 (1990), no: 3/4, Leiden, 93-114

This PDF-file was downloaded from <http://www.kitlv-journals.nl>

KAREN FOG OLWIG

THE STRUGGLE FOR RESPECTABILITY: METHODISM AND
AFRO-CARIBBEAN CULTURE ON 19TH CENTURY NEVIS

One of the important results of missionary activity in the West Indies was the gradual transformation of the Afro-Caribbean people from the status of plantation stock to that of socially accepted human beings. By working towards a recognition of the humanity of the slaves the missionaries helped make way for the eventual emancipation of the slaves. The sort of humanity, however, which the missionaries envisioned for the slaves was, naturally, closely defined by the perceptions of the European societies from which they came.

In the case of the Methodists, who began their missionizing activities among slaves during the late 18th century, the promotion of respectability among the slaves was seen to be a crucial basis for their recognition and acceptance within the wider society. The concept of respectability, which was advocated by the Methodists, was informed by the cultural values of the emerging middle class of 18th-century British society, from whose ranks the missionaries came. It was, furthermore, directed against the "folk" cultural values of the lower classes from whose ranks the Methodist middle class emerged. Methodists, by and large, failed to recognize the importance of Afro-Caribbean culture as a basis of cultural identity among the slaves, which could be accorded public respectability. This is because this culture was not middle class European, at the same time as it resembled, in some respects, the mores of the lower class folk society against which Methodism reacted.

The Methodist mission therefore sheds light on one of the important ways in which Afro-Caribbean culture became marginalized at the expense of an English, Methodist cultural model of respectability. Moreover, it evinces the ways in which this affected the position of the Afro-Caribbean population in the

free society which emerged after the emancipation of the slaves. Since the role of respectability has been of some debate in present-day Caribbeanist scholarship, this historical anthropological study of the Methodist mission also relates to an important aspect of Caribbean studies.

METHODIST RESPECTABILITY AND SLAVE SOCIETY

The basis of the Methodist mission in the West Indies was the principle that "all men, including slaves, were brothers in Christ" (Blackman 1988: 4). This was not a generally accepted Christian dogma in the West Indies, when the Methodists began their mission after landing on Antigua on Christmas day in 1786. In fact, in the Eastern Caribbean the Moravian and Methodist churches were unique in recognizing the "black slaves, the free and the coloured people as equal with whites in the sight of God" (Blackman 1988: 2). It is important to recognize, however, that the brotherhood – or equality – that these missionaries offered the slaves, was not based upon a feeling of general, pan-human equality. They did not subscribe to the notion that all peoples and cultures, including all religions, must be respected as equal, nor did they challenge secular, this-worldly distinctions between master and slaves. In order to be admitted to the brotherhood of the Methodists, or the Moravians, it was necessary to be converted to Christianity, preferably their own version of it, and to accept the social order of this world.

The Methodist notion of brotherhood nevertheless had quite revolutionary implications when applied to British West Indian plantation society. The late 18th century, when the Methodists began missionizing among the slaves, was a period when the plantation economy based upon slavery was at its height. As the Jamaican sociologist Orlando Patterson has shown, this was an extreme form of chattel slavery where the slaves were regarded as mere beasts of burden, which were nothing but a part of the planters' private property, although a very important and valuable one. In order to fit this "nonhuman" position, the slave was cut off from "the social heritage of his ancestors and deprived of any personal honor and recognition" – the slaves were, in other words, regarded as "socially dead" (Patterson 1982: 5, 13, 46, 48; Kopytoff 1982).

For plantation society, any sort of mission which recognized the slaves as human beings, as "brothers in Christ", or perhaps even worse as "equal in the sight of God", therefore posed a serious threat to the established social order (Turner 1982: 196). Since this social order was a rather precarious one, in that it proved increasingly difficult to keep the slaves in their situation of social death, the missionaries came at a time, when a solution was needed to the growing problem of how to handle a large population which pressured for social

recognition. While the planters initially were hostile towards the missionaries, they began to tolerate them, if the missionaries were willing to work within the social system. To a certain extent the notion of respectability, which formed an important basis of the missionaries' concept of proper human relations, fit this purpose.

The idea of respectability emerged in Europe in the 18th century within the bourgeois segments of society. Concerned with the establishment of "'decent and correct' manners and morals, as well as the proper attitude toward sexuality" (Mosse 1985: 1), respectability became an important means by which the middle classes first legitimized and demarcated themselves, and later upheld their special status vis-a-vis the lower and upper classes (Mosse 1985: 9). Pietistic movements such as that of the Methodists gave religious support to the idea of respectability, and later in the 19th century, nationalistic movements adopted the middle class ideal of respectability and made it an ideological foundation of the new nations (Mosse 1985; Hempton 1984). Respectability, in other words, was invented to be a "traditional" way of life which provided an important moral and social underpinning of the new nationalism (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983).

The notion of respectability also has become an important basis of West Indian societies, associated with the norms of the European oriented middle classes. In the West Indies respectability remained largely confined to the relatively small middle class segments of the population and did not become the cultural foundation for the population as a whole to the extent that it did in Europe. The middle class, however, represented the highest level to which the free colored class and their equivalent in post-Emancipation society could reasonably aspire. Respectability therefore has become identified by the Afro-Caribbean population with high status in society at large, and has become a social ideal for the lower classes to aspire to.

