

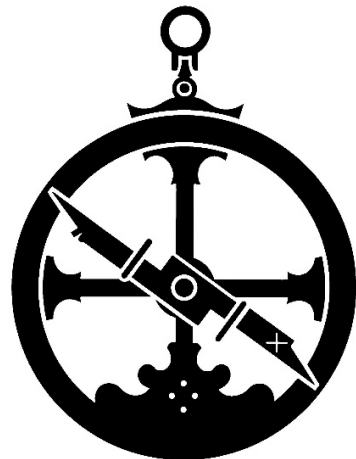
# Traveling to Market: Provision Grounds and the Caribbean Higgler

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## *Introduction*

It is impossible to spend time in a Caribbean nation without noticing women by the side of the road selling produce. In Barbados, their stands are usually situated near a busy thoroughfare to display fruits, vegetables, and starchy root vegetables. They regularly call out for passersby to stop and see their goods. A broad range of people pause to evaluate the produce; barefoot men in raggedy tee-shirts, and elegant women dressed in suits, nylons, and high heels stand side by side to examine the produce before choosing the items they want. A ubiquitous sight, these higglers provide much of the fresh produce throughout the British and French Caribbean, yet, research on and with higglers is limited.

This article explores the histories and roles of these women in two time periods in the Caribbean: their early work on slave provision grounds throughout the region, and their role in the Jamaican economy of the late twentieth century. Small plots of land allocated to slaves in the British and French Caribbean islands were initially intended to raise subsistence foods to supplement or replace slave rations. For some successful farmers, these provision grounds were able to provide a surplus of foods that the slaves sold to each other and the plantations in the small, slave-run food markets that formed. In this paper I describe these provision grounds, and examine how they contributed to female entrepreneurial activity and the development of the modern agricultural system, as well as the historical means of production and internal distribution. Utilizing the creole society model (Mintz and Price 1976), I argue that the provision grounds, marketing activities and their associated levels of autonomy were institutions co-created by the owners and slaves as part of their process of creating cultural norms comprised of both European and African traditions, but suited to the New World context.

## *Creole Model*

Sidney Mintz and Richard Price (1976) establish that the cultures found in the New World are creole in nature. They are comprised neither of homogenous contributions from specific African societies to specific New World areas, nor are they separated by race or ethnic lines, grouped together only under governmental authority. Rather, we must situate our understanding of these societies in the context of slavery's conditions and institutions, where free and slave peoples were deeply divided, yet interdependent. Some institutions in the society were created in the slave sector, others across the divide, and the cultures were not borrowing from each other, but rather, "creating" or "remodeling" may be more precise" (1976,83). This creole society model provides an excellent framework to understand the small farmers and market women who sell their produce.

## *Provision Grounds Under Slavery and Emancipation*

Slavery in the French and British colonies was well established by the seventeenth century, and forced labor on the plantations remained customary until the nineteenth century. In Haiti, slavery ended with armed rebellion in 1804, in the British colonies it ended by 1838, and in the French islands by 1848. During the slave years, each Caribbean slave colony handled slave subsistence differently. Some slaves were expected to live only on rations, others were organized into gangs to plant food for all. Some plantations granted small garden plots near slaves' homes, while others were given larger tracts of land further away where more foodstuffs could be grown. Some islands combined rations with provision grounds. Slaves sold some of their surplus harvest on almost every island, but the quantities varied widely. On each island, experiences differed in terms of the slaves' access to land, the conditions under which they were allowed to utilize the land, the

gendered implications of the experiences, and the impacts of the provision grounds on the slaves' diets, incomes and welfare. Understanding "freedom" to be access to a set of liberties (Stinchcombe 1994), the provision grounds can be said to have increased freedom for some slaves. The decision-making implicit in planting, tending, and harvesting, as well as choices about how to handle the harvested foods, were instances of slaves having a small amount of freedom in which to make their own decisions.

