"The High Price of Sugar"
by Susan Miller
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Right from the start, Columbus had a plan: to establish a sugar industry on Hispaniola much like the ones back home on the Canary and Madeira islands. So on his second voyage to the New World, he brought along several stalks of sugar cane. The Spanish hidalgos couldn't be bothered with the broiling, backbreaking task of growing and making the sweetener, so they forced the locals to do it for them. When the Indians started dropping from disease, the Spaniards turned to Africa. By the mid-16th century a nascent sugar industry completely dependent on black slave labor had taken hold in the Spanish Caribbean. The dramatic change on Hispaniola prompted a Spanish historian to write: "There are so many Negroes in this island, as a result of the sugar factories, that the land seems as effigy or an image of Ethiopia itself." Thus began a relationship between sugar production and African slavery that was to dominate Caribbean life for nearly four centuries.

While Spaniards in the Caribbean were the first to produce and export sugar, their pioneering efforts were soon outstripped by developments on the American mainland. Sugar cane prospered in the Spanish territories of Mexico, Paraguay and Peru. By 1526, the Portuguese had begun shipping sugar from Brazil to Lisbon in commercial quantities. By the end of the 17th century, the British had also established stakes in the Caribbean, and slavery became an integral part of their newly settled colonies almost from the start. Dutch traders, who had a foothold in Brazil, first introduced sugar making to English colonists on the island of Barbados in the 1630s. From humble beginnings, the British sugar industry spread north to the Leeward Islands, where it soon wrought a social, economic and political transformation so sweeping and rapid that historians have called it the Sugar Revolution. "England fought the most, conquered the most colonies, imported the most slaves and went furthest and fastest in creating a plantation system," writes Mintz in "Sweetness and Power." In 1655, when Britain conquered Jamaica--an island nearly 30 times the size of Barbados--she came to dominate the north European sugar trade.

The sugar industry was a messy business. Planters, clearing huge tracts of forested land, devastated the environment. In 1690, trees covered more than two thirds of the British colony of Antigua. By 1751 planters had stripped every acre suitable for cultivation. Antiguan John Luffman, writing in 1786, observed that even the largest hills were "clothed with the luxuriant verdure of the sugar cane to their very summits." The rapid deforestation only heightened the region's propensity for drought and erosion.

It was also extremely lucrative. In the 18th century, Antigua rivaled Barbados as one of the leading producers in the Caribbean, although neither could compete with Jamaica or French Saint Dominique (Haiti). "Barbados, in one period, and Antigua, in another, were producing more wealth than the entire North American continent," says Conrad Goodwin, an anthropologist who (along with geography Lydia Pulsipher) has spent more than a decade excavating and studying sugar plantations on Antigua and the neighboring island of Montserrat.
The production of sugar—from holing, planting and harvesting to crushing, boiling and curing—depended on a large work force. To meet the demand for labor, Antiguan planters imported tens of thousands of slaves from Africa. In 1678 there were 2,308 whites and 2,172 blacks on the island. By the mid-18th century, Antigua’s population had grown to nearly 40,000, and blacks outnumbered whites 10 to 1. David Barry Gaspar, a historian at Duke University, speculates that the ratio of blacks to whites would have been even higher if thousands hadn’t committed suicide or died as the result of accidents, disease, poor diet, hard labor and mistreatment at the hands of their masters. "Because of the general oppressive environment of slavery, the slave population was not self-reproducing," says Gaspar. Their ranks had to be constantly replenished with imports from Africa.

A slave’s life was grim beyond our capacity to imagine and sometimes beyond their capacity to endure. The workday was endless, and beatings were common for the smallest infraction. Mary Prince, a slave who lived on a number of different Caribbean islands in the early 19th century, describes her treatment by one particularly cruel owner: "To strip me naked--to hang me up by the wrists an lay my flesh open with the cow-skin, was an ordinary punishment for even a slight offence."

The conditions on plantations drove some slaves to suicide and infanticide. Others fought back with insubordination, malingering and feigned illnesses. Running away was virtually impossible since by the mid-18th century the forests had been cleared and most of the smaller islands afforded no place to hide. But, as recent scholars have begun to see, the slaves were often resourceful in adapting to their plight. "I'm not saying that slavery wasn't bad, because it was," says Pulsipher. "But slaves were not just victims. We should give them credit for being able to seize a bad situation and make the best of it."

On most plantations slaves managed to carve out a degree of autonomy by insisting on certain rights, such as a weekly day off and the right to sell, at Sunday market, food they had grown in their own gardens. "One of the forms of both accommodation and resistance, especially on Montserrat, was through these slave gardens up in the hills," says Goodwin. "Because they could escape white eyes, these gardens had connotations of freedom and self-worth. But the gardens were also advantageous to slave owners because they relieved them of some of the responsibility of supplying food to slaves."

Sunday, market day, had little religious significance for slaves who, at least in the early years, didn't attend church. Because slavery did not square with their religious teachings, Anglican planters had little interest in converting their labor force. It was not until the late 1700s, when the Moravians and Methodists arrived and opened their doors to slaves, that Sunday became important as a day of worship. In the meantime, they quietly practiced the religious traditions they had brought over from Africa. Islam had some influence, but it's not known how much.

But even after the introduction of Christianity, Sunday remained one of the few days that slaves found free time to enjoy themselves. John Luffman offered this description of a musical afternoon: "Negroes are very fond of the discordant notes of the banjar and the hollow sound of the toombah.... The banjar is the invention of and was brought here by the African Negroes, who are most expert in the performance thereon, which are principally their own country tunes. To
this music I have seen 100 or more dancing at a time.... The principal dancing time is on Sunday afternoons, when the great market is over. In fact, Sunday is their day of trade, their day of relaxation, their day of pleasure, and may be called the Negros’ holiday."