This ideal has not gone unchallenged, however. Wilson has thus suggested that Caribbean societies contain two juxtaposed ideas of "respectability" and "reputation", which correspond, on the one hand, to the values of the official, legal society, delineated above, and, on the other, to those of the local, peasant communities (Wilson 1969: 70-84). He sees women and men as identifying differently with these values so that the female sphere, which is associated mainly with the domestic unit and the church, is most concerned with respectability, whereas the male sphere, located in the public arena of the rum shops and informal street corner gatherings, can be seen to be oriented towards reputation.

Wilson's ideas have been further developed in Roger Abrahams' studies of Caribbean folklore and ritual, which he argues often take the form of a symbolic struggle between societal forms of respectability and local cultural concepts of

reputation, expressed in a conflict between respectability as form and reputation as content (Abrahams 1983). Like Wilson, he also views women as the guardians of respectability concerned with the perceived appearance of the domestic unit within the wider society, and as less involved in those activities in the local community which are associated with reputation (Abrahams 1983: 152-53).

Implied in this juxtaposition of respectability and reputation is a view of respectability as a foreign element being imposed from the larger, external society and of reputation as an authentic concept generated locally in peasant communities which have been relatively isolated from the wider society (Wilson 1969: 83). This leads to the impression that women have chosen to identify with European values, whereas men are the upholders of Afro-Caribbean community values. However, as argued by Sutton (1974), the complex of values found in Caribbean communities has developed in close association with colonial and neocolonial power structures over which the Afro-Caribbean population has had little control. Furthermore, women as well as men have been subject to these colonial displays of power. This suggests that the present-day tendency for men and women to engage in different forms of cultural expression, as described by Wilson and Abrahams, should not necessarily be seen to reflect a situation where men are more oriented towards local values, whereas women are inclined to support colonial, societal values. Rather, it should be interpreted as a result of the different access to public institutions that men and women have experienced as a result of the colonial gender structures which were imposed on them in the post-emancipation era.

By analyzing the concept of respectability within the historical context in which it was introduced to the Caribbean, I shall try to demonstrate that the role of respectability in Caribbean societies must be examined from the point of view of a cultural struggle between colonial and local interests in which men and women were equally involved. This struggle centered on attempts, on the part of the colonial authorities, to control the Afro-Caribbean population by integrating them via social institutions of respectability, and, on the part of the Afro-Caribbean population, on the employment, or appropriation, of these socially recognized institutions of respectability as a means of displaying their culture in a society which refused to grant this culture any public recognition.

On the basis of records from the Methodist Missionary Society this article presents a case study of the Methodist pursuit of respectability on the Leeward Island of Nevis; the reactions to these efforts on the part of the Afro-Caribbean population, and the relevance of 19th-century Methodist notions of respectability to the later development of cultural identity on the island.¹ From a historical anthropological perspective I shall show how the tradition of respectability, which was introduced to the Afro-Caribbean population primarily through

English Methodist missionaries, "went native" in the West Indies; and how its institutions were unmade and appropriated into West Indian custom as a pattern of social practices constituting "respectability". This respectability therefore became at one and the same time an expression of Afro-Caribbean identity and an institutionalized means of seeking recognition in the wider Euro-Caribbean society.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE METHODIST MISSION ON NEVIS

The Methodist mission began on Nevis, when Dr. Coke and his fellow missionaries visited the island from Antigua in January 1787 (Coke 1811: 12).² William Hammer worked on Nevis and gradually persuaded individual planters to let him preach for the slaves on the estates. When Dr. Coke returned to Nevis in 1789, a class of 21 catechumens had been established on the island, and in 1790, when he paid his last visit, a chapel had been secured in the capital Charlestown (Coke 1811: 13-14). The Methodist "society" (the term which the Methodists preferred to the term "church") grew rapidly to a membership of nearly 400 in 1793 and almost 1200 in 1803, the latter figure representing more than 10% of the total population.³ At that time the Methodists had erected two other chapels in the Gingerland and Newcastle areas of the island, and two missionaries were usually stationed on the island. Despite the growing importance of the chapels, the Methodists continued to go out to the slaves on those estates where planters were willing to allow this, in order to recruit new slaves for the faith. They generally came every two weeks, preaching either in the estate yard under a big tree, or in the boiling house, which was fitted into a chapel for the occasion. Often the manager or planter was present during the service.⁴

The Methodist church on Nevis appears to have been organized much as it is today. When slaves expressed a wish to join the society, they were placed in classes (first on trial) under a leader who reported to the minister on the members' progress or problems. Apart from attendance at class meetings and the regular services in the chapels, the members also were expected to go to the quarterly "love feasts", where they could bear testimony to their conversion, and to "watch nights", where the congregation prayed together in silence. These watch nights often were held on special occasions such as New Year's eve. A condition of membership was payment of class money and admission tickets to the church (Goveia 1965: 292). Those who could afford it paid extra for a pew.⁵ Membership in the Methodist society therefore reflected a certain economic standing among the slaves, and those slaves who were unable to pay their dues

often chose to stay home to avoid the shame of coming empty handed to church. During hard times, such as droughts, attendance therefore declined markedly.⁶

An important avenue for attracting new members was the Sunday School, where the children were instructed in the Bible. The Sunday Schools later developed into proper schools, and in 1818, the two Methodist missionaries on Nevis noted that they had established a morning school from 6 to 7, where children were taught to "read, spell, sing and the catechism". This school, however, was in dire need of Testaments and spelling books.⁷ Only two years later, the day school in Charlestown had been expanded from 6 to 8 in the morning and had about 100 children, 60 or 70 of whom attended regularly.⁸ This education was gradually expanded and schools were established in other parts of the island.⁹