Barickman claims that the practice of slave-tended provision grounds originated in the sugar-producing regions of Northeastern Brazil, and that on some West Indian islands, the practice became known as "the Brazil system" (1994,657). Wilson (1964,118) notes that the earliest mention of a slave subsistence plot in the Caribbean was found in the 1687 writings of Sir Hans Sloane, who commented on the peanuts, sesame, okra and "pease" being "very carefully planted by Europeans as well as Slaves" in Jamaica. Subsistence grounds were commonly accepted as belonging to the slaves, and when estates were evaluated by government appraisers, these portions of land were not assessed—thus conceding that by custom and in practice, the land (or at least the value of the land) did not belong to the plantation owner, but rather, the slaves (Barickman 1994). However, because these lands were generally not evaluated, there is no way of knowing if they were fertile, desirable land, or marginal plots of questionable quality.

The slaves' views of slavery and provision ground ownership are illustrated in demands made of one Brazilian plantation owner in the late eighteenth century: Slaves insisted not only on more time to work in their plots and greater independence in determining the locations, but also petitioned their owner for a boat on which they could transport their goods to market without paying freightage (Barickman 1994,665). Slaves often sold produce back

to the plantations, and it was not uncommon for plantation owners' wills to reflect monetary debts owed to their own slaves (Barickman 1994,665).

Widespread allocation of provision grounds throughout the Caribbean was the result of government policies aimed at improving slaves' living conditions, based on laws and regulations passed by the British, French and Spanish governments between 1787 and 1789 (Reddock 1985). Slaves' rights to receive time to cultivate and market were reinforced in the British colonies, which legislated that they should be allowed one day off per week to participate in the marketing of produce. While this law was practiced in Trinidad and British Guiana, it was largely resisted in the self-governing colonies of Jamaica, Tobago and Barbados (Reddock 1985,73). Yet, local government efforts to eradicate marketing were often ineffective, and over time, owners were obliged to acknowledge slaves' rights to their ground and the necessary time to cultivate it. Kate Browne (2004) argues that the contemporary creole economics she studies in Martinique were rooted in the small garden plots on the margins of the estates given to slaves to provision themselves. On Martinique, they were typically given as much land as they were able to work, and the French colonies allowed "'free' Saturdays for the slaves to cultivate their food" (Browne 2004,122). The slaves' ownership of these pieces of land was well-respected, and even the Colonial Council of Martinique acknowledged that "the slave is the sovereign master over the terrain that is conceded to him" (Browne 2004,122).

In Jamaica, St. Domingue, Grenada, Martinique and French Guyana, slaves grew most of their own foods and produced a considerable surplus to sell in the Sunday slave-run food markets that emerged. By 1775 slaves held approximately one-fifth of the circulating currency in Jamaica, and by the 1830s, about one third of the agricultural output on the island came from the provision

grounds (Barickman 1994,663). On Martinique, the slaves provided most of the dietary staple of cassava flour found in the island's markets, and by the 1790s, slaves in St. Vincent and Grenada held a "virtual monopoly" over the locally grown supply of produce (Barickman 1994,663). When slaves farmed their own plots, they often preferred crops that could be left untended for periods of time, such as yams, taro, sweet potatoes and plantains; these foods became dietary staples in the region (Wilk 2006,59).

Despite a cited lack of documentation on the pre-Emancipation distribution of labor, Mintz argues that it appears that provision ground land was only granted to male slaves, yet records indicate that in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, observers would find the whole family at work on the land (Mintz 1974,211). It is interesting to note that this might be a space in which male slaves exercised patriarchal authority over the women and children of the family, utilizing their labor as he saw fit (Barickman 1994,682).