Slaves seized an opportunity that was given them by the western European calendar and, quickly and entrepreneurially, started the markets. "Slaves used this time to socialize, reaffirm cultural links, meet their mates and sell whatever it was they had for sale: the baskets they’d woven, the food they’d made or the vegetables they’d grown. It was a time to improve their economic status, in small but significant ways."

In other parts of the Caribbean, however, slaves were not so fortunate. On Antigua, slaves had trouble finding space to plant their gardens because nearly every acre was in cane. Despite laws ordering slave owners to provide plantations with provision grounds, many wouldn’t spare the land to ensure that slaves were adequately fed.

Throughout the Caribbean, sugar plantations were a curious blend of farming and factory work because so much of the industrial processing of the sugar was carried out on the spot. Mintz has dubbed the plantations "precocious cases of industrialization," and even the planters themselves recognized their industrial elements. In "An Essay Upon Plantership," Samuel Martin, an Antiguan planter writing in 1773, described the plantation as a machine with many moving parts: if one broke, the machine broke. "Even that early, labor was very important, filling many cogs in the machine," says Goodwin.

The "sugar" cycle began in August or September, when the laborers prepared the fields for planting. Slaves, wielding hoes under a mercilessly hot sun, dug holes about five or six inches deep and about five feet square, into which they placed cane cuttings, covered them with a layer of mold and prayed for rain. The slaves tended the new cane shoots as they grew; the crop was harvested, one field at a time, 15 months later.

When it came to the harvest, timing was everything. As soon as the sugar cane was ripe it had to be cut and ground, often within 24 hours to keep it from spoiling. Black overseers, called drivers, would stand behind a line of slaves, crack their whips and give the order to start cutting. From the break of dawn until after dusk, the slaves toiled in the hot, sticky fields—cutting the cane, gathering up the stalks, stripping off the leaves and loading the 100-pound bundles onto ox carts bound for the mill. The pace was so frenzied that pregnant women were sometimes obliged to give birth in the field and then continue working.

For the slaves who fed the mill, the work was less physically demanding but posed different dangers. The feeders, as they were called, were liable, especially when tired, to get their fingers caught between the vertical rollers that crushed the cane. A watchman stood ready with a hatchet to sever an arm before it could be drawn into the machine. As terrible as this must have been, the alternative was worse. The rollers couldn’t be stopped by flipping a switch. "If the limb wasn’t chopped off, the slave would be crushed to death," says Goodwin.

The boilermen had a less exacting but hotter and heavier task. Juice from the sugar cane would enter the boiling house by a pipe that ran from the mill, and workers would siphon it into a great
copper basin. After several hours of boiling and skimming, the slaves would ladle the steamy liquid into a number of successively smaller coppers until it was ready to crystallize. The sugar was then cooled, packed into barrels and rolled into the curing room. Holes were drilled in the bottoms of the barrels, allowing the molasses to drain into separate containers.

Laboring in temperatures above 100 degrees, the boilermen often worked through the night, and the darkness increased the likelihood of serious burns from the scalding, sugary liquid. But because their job required a high degree of knowledge and skill, the boilermen were among the most valued slaves on the plantation.

Slaves used the molasses and skimmings from the boiling house to make rum. Water, molasses, yeast and lees were combined in a fermenting cistern and left for a week to 10 days. The fermented liquid was distilled into rum and decanted in wooden barrels. The rum, as well as sugar and molasses, was stored in a warehouse until a ship arrived to carry it either to Europe or to one of the North American colonies.

In the 17th century, there emerged two so-called triangles of trade. The first and most famous of these linked Europe to Africa and the West Indies. European goods, such as trinkets, arms, gunpowder and gin, were exchanged for slaves in West Africa. The slaves were shipped to the West Indies and sold for sugar, coffee, indigo and other tropical products, which were then sent to the European mother country. The second triangle wasn't vital to world trade until the mid-18th century. In this scenario, New England merchants shipped rum to Africa, exchanged the rum for slaves and sailed to the West Indies, where they sold the slaves, bought molasses for rum-making and returned home.

As several scholars have pointed out, trade was not limited to these two triangles; more often than not, it moved in several directions. "Some of the trade did actually flow in legal channels as it was supposed to do, within a single imperial system," notes Philip D. Curtin, author of "The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex." "Much of it flowed outside those channels."

The sugar industry--so prosperous for nearly two centuries--had started to decline by the mid-19th century. Several factors contributed to its downward spiral: emancipation of the slaves, falling sugar prices and the development of alternative sweeteners. Still, on some islands--Puerto Rico, Barbados, Cuba and the Dominican Republic--sugar remains the main export today. On Antigua, the only reminders of the sugar heyday are the ruins of countless plantations, the Cavalier rum factory (which must import its molasses from the Dominican Republic) and a population that traces its roots to Africa. On Antigua, as with so many islands, one monoculture has simply been exchanged for another: tourism is now virtually the only industry.

Despite the changes wrought by 500 years of contact with the Old World, the people of the West Indies have managed to build a vibrant culture, mixing European elements with those of Africa and the Americas. In the British West Indies, for example, cricket has long been the most popular sport. Before a recent match between Montserrat and Antigua, the Montserratian team, which hadn't won a game all season, performed an old African rite to increase its chances: rising at dawn, they gathered on the playing field and started dancing ... to drive away the evil spirits.