WORKING WITHIN THE PLANTATION SOCIETY

Apparently the initial reaction on the part of the planter class towards the Methodists' attempt to missionize among the slaves was that of disbelief and ridicule. On the neighboring island of Antigua, where the mission first began its activities, the upper class expressed the opinion that the missionaries might as well "try to turn ... mules and oxen into men as make Christians out of ... slaves" (Gumbs 1986: 39). There is no doubt, however, that this ridicule disguised a real fear that Christian missionizing among slaves would disturb the delicate social order. This was made clear by William Smith (1745: 230), an Anglican minister on Nevis earlier in the 1700s:

When a Slave is once Christened, he conceits that he ought to be upon a level with his Master, in all other respects; in consequence whereof, he presumes, that if his Master corrects him, for ever so great a Fault, he is at full liberty to send him out of the World, by a Dose of Poison ... if even the whole Country was so mad, as to set about such an odd Conversion, the effect would then be a general Rebellion, and Massacre, of us Whites. This is Truth ...

This fear of the effects of Christening slaves was still prevalent in the late 1700s. The missionaries on Nevis were met with skepticism, which turned into hostility when the planters suspected the missionaries of being connected with the English abolitionists and of supporting Wilberforce's parliamentary campaign. Attempts were made to "intimidate the missionary and members of the society and a mob tried to burn their chapel over their heads" (Goveia 1965: 291, 295). This persecution stopped, however, and in 1805 one of the missionaries could report, "the principal Inhabitants have treated me with respect".¹⁰

One of the major reasons why the Methodists became accepted was that they succeeded in reassuring most of the white population that far from being agents of revolutionary change, they were a stabilizing force in the plantation society. The 1821 report of the Methodist Missionary Society thus makes clear that the Methodists were being accepted because they were helping to keep the increasingly restless slaves quiet by giving them a more divine purpose to live for. The report notes with great satisfaction that "open opposition to the efforts of the Missionaries has ceased" and goes on to state that "nothing but prudent and persevering exertions are necessary, under the divine blessing, to fix in the minds of the slaves generally the sanctifying truths of our holy religion, to bring their conduct under its salutary control, and thus at once to promote their present happiness, and to fix the peace and security of the colonies upon the surest foundations" (Report 1821: lxxxi).

This role of the missionaries as institutors of social order in colonial society was made clear in a letter from 1823 by two missionaries on Nevis, which stated: "truly religious Negroes become in general so much reconciled to their providential lot as to indulge but little anxiety respecting any great political change in their outward condition".¹¹ Whatever feelings of repugnance the missionaries held against slavery had to be confined to privacy in order to promote the greater missionary cause.¹²

METHODIST AND AFRO-CARIBBEAN CULTURE

Although the basis of Methodist missionizing among the slaves was that of equality in the sight of God, the Methodists believed that heathen slaves, who had not been exposed to any civilizing influence, had a very low level of understanding. One missionary writing in 1837, a few years after emancipation, thus noted that one could not expect as much of the "Negroes" as of the Englishmen with regard to understanding of religion, because they were "extremely ignorant, degraded almost to the level of beasts, oppressed and cruelly treated by their owners".¹³ Apparently it did not dawn on this missionary that the Afro-Caribbean population, despite this deprivation, might have developed a cultural system which provided a different basis for religious practice and understanding. This is related to the fact that the missionaries, as noted, in their work with the slaves emphasized those cultural values and norms of behavior that would meet with respectability in the wider society. They therefore were not particularly eager to reconcile Methodism to the Afro-Caribbean culture, which had developed among the slaves at the time the missionaries began their work on the island.

Religious Beliefs and Practices

One fundamental obstacle to Methodist missionizing among the slaves was presented by the religious practices and beliefs of the latter. The records indicate that the slaves had an essentially different concept of man and the supernatural. To them, it seems that man was basically "good" and not a sinful creature in need of salvation by God (Turner 1982: 71). One woman, refusing to attend the missionaries' preaching, indicated that she just did not see any reason why they should need to save her: "Massa me no muroter, no kill, me trouble nobody, me no sinner massa, me no used prayers massa".¹⁴ This failure to see man as basically a sinner is also apparent in this letter which expresses almost complete frustration on the part of the missionary:

I have been utter astonished at the darkness and ignorance which covered their minds. Many who have attended the house of God for numbers of years know no more of their state as Sinners, or of the plan of Salvation than the beasts which perish. And I find it exceeding difficult to get them to understand what they are by nature and what they must be by grace, before they can enter the kingdom of Heaven, however after giving them what instruction I can, I commend them to God who alone can enlighten the mind of man. And as to the pride of these people, it exceeds all I have seen before and appears to be increasing every day.¹⁵

Whereas the slaves' stubborn clinging to unchristian beliefs was frustrating, their continued practice of witchcraft, or obeah, was regarded as even more serious, since this was a more visible display of their heathenism. Since obeah was illegal, those who were caught using it were punished. Apparently, the punishment sometimes consisted of the slave being confronted with the Methodist missionary, who made them kneel down and repeat the Lord's prayer. In one case, where the switch had to be used to make an old obeah man do this, he at first refused to repeat "Thy Kingdom come", jumping up and shouting "'Me no Kingdom come!, no kingdom! Me no Kingdom come!'"¹⁶