While provision grounds decreased owners' expenses in feeding their slaves, they also provided slaves with an economy of their own. Many argue that the primary importance of the land was not the foodstuffs harvested, but rather the autonomy enjoyed in the process (Mintz 1955, Katzin 1960, Barickman 1994, Beckles 1998, 1999, and Welch 2000). However, slaves still had to compete with their masters over their own labor time in their efforts to accommodate both enslaved labor and their own cultivation. Ironically, at times, slaves were able to use the money they made through working their own crops on lands conceded to them by their owners, to purchase their own freedom (Mintz 1955).

This autonomy consequently drew the attention of authorities who attempted to control and regulate the markets on numerous occasions, but these efforts were generally unsuccessful (Mintz 1955). The

1774 Act in Barbados attempted to prevent any slaves or free coloreds from displaying goods on any "stall, bench, stand or table, or in any tub or tray" (Reddock 1985,73) on any street in the main town of Barbados. However, these legislative attempts were ultimately unsuccessful, and the food marketing tradition along Roebuck Street in Bridgetown continues to the present day. In fact, slave-run markets across the region were often considerable in size, with markets on Jamaica, St. Domingue, Antigua, Martinique, and Grenada frequented by "hundreds and even thousands of rural slaves" (Barickman 1994,672).

By combining their slave labor with work on their provision grounds, slaves were able to not only increase their share of the market wealth, but to make decisions acting as "free" individuals. As participants in the island market economy, those who sold produce in the markets became known as "higglers" across the region, but also "hawkers" in Barbados. The successful grower was able to use profits to obtain manufactured goods such as clothing and shoes that displayed economic independence and status among other slaves, as well as potentially purchase his or her own freedom. Participating in higgling allowed them to temper the common problem of malnutrition by expanding their diets and those of their families, to possess property, make their free time profitable, and travel and engage in social lives outside of the plantation (Beckles 1999). As Beckles describes it, higgling allowed enslaved peoples to minimize the "degree of their unfreedom" (1998, 46).

### *Problematic "Freedom"*

These economic transactions may seem odd in light of the land being used to grow the produce initially or officially belonging to the plantation owner, yet it may be safe to assume that attempts to retract access to provision grounds might initiate unrest among the slave population. White plantation owners lived in constant fear of

armed rebellion, or more subtle forms of retribution such as poisoned food. Privileges and freedoms often slowly evolved into accepted norms that could not be altered or rescinded without unrest or rebellion among the slaves (Burton 1997). This uneasy collaboration exemplifies the creole society model that Mintz and Price (1976) argue typifies social and culture in the islands.

Provision grounds in Brazil and the Caribbean allowed autonomy and a set of freedoms rarely experienced by the slaves, while simultaneously enacting further oppression by the plantation, which required “free” time to be spent in working to keep one’s self alive. While the liberty experienced by the slaves allowed them to leave the plantations on a weekly basis, engage in autonomous economic activity and act as free agents in their marketing practices, the custom was also a further work burden to the slaves. Forced to labor for long hours in an unforgiving climate doing intense physical work for the plantation, slaves were then compelled to engage in a second shift of subsistence agricultural activity simply to survive. Although for a few slaves, the money earned from produce grown on their provision grounds may have given them the financial ability to purchase their own freedom, this was not the norm. For most, raising crops as a second shift was not an option, making the idea of this increasing “freedom” problematic. Yet, this time spent raising and selling food was time away from the intense gaze of the plantation overseers, the specificity of enslaved tasks, and allowed them to decision-making likely beyond what they were able to engage in on a daily basis—thus the use of the term freedom. So while this added labor can be understood as ‘super-exploitation’ by some perspectives, most scholars agree that the cultivation of subsistence plots nonetheless allowed the slaves to temporarily enjoy limited freedoms and agency, and ultimately for some who could earn enough money, actual freedom.

### *Post-Emancipation*

The subsistence plots that slaves cultivated under slavery were the training grounds for the subsistence agriculture that emerged under the conditions of post-Emancipation peasantry. Likewise, Beckles asserts that in the process of participating in higgling, black women were actually “creating...the informal sector” in the Caribbean (1998). After Emancipation, small freehold enterprises grew on the edges of the plantations in the English Caribbean, and served to supply food staples to the plantation and its workers. Heath asserts that most former slaves were only casually committed to the development of their own land (1988,427). However, some freed slaves who had access to land would produce and market foodstuffs, much as they had during slavery. In this way, they were able to use land ownership to “strengthen their position within the plantation-dominated order” (Beckles 1990,116) and achieve some degree of self-sufficiency, especially on small islands like Barbados where plantation labor provided the only real post-Emancipation employment option.

Mintz argues that prior to emancipation, there was no sexual division of labor, and during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, most descriptions cite male marketers or whole families working in the marketplace (Mintz 1974,211). Yet after emancipation, there was an increase in entrepreneurial activity among women, and they quickly came to dominate the market system (Mintz 1974). Similarly, Freeman (2000) asserts that in the early post-Emancipation period labor opportunities outside of the plantation were very limited, and many newly freed women expanded their provision ground marketing activities. It is possible that the unpredictability of male employment due to the seasonality of sugar cane production may have further reinforced this female emphasis on entrepreneurial activities. Women became increasingly visible in their roles as higglers, and they quickly

dominated the internal marketing system. In the process, they reinforced images of women's trade and business abilities, as well as women's independence from men (Freeman 2000). This type of market activity was one of the few labor opportunities open to women of the time. While it seems problematic to simultaneously acknowledge the lack of employment opportunities for women and refer to this as "freedom," the lack of the enforced labor of slavery and the opportunity to make decisions regarding the higgling practices nonetheless indicates that this entrepreneurship is indeed more "free" than the experience of slavery.

Building on the post-Emancipation upsurge in higgling practices by women, higgling in varied forms continued as a viable means of household support. Increasingly, especially over the twentieth century, some higgler women became involved in the broader global marketplace, traveling to other islands and to the United States to purchase goods such as clothing, jewelry, and shoes to resell to local audiences back in Jamaica and Barbados (Freeman 2005). By the 1980s, these "'big time' entrepreneurs" (Freeman 2005) had become so economically successful that the Jamaican government re-titled them "informal commercial importers" (Johnson 2009,27) and began to levy taxes and customs duties on their goods. The successful modern higgler was identified no longer by the traditional head scarf and colorful printed skirt seen in the markets of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, but rather by her tight, brightly colored outfit paired with an elaborate hairstyle and plentiful gold jewelry (Hope 2004). Johnson (2009) explains that less successful higglers were pushed to the periphery, becoming itinerant street vendors, peddling cheap toiletries, cosmetics, cigarettes, hats, cold beverages, and snacks.

### *Contemporary Higgling*

Higgling can be understood at a broad, national level as well as at the level

of individual women and their families. Thus far, this paper has focused on contemporary higglers in the national arena, however, we also need a more intimate understanding of how their choices and limitations are situated in the household economy and individual experience.

In 20<sup>th</sup> century West Indies, the historical process of selling one's own surplus produce has transitioned to market women who gather stock from rural farms to resell at larger urban markets. The internal distribution system of many islands has historically relied on small farmers producing goods that move to the markets via higglers. Mintz (1971) argues that women predominate in the marketplaces throughout the West Indies, and their activities contribute to the national economy through their payment of shipping, storage and market fees, as well as taxes. Their role in production on each particular island is not always clear, but they appear to participate in some farming with men, and make some decisions regarding which plants to cultivate (Grossman 1993). Mintz examines the efficiency of the small scale distribution system in place for the domestic distribution of foodstuffs, and finds the system effective because there is no other labor outlet for these women; they simultaneously provide entrepreneurial training for their young, and they utilize waste such as tin cans, bottles and burlap bags to construct stalls and transport goods. Thus, their activities "contribute both directly and indirectly to the economic effectiveness of so-called 'backward' economies" (Mintz 1971, 250). Katzin (1959, 1960) explains that Jamaican higglers of the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century were most always women who bought produce at small farms, then carried the goods to market themselves by traveling on large trucks that tour the countryside to transport these marketers. In this way the higglers were the essential link in the internal distribution system between the rural farmers and the urban consumers.