The Provision Grounds

One of the aspects of slave culture that the missionaries were forced to give a certain amount of recognition was the Afro-Caribbean system of small farming; if for no other reason, than that it provided an important economic basis for the Methodist Society. The slaves' system of small farming, however, is almost only referred to when it failed to provide enough funds for the missionaries. This occurred most often, when there was a serious drought on the island, which made it impossible for the slaves to grow sufficient crops in their small lots on the plantations' marginal land to feed their own families, let alone the missionaries.¹⁷ This lack of sufficient funds had, as noted, the further

consequence that the slaves stopped attending the chapel, or even left the Methodist Society altogether.¹⁸

The central role of the provision grounds in the lives of the slaves is apparent in one of the testimonies of several slaves "living and dying in God" which were sent from Nevis in 1802 to the Methodist Missionary Society in London. One of the testimonies relates how the old slave Bean, when he thought he was dying, blessed a son of his and used the image of the plentiful provision ground to convince his son of the prosperity he would achieve if he adopted a Christian life. Bean took his son by the hand and said:

... God bless you my child. Take care to be a good boy. I have set you a good example, follow your Father to heaben, keep from ebery ting dat is sinfa and God will bless on you, if you save him good heart make ebery thing prospra you take in you hand, when you plant cassada he make um come up good when you plant tanja when you plant potatoes he send rain from heben and he grow good.¹⁹

While missionaries were taken by the "simplicity and heavenly mindedness" which were revealed in this statement, which had the effect that the son promised "amendment of life and to attend the chapel", they showed little understanding of the cultural importance of small farming, implicit in such a statement. Furthermore they displayed a startling lack of knowledge of the agricultural skills and capabilities of the slaves. One missionary thus was shocked when he learned that the slaves were not ignorant savages, but knew as much as he did about the cycles of the moon and the weather believed to be associated with these cycles, important knowledge for small farmers. This dawned on him, when he was seeking shelter in a shed along with several slaves:

I observed we shall have a new moon tonight & perhaps a change of weather. He [a slave] replied 'Yes massa, we shall.' He then spoke of the times when there would be a new moon and I asked him how it was that the negroes who cannot read, know as well as us who can, the exact changes of the moon? He replied that there was nothing they knew better & added 'We count days & look at times' ... he proceeded to notice the various positions of the moon & its appearances, and described the conclusions to which they arrived from such observations, as to what kind of weather would follow ...²⁰

The Markets

The missionaries paid considerably more attention to the slaves' markets, for the simple reason that they were held on Sundays, the only available free time for the slaves. This meant that the markets represented a serious break of the Sabbath. While earlier in the history of the island society all shops were kept

open on Sundays, by the 1800s most of the shops owned by the white population remained closed on Sundays.²¹ In this way, the slaves' markets were stigmatized by the very fact that they were forced to take place on Sundays. Some of the missionaries sympathized with the slaves' lot and saw in the markets an opportunity to spread the gospel to those slaves who did not attend the chapel. They therefore went to the market place itself and preached for the people there:

As the Negroes did not come to the chapel to hear us I have thought it my duty to go to them. Accordingly I went & preached in the Market after preaching in the forenoon in the chapel on the sabbath day which is nearly at an equal distance from church & chapel. When the negroes saw me entering the Market with the Hymn Book in my hand they immediately cleared away all their provisions for the accommodation of the congregation & almost the whole of the negroes surrounded me like a swarm of Bees & heard with seriousness & attention. I ascended an old wall at the side of the Market which I made my Pulpit. In this situation I stood whilst a pious old negroe held an umbrella over me to keep my head from the effects of a vertical sun. It is impossible for me to tell you with what pleasure I made the trumpet sound forth the glad-tidings of great joy to my black & coloured brethren who summoned to receive the word with a smiling conveyance of gratitude to God & man. One of the Negroes cried out when I began to sing O! Me never saw like! He be good Massa! – Me don't know where he be come from! – O! God bless good Massa! – Another poor woman like the woman at Jacob's well forgot her provisions at the other end of the market and came & joined the congregation.²²

Other missionaries were not just against the market, because it took place on Sundays, but also because they saw in it an ungodly place where a sort of language and behavior was displayed which was entirely unsuitable for respectable adults – and children:

Slave children at ca. six years old, or under, are employed picking grass for the cattle, vines for hogs and rabbits and this they do daily from light to dark. On the Sundays, their parents, or some other relations wash, and put a clean frock or shirt upon them and take them to Market. Here they see and hear nothing good everything bad, for slaves without the fear of God, can use, when offended the most obscond language.²³

There were two market places on the island, in Charlestown and Gingerland, and they attracted several hundred persons every Sunday.²⁴ They seem to have been not just places of trade, but important areas of social intercourse among the slaves, and many lingered in the area of the market place after the trade had stopped, talking and drinking. For the missionaries it therefore was humiliating to see members of his congregation mingle with the crowd at the market after having attended service in their chapels.²⁵

Music and Dance

The social life which took place among the slaves in the markets early on Sundays continued on the plantations where the slaves gathered in the afternoon to dance to the music of the fiddle and tambourine. This sort of entertainment was seen as being incompatible with the Methodist faith, and one missionary noted with regret that "Sunday dancing is much more common than preaching, and the houses that are regularly open for this wicked and disgraceful purpose are more in number than places of worship".²⁶ The Methodist reports are filled with descriptions of missionaries having entered dances held either in private houses or in the open in order to break them up.²⁷ As the Methodist society became more established, the missionaries took a more aggressive stand and expelled those members known to participate in this social activity.

The Family

One area of the slaves' culture which the missionaries were most eager to reform, because it was a blow to any sort of respectability envisioned by them, was the slaves' practice of cohabiting without being married. In the early period of their missionizing activities on Nevis, the Methodists confined themselves to "joining" slaves who were cohabiting. This was an informal ceremony, which was not considered to constitute a real marriage. Apparently the slaves did not regard it as such; neither were the joined slaves recorded in a register. In 1819, the Methodists began performing official marriages of slaves, and in 1822, cohabiting members of the society were required to marry.²⁸ The bans of the couple were published in the church, as was done for the white population in the Anglican church, and as far as the Methodists were concerned these marriages were completely valid.²⁹

This raising of the slaves' marital unions to an official level of respectability on par with the whites proved to be too much of a provocation to the white population. In 1828 a marriage act was passed on Nevis, granting only the clergy of the church of England and Ireland permission to perform marriages of legal significance. The marriages which the Methodists already had performed were regarded as illegal, and the Anglican clergy remarried several persons married in the Methodist church to others.³⁰ The marriage bill was kept in effect until 1842 and was clearly seen as a means of keeping the ambitious Methodists in check:

Some of our respectable people who have a house to live in – a horse to ride and other property are looked in the face by some of the opponents and then told by them that the Marriage in the chapel is not good and if they did they cannot make a will and leave their

property to their wives because they are nothing more than concubines and their children bastards.³¹

In the eagerness to establish a "proper" marriage among members of their congregation, the Methodists seem to have ignored the fact that the slaves' family system perhaps was not so much based on the marital union as such, as on the wider, consanguineal family. The references which appear to this sort of family therefore are only indirect, such as the description of the father who called a son to his deathbed to give him his blessing referred to above. The importance of kinsmen is apparent in other descriptions of deaths, with relatives gathering around the dying person³² and in cases concerning family loyalty, often only noted because loyalty to the family proved stronger than loyalty to the Methodist church.³³

THE STRUGGLE FOR RESPECTABILITY AFTER EMANCIPATION

Despite the frustrations often felt by the missionaries over their "stubborn" congregation, who refused to change their ways, the Nevisians were not untouched by the efforts of the missionaries at converting them to respectable citizens in society. The way in which the Nevisians vied for this respectability depended on the social and economic status they had achieved by the time of emancipation in 1834. For analytical purposes the Nevisians can be divided into two major groups: the small rising middle class of small property owners, and the large lower class of plantation laborers.

The Local Elite of the Middle Class

By the time of emancipation, a group of "most respectable" people had emerged within the Methodist Society who had acquired "a house to live in – a horse to ride and other property", and who were most upset about being told that they lived in concubinage and had bastard children, whom they could not make provisions for in wills. This class of people had arisen among the more privileged of the Afro-Caribbean population, such as those who possessed special marketable skills, for example artisans; those who engaged in trade activities, and those who were the offspring of mixed white/black unions and therefore had special access to the upper echelons of society. During the last 26 years before emancipation, a total of 320 slaves were manumitted (Higman 1984: 689).

For this group of people, the Methodist Society represented an institution in which they could assume leadership as "class leaders", local preachers, and later

fully ordained preachers. This group of people, who had been among the first to take advantage of the Methodist teaching on the island, also found positions as school teachers, when the educational system was expanded at the time of emancipation to accommodate the increasing number of children seeking education. In the early 1840s, these local teachers began to receive training at a college in Antigua.³⁴ As active participants in the Methodist church and schools they helped establish Methodist patterns of respectability as the basis of social standing in the community.

The modest and temperate style of life associated with English Methodism was strongly impressed upon the Nevisian congregation in Charlestown at the celebration of emancipation day in the chapel in 1839, which was orchestrated by the missionary in collaboration with the "class leaders". The freed population apparently regarded emancipation day on the 1st of August as their "Christmas", and in order to prevent them from engaging in the drinking and carousing usually associated with Christmas, a Society meeting was called at two in the afternoon on emancipation day. Fourteen hundred showed up for the event, which probably was as different from Christmas carousing as possible:

The arrangement was that all must have Society tickets to get admission and upon their admission they were to go to the part of the chapel and take their seats just in the same order as when they are met in class. This was done. Each leader was then at the direction of the preacher to wait upon his or her members and present to each one two cakes and a little water. This was done in a quiet and orderly manner after I had addressed our people on about fifteen virtues such as ... piety, prayer, Love, Honesty, Faithfulness to their engagements etc. etc. After we had done this, we then in a very solemn imposing and respectable manner renewed our covenant with God in much the same manner as at the close of the year.³⁵

No wonder the missionary later in the report could relate that "it has been said by many of the gentlemen in this colony that Methodism is the principal cause of that good order which has prevailed." This serving of cake and non-alcoholic drink was also common at tea meetings, which became popular at this time at gatherings which were "sober, spiritual and tended to godliness", and therefore provided occasions where the people could enjoy "the pleasures of Religion and Sociality together." At the same time, the tea meetings helped raise funds for worthy causes such as the new schools.³⁶

The following year a procession of the Sunday School was held by the Methodists which went through Charlestown and into the market place by the court house where a song was performed. This procession displayed good order, modesty and proper appearances in combination with loyalty to the British throne:

... they were arranged in order for walking under the care of their teacher. I then took my place at the head of them and immediately followed the biggest boy belonging to the day schools with a large Flag with the following motto 'Wesleyan Infant School – Fear God and Honour the Queen'. Among the Boys were two more small flags with the following words 'Loyalty' and 'Modesty'. Then at a given distance there were two similar flags with these words 'Temperance' 'honesty' inscribed on them. I suppose there were nearly 400 children. Boys and girls all smartly clothed. The boys had caps and straw hats, Jackets and Trousers. Shoes and stockings almost without an exception. The girls were all in white, many with bonnet and almost every one with shoes and stockings. I can assure you it was a lovely solemn attractive sight.³⁷