The “country” higgler who lives in more rural areas buys produce from her network of farmers, transports it to market, then sells it to another network of higglers in town, or to the consumers. “Town” higglers who live in urban centers rent market stalls at which to sell goods to consumers, and rely on the country higglers to transport foodstuffs to them. While country higglers could potentially make a larger profit by selling to the consumers themselves, they would also be vulnerable to greater risk of losing profit to cheaters, thieves, or fluctuating prices during the day. Due to the small profit margin, these country higglers often lose money, because they are cheated by customers and fellow traders, or their stock rots, is damaged, or is stolen (Mintz 1971, Katzin 1960). Country higglers use the time in town and their profits to purchase necessary items for their own households, as well as for friends and neighbors in the country, while also socializing with friends and family in the towns. In addition to the domestic produce, town higglers also sell imported goods and non-consumables.

#### *Farmer / Higgler Relations in Jamaica*

Higglers fulfill an essential function for the society by making available to consumers produce that is scattered in small amounts on numerous, relatively inaccessible farms. Officially, small farms in Jamaica are 10.1 hectares or less, yet 90% of small farms are actually 4.0 hectares or less. Despite their size, these small farms are recognized as the “pillars of domestic food production in Jamaica” (Spence 1999,296). They are the main producers of root crops and vegetables, the mainstay of the domestic food supply. In the late 1980s Heath found that farming practices could not meet domestic food demand, because in some cases there was limited access to land, but also that Caribbean peoples have a “generalized aversion to work on the land” and the labor force was lacking (1988,431). In Barbados, this is a phenomenon that some attribute to the legacy of slavery (Sweeney

2005). Heath notes that farming incentives in the form of government leasing grants were not successful, and that land ownership provides more of an incentive to farm.

While the practice of higgling does indeed involve large amounts of labor for small amounts of profit, it is a system that Katzin argues is practical for the region. She asserts that because of limited technological development and abundant labor, “facilities that utilize a greater proportion of labour and a lesser proportion of capital are likely to be more efficient for such underdeveloped economies” (1960,329). However, she notes that the labor of self-employed higglers is valued at a lower wage than would be tolerated for wage-labor. She explains that often a higgler’s profit equals her expenses, meaning she isn’t working for a wage. Worse is when her wages are negative because of profit loss (Katzin 1960,329). In Jamaica, higgling is an efficient system for internal distribution because of the labor surplus in the country. If the economy were replaced by a more technologically sophisticated one, the large number of women relying on higgling would be left without support.

As noted by Heath (1988) and Wong (1996), small farmers in Jamaica tend not to rely on the government marketing board to distribute their produce, but prefer to sell to higglers. “At the farm gate” sales mean no worries about damage in transport, and the large number of higglers ensures that the farmers can negotiate better prices. In addition, Mintz (1971) argues that the consumers in Jamaica have irregular incomes, thus creating irregular demand that would not support any other type of formal agriculture and distribution systems. In Jamaica, production and marketing are interdependent and support each other, even in some ways to the present day.

Some Jamaicans feel that higgling activities compete unfairly with established merchants and are even “unpatriotic,” yet there is some cooperation between the



groups, and many merchants turn to higgler to act as purchasing agents to obtain scarce goods (Witter 1988). Thus, the formal and informal economy are not always in competition, but rather, act out a constant dialectic between competition and cooperation. While the formal sector often laments the financial competition from the informal sector, it also relies on the informal to help meet consumer demands.

### *Implications for Households and the Individual*

Based on mid-twentieth century data, the scale of Haitian higgler practices ranges from peasant women selling small handfuls of surplus produce, to large scale vendors with numerous stalls. Town higgler are a diverse bunch, ranging from women with a small stock of goods and little capital relying on regular customers to stay afloat, to women with numerous stalls, a diverse clientele and often thirty or more years of experience. The larger operators such as this prefer the term “vendor” over higgler, as do men who are involved in trade operations of this size.

Historically in Haiti, Mintz found that market women have demonstrated a solid understanding of economic principles and engage in small scale lending. Marketing has been considered women’s work on the island, and few men engage in petty trading. Unfortunately, the Haitian economy is such that substantial economic growth is not possible, and the only available investment opportunities for most of these women are to expand in the same trade (Mintz 1971). There are few open venues to which these practical skills can be transferred, as the Haitian economy has not allowed much room for economic innovation for women. There is little to no opportunity for them to reinvest in new forms of production, as it is primarily men who dominate the large scale marketing, export production, the government, and the military. Even with internationally desired products such as coffee, women handle

internal markets, and men dominate export products. Because of these financial limitations, much of women’s profit has been reinvested in educating their children so that the next generation may be able to move outside the marketing sphere.

Katzin (1960) found that because gross profit accrues to a higgler according to units of goods sold, the Jamaican higgler is motivated to maximize her load. All gross profit beyond the minimum needed to defray expenses such as truck travel, market fees and taxes will become net profit. Thus, country higgler carry the largest manageable amounts to market with them, often utilizing younger children to assist, or older children to ship further loads of goods on trucks that go to town on days following her departure to market. Some goods, such as red peas, offer a much lower profit margin than others—carrots have a profit margin of 50 percent, whereas red peas only have a usual gross profit of 20 percent (Katzin 1960,311)—and are thus carried in smaller quantities and less often. Risk is mitigated by all involved in the process. Farmers minimize risk by diversifying their crops, country higgler reduce risk by carrying a selection of items, and town higgler decrease risk by maintaining close ties with their country higgler providers, who will help them absorb some of the loss experienced through market saturation and decreased prices.

Most higgler tend to stick with familiar products and suppliers, and do not like to expand into unknown markets that require developing a new group of suppliers or buyers. An excellent example is flower growing in the Riverside area of Jamaica (Katzin 1960). A few farmers found that flowers could be much more profitable than food and began to substitute them for some subsistence crops. However, many higgler refused to incorporate the flowers into their line of products, despite their higher profit margin. Much as Barlett (1977) demonstrates of peasants in Paso, Costa Rica, this resistance to change is not due to

some inexplicable adherence to tradition, but rather, very practical concerns. Although the potential for increased revenue with flowers was great, they required more capital investment, were more likely to be damaged by weather, and if demand declined, were utterly useless. Further demonstrating the link between the household economy of the higgler and her market practices, foodstuffs could always be consumed by the farmer's or higgler's family or livestock, but unsold flowers would be a total loss.

Farmers in Jamaica perceive export crops to be more desirable as there is better market security, expected income, and increased social status, compared to domestic-oriented crops. This is why higgling depends on reliable, consistent networks of established relationships between farmers, country higglers, town higglers, and consumers. All involved in the supply line are careful to establish and maintain relationships that will ensure regular supply and demand, often sacrificing profits in the short term to preserve long-term relations. Each step in the supply line tends to feature a small bonus amount, referred to as the "brawta" or "make-up." Katzin (1960) compares this extra amount to the "baker's dozen" of thirteen in England and America. Even in Barbados today, this custom is still practiced. When buying bananas and mangos from hucksters on the street, my requested three bananas usually turned into four in the bag, and two for five Barbadian-dollar mangoes usually became three. Country higglers risk their own capital in purchasing goods from farmers, but town higglers are often given the produce on credit, the amount of which is repaid before the country higgler leaves town again. In addition, the operating expenses for the country higgler are much higher than those for the town higgler, whose only investment is a small rent on a market stall. All those involved in the process are interested in maximizing their long term gains, and solid, amiable

relationships are crucial for the long term success of all.