Not just the Sunday School, but also the day school emphasized the importance of a "decent appearance". Thus, at the boys school in Charlestown the rule that the pupils had to wear "a jacket and trousers" was strictly adhered to.³⁸

In 1840, the marriage bill, which had prevented Methodists from performing marriages, was reconsidered in the local assembly which represented mainly white planter interests. The increasing respectability of the Methodist church in the society and the rapid advancement of the Black middle class associated with it were perceived as a threat by some of the assembly members. One member thus criticized the Methodists for advancing "the doctrine of equality", saying that they wished to "give to those who have black skins and coloured skins white skin", and the Methodists were accused of teaching "the people to interfere with the politics of the country" and "to aspire to offices for which they are not competent, even that of President".³⁹ At this time, however, the Methodists had won the day – they had shown their usefulness in providing an orderly English model of behavior for the Black population to emulate – and the marriage bill was revoked. The Methodists finally had become completely established, and their notions of respectability had become an important basis of social standing in free society.⁴⁰

It seems, however, that it was only a fairly small minority in the church, which succeeded in living up to the conventions of respectability expected by the Methodists. While the members of congregation were eager to participate in church affairs, the missionaries' letters, journals and reports are filled with despairing commentaries on the members' succumbing to such evils as dancing, drinking, licentiousness, fornication, and heathenish superstition.⁴¹ These practices were most embarrassing, when they involved the local middle class and leadership in the church. One missionary thus resolved to stop holding tea meetings, because they were frequented by "orators" who used them to "talk of their being Means of Grace", whereas they were steeped in what he regarded as "Dissipation and Immorality".⁴² It therefore seems that even though the middle class subscribed to Methodist ideals, and validated their position through them, they found it difficult to reconcile these ideals with their everyday life.

We may find the reason for this difficulty in the fact that adherence to the Methodist ideas and culture implicated a total denial of the Afro-Caribbean culture out of which the middle class had emerged. This is apparent in the nomination of a local school teacher who was admitted for training to become a fully ordained minister in the Methodist Society in 1868. It reads: "He is black – but of very superior ability. He is a thorough student, shrewd & acute, possesses good preaching talent. There is no negroism about him either in speech or manners. He has command of excellent English".⁴³ The good Methodists and leaders of the emerging elite thus were to be Negroes with no "negroism about them", or as stated by the member of the Nevis legislature quoted above, Blacks who were given "white skin". Most members of the middle class formally expressed their social position by assuming leadership roles in church, occupying the front pews in the main body of the chapel, or just being regularity itself in attendance.

The Lower Class

While the middle class struggled to maintain the appearance of respectability by seemingly adopting English Methodist conventions as their own cultural traditions, the vast majority of the Afro-Caribbean population who belonged to the lower class of plantation laborers chose an opposite strategy in their search for respectability. Rather than pretending to abandon their Afro-Caribbean culture, they appear to have attempted to remove this culture, or at least certain aspects of it, from its marginalized, "immoralized" position in society. They did this partly by conforming to Methodist conventions, partly by adapting the Methodist traditions to their own conventions. The change of the market day from Sunday to Saturday, which the freed made without interference from the authorities, though prompted by the missionaries, is an example of accommodation to the Methodists.⁴⁴ By holding market on Saturdays, the free were not just assured that they could attend church at their own leisure, but they also removed the stigma attached to the market because of its former association with slavery and the breaking of the Sabbath in public.

This larger segment of the Nevisian population also struggled to gain a respectable position in society by appropriating cultural forms, associated with established institutions such as the Methodist Society, and using them to display their cultural values and practices, i.e. their Afro-Caribbean identity. The special Nevisian version of holding tea meetings, which has been analyzed by Roger Abrahams (1983), is an example of this practice. Beginning with the earliest Methodist records from the period of slavery, the missionaries have noted the eagerness of the members of the congregation to speak at the love feasts; their oratory talents, and the great assertiveness with which they expressed

themselves. Furthermore, the slaves were taking advantage of these love feasts to make public their plight as slaves, which made the missionaries extremely nervous.⁴⁵

By the latter part of the 1800s, when the tea meetings also presented opportunities for testimonies, this oration had gotten out of hand, as far as one of the missionaries was concerned, in that the meetings had become occasions for the display of great orations the flourishes of which bore little resemblance to the modest and temperate life advocated by the Methodists. One orator thus was described as having an "appearance equal to deceiving the most elect deputation that ever touched and glanced on every land!"⁴⁶ The Afro-Caribbean performative talents clearly were taking over the scene, in the process changing it to something that the missionary did not wish to be associated with.

Out of such tea meetings grew entirely different "tea meetings", which were organized by the Nevisians themselves. These involved a court of a king and queen and their attendants who sat at the head table, while a number of orators made various performances of speeches or poems under the direction of a toast master. This toast master himself held long speeches, which included Latin phrases, riddles and play on words, and it was his task to keep control over the audience, which participated actively in the event, laughing, joking, and jeering, when mistakes were made on the scene. This tea meeting has been described as a struggle between the Afro-Caribbean and the Euro-Caribbean cultures, or as a struggle between reputation in the local community and respectability in the wider society, with the most successful tea meetings being those where the toast masters manage to keep a delicate balance between the two (Abrahams 1983: 10-18, 112-21). The tea meetings thus seem to have represented attempts to maintain a respectable appearance while displaying Afro-Caribbean culture.

Another example of this attempt at combining Methodist form with Afro-Caribbean content is found in the Noahite movement. This movement emerged in 1839, the year after the abolishment of the apprentice system following emancipation of the slaves. It was started by a newly freed man, who called himself Noah and proclaimed to be a "Prophet" and a "Comforter" and started preaching and holding meetings "till a late hour", attracting congregations of several hundred persons.⁴⁷ At these services, or meetings, which were held every Sunday, quotations from the Scriptures, the Apostles' Creed and verses of John Wesley's Hymns were important elements along with dreams, prophecies, various declamations as well as "extravagant dance in which the body is violently tilted and tossed till violent convulsions ensue". The culmination of the service was "one tumultuous roaring from the vehement mass of devotees; men, women and children writhing and rocking in wonderful confusion".⁴⁸

The Methodists became increasingly concerned over this movement, which apparently drew participants from all over the island, including members of the

Methodist Society. While some of the English missionaries dismissed the religion as “absurd and laughable” and thought it curious that “people should be found in this state in the midst of a civilized community”, the local preachers were more uneasy about this “grossly ignorant perversion of Christianity” and wrote to the Methodist Missionary Society in order to make it take a more aggressive stand against the evil. It seems that to these local preachers, leading members of the respectable community on the island, such a bold display of Afro-Caribbean culture through the appropriation and transformation of the Methodist service was too much of a challenge to the established order and respectability of the society.

During the 1870s, the Methodists succeeded in wiping out the Noahite movement through concerted preaching efforts in the area where it was located. This resulted only in a brief respite, however. Early in the 20th century, other religious institutions willing to incorporate Afro-Caribbean cultural practices into their services began missionizing on the island. One of the most important among these was the Pilgrim Holiness Church, an American offshoot of the Methodist church, which arrived in 1909. The missionaries from this church attracted a large following by holding services with lively singing accompanied by tambourines – one of the Afro-Caribbean instruments that the missionaries had expended great energy to condemn as sinful. Interviews suggested that this church recruited Methodists who had not been able to achieve the sort of leadership role in the Methodist church hierarchy to which they aspired, as well as some of the poorer people who never felt “at home” in the Methodist or Anglican churches. This church had come to stay, and it was followed by many other churches, who, in various ways, were willing to allow the Afro-Caribbean culture to receive expression within a respectable institutional framework.

CONCLUSION

The relationship between the English Methodists and the Afro-Caribbean population was one informed by different cultural frameworks as well as different class interests. The rising middle class, which established itself at the time of emancipation, seems to have adopted the English Methodist cultural values and practices of respectability as their own, using them as a mark of their elevation in society. By attempting to fit so neatly into a foreign cultural form in order to validate their special position in society, the members of this elite were making a formalized English Methodist tradition the basis of their daily life. In this way they ran the risk of becoming entirely appropriated by this tradition and its makers.

The vast majority of the Afro-Caribbean population belonging to the lower echelons of society did not adopt the English Methodist culture as their own, as did the middle class, partly because they did not have the economic or cultural wherewithal to master it, partly because they held on to their Afro-Caribbean culture. They were not untouched by the Methodist notions of respectability, however, but employed the forms of the English Methodist traditions as an institutional framework in which they could display their own culture and identity and thus seek recognition in society. The Afro-Caribbean lower class, in other words, sought to externalize, and thus display, their culture through cultural forms of the wider society such as those offered by the English Methodist church.⁴⁹

Because of the indirect nature in which the lower class of the Afro-Caribbean population was able to display its culture before and after freedom, its cultural expression was of necessity more "subtle" and "invisible" (Price 1985: 24-26; Safa 1988: 117-18) than was that of the upper class. The involvement in European-oriented institutions of respectability therefore does not necessarily imply support of the European values and submission to the system of oppression that they are associated with, as Wilson's interpretation leads one to believe. Quite the contrary, by separating form and content, and externalizing their culture through foreign form, in the process transforming the forms, the Afro-Caribbean people managed to keep their culture alive, at the same time as they institutionalized it. By doing this, they demonstrated the way in which colonial, invented tradition can be appropriated by those it was meant to control and sometimes even turned against those who invented it.

NOTES

1. This article is a revised version of papers presented at the Institute of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen (1989), the Society for Caribbean Studies Thirteenth Annual Conference, Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire, England (1989), and The Third World Plantation Conference, University of Southwestern Louisiana, Bunkie, Louisiana, USA (1989). I wish to thank participants in these meetings as well as Sally and Richard Price for their comments. The article is part of a larger study on Afro-Caribbean cultural identity which is based on fieldwork among Nevisians in the West Indies, USA and England, as well as research in archives in Nevis and London. This has been supported by the Danish Research Council for Research in Developing Countries and the University of Copenhagen.

2. For further discussions of missionary activities in the British West Indies, see Smith (1950), Rooke (1979), and Turner (1982).

3. Coke 1811: 13-14. C 1: March 8, 1803. Higman 1984: 417-18.

4. C 432: 27 September, 1831.
5. C 166: 24 April, 1822.
6. C 28: 20 January, 1814.
7. C 66: 30 April, 1818.
8. C 113: 16 May, 1820.
9. C 28: 20 January, 1814. C 232: 20 July, 1825. C 267: 12 January 1826. C 482: 8 October, 1833.
10. C 6: 7 August, 1805.
11. C 203: 20 October, 1823.
12. See for example C 123: 2 October, 1820. Turner 1982: 9.
13. CA 994: 11 September, 1837.
14. C 363: 3 December, 1828.
15. C 579: 18 March, 1837.
16. C 154: 16 November, 1821.
17. C 96: 20 July, 1819. C 584: 10 May, 1837.
18. C 28: 20 January, 1814.
19. C 25: 21 May, 1802.
20. C 355: 28 August, 1828.
21. C 1: 7 May, 1803.
22. C 261: 24 March, 1825.
23. C 255: 30 October, 1824.
24. C 301: 26 March, 1827. C 330: 7 January, 1828.
25. C 449: 3 May, 1832.
26. C 413: 16 December, 1830.
27. C 363: 4 December, 1828. C 55: 28 February, 1 May, 1820. C 361: 3 November, 1828.
28. C 203: 20 October, 1823.

29. C 171: 5 August, 1822. C 175: 10 October, 1822.
30. C 357: 9 October, 1828.
31. CA 1013: September, 1841 (the exact date is not listed).
32. C 363: 4 December, 1828. C 380: 3 August, 1829.
33. C 380: 3 August, 1829.
34. CA 1028: 18 May, 1843.
35. CA 1006: 2 August, 1839.
36. CA 1013: 26 October, 1840. CA 1019: 15 September, 1841.
37. CA 1012: 7 August, 1840.
38. CA 1020: 1 January, 1842.
39. CA 1012: September, 1840 (the exact date is not listed).
40. CA 1020: 1 January, 1842.
41. For example, CA 1019: 15 September, 1841. CA 1068: 13 March, 1852. CA 1130: 8 June, 1861. CA 1132: 10 September, 1861.
42. CA 1132: 10 September, 1861.
43. CA 1189: 10 July, 1868.
44. C 487: 3 August, 1834. C 506: 22 August, 1834.
45. C 25: 21 May, 1802. C 227: 10 May, 1825. B 55: 9 April, 1820.
46. C 1132: 10 September, 1861.
47. CA 1003: 8 April, 1839. CA 1004: 10 June, 1839. CA 1016: 2 April, 1841.
48. CA 1172: 11 June, 1866. CA 1220: 26 February, 1872.
49. In this way their efforts were parallel to those of the Kwaio studied by Roger Keesing (1982, 1985), who have attempted to externalize and codify their culture as "kastom" by having it put on paper by, among others, anthropologists.

ARCHIVAL RECORDS

Methodist Missionary Society Archives, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, School of Oriental and African Studies, London.

Correspondence - West Indies General, 1803-1857 (referred to as C), micro fiches 1-727.

Correspondence - Antigua, 1833-1890 (referred to as CA), micro fiches 989-1296.

Biographical (referred to as B), micro fiches 27-109.

REFERENCES

ABRAHAM, ROGER D., 1893. *The man-of-words in the West Indies: performance and the emergence of Creole culture*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

BLACKMAN, FRANCIS (WOODIE), 1988. *Methodism 200 years in Barbados*. Bridgetown: Barbados.

COKE, THOMAS, 1811. *A history of the West Indies*. London: [Printed for the Author].

GUMBS, WYCHERLY, 1986. *Methodism: its roots and fruit*. Nevis Circuit.

GOVEIA, ELSA V., 1965. *Slave society in the British Leeward Islands at the end of the eighteenth century*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

HEMPTON, DAVID, 1984. *Methodism and politics in British society 1759-1850*. London: Hutchinson.

HIGMAN, B.W., 1984. *Slave populations of the British Caribbean 1807-1834*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

HOBBSAWM, TERENCE AND ERIC RANGER (eds.), 1983. *The invention of tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

KEESING, ROGER, 1982. Kastom and anticolonialism on Malaita: 'culture' as political symbol. *Mankind* 13(4): 357-73.

———, 1985. Kwaio women speak: the micropolitics of autobiography in a Solomon island society. *American Anthropologist* 87: 27-39.

KOPYTOFF, IGOR, 1982. Slavery. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 11: 207-30.

MOSSE, GEORGE L., 1985. *Nationalism and sexuality: respectability and abnormal sexuality in modern Europe*. New York: Howard Fertig.

PATTERSON, ORLANDO, 1982. *Slavery and social death: a comparative study*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

PRICE, RICHARD, 1985. An absence of ruins? seeking Caribbean historical consciousness. *Caribbean Review* 14(3): 24-29, 45.

REPORT of the Wesleyan-Methodist Missionary Society, 1821. London: Printed for the Society.

ROOKE, PATRICIA T., 1979. "The world they made" – the politics of missionary education to British West Indian slaves, 1800-1833. *Caribbean Studies* 18(3&4): 47-67.

SAFA, HELEN I., 1987. Popular culture, national identity, and race in the Caribbean. *Nieuwe West-Indische Gids / New West Indian Guide* 61(3&4): 115-26.

SMITH, R.W., 1950. Slavery and christianity in the British West Indies. *Church History* 19: 171-86.

SMITH, WILLIAM, 1745. *A natural history of Nevis*. Cambridge: J. Bentham.

SUTTON, CONSTANCE R., 1974. Cultural duality in the Caribbean. *Caribbean Studies* 14(2): 96-101.

TURNER, MARY, 1982. *Slaves and missionaries: the disintegration of Jamaican slave society 1787-1834*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

WILSON, PETER, 1969. Reputation vs. respectability: a suggestion of Caribbean ethnography. *Man* (n.s.) 4:70-84.

KAREN FOG OLWIG
Institute of Anthropology
University of Copenhagen
Frederiksholms Kanal 4
DK-1220 Copenhagen K
Denmark