### *Social Implications of Higgling*

Economist David Wong (1996) proposes to reduce the numbers of higglers in Jamaica by increasing wage labor options, which does not address the numerous implications of women's involvement in wage labor. He contends that higglers are a part of the surplus labor force in Jamaica, and in order to reduce the numbers of higglers on the streets, the government would need to find a way to increase wage labor jobs (1996). Yet, individuals are willing to engage in this type of self-exploitation because alternatives are lacking, and wage labor jobs would decrease the higglers' autonomy and occupational flexibility. One consideration is that the reason numerous women engage in this form of labor is precisely because it is not conventional wage labor, rather, it allows them a more flexible schedule and entrepreneurial independence. Similarly, Abraham-VanDerMark found that as women on Curaçao transitioned from agricultural to wage labor, their social positions evolved from autonomy to increased reliance on men because of job insecurity and men's workplace control (Levy and Lerch 1991,70). Women engaged in wage labor in the banana industry of St. Vincent still tend to raise foodstuffs on small pieces of land, usually consisting of 0.5 acres, and sell their surplus at the nearby Kingstown market. Although already employed, they have more control over the market income than they do the banana wages, which are contingent on the degree of income sharing between men and women in the household (Grossman 1993). In addition, while small farms and the market practices may seem wasteful from the "agronomic, conservation, and economic points of view" (Mintz 1955,101) they in fact allow the development of social capital in the form of entrepreneurial independence. One of Mintz's informants even explained that "she'd rather be a

higgler and make a shilling than work in someone's house" (1955,102). While higgling is often perceived as a low-income activity, some successful higglers achieve income levels that rival professional and white-collar workers in Jamaica. So in many cases, not only do women achieve independence in their economic choices, many are very successful in these independent activities.

While these women clearly experience financial success in higgling, they are not always respected for these achievements. Perceptions of modern higglers vary; they are more directly in control of their lives and economic well-being, as well as financially more stable than many housewives, yet they are less respected in society because of their engagement in loud verbal activity in the workplace and their constant contact with lower class people (Freeman 2000). So while providing a means for financial upward mobility, higgling simultaneously reinforces social stigma attached to the position. As such, while higglers often achieve an middle class income, their participation in this activity prevents them from achieving middle class status. Public disdain for the profession is demonstrated in the Jamaican newspaper, *Daily Gleaner*, where a poll found that 70 percent of the public wants to see the government remove higglers from the streets (Witter 1988,11).

Working within Peter Wilson's (1973) framework of reputation and respectability in the Caribbean, one could argue that higgler women's involvement with the male outdoor space makes others see them as less respectable. Higgling has been clearly delineated as a woman's activity, one in which men do not participate. Yet, men are involved in sidewalk vending of non-consumable items (Witter 1988) and do not seem to be perceived as less respectable because of their involvement in the public sphere. The stigma is attached to women, who are expected to be more respectable and less

involved in life outside of the home, family and church. One could argue that higgling is low status simply because it is dirty, physical labor, yet as men are respected for their similar labor, this does not seem to be the case. However, Le Franc (1994) argues that in Jamaica, middle class status is increasingly based primarily on income rather than traditional British criteria such as family background and occupation, and Johnson (2009) asserts that what the Caribbean higgler has lost in respectability, she has gained in reputation. The topic invites further research on social acceptability utilizing Wilson's reputation and respectability paradigm to determine what the reasons are for the stigmatization of women's higgling activities, and how this stigmatization is waning as class markers shift.

#### *Higgling in the Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century*

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Witter (1988) claimed that there were approximately 15,000 higglers in Jamaica, and that well over half are women. Most of these women provide the sole support for their children, of which they average 4.5 each. Using these figures, he estimates that approximately three percent of the country's population is being supported by higgling activities. He points out that while historically most higglers were from rural areas, many were urban dwellers at the time of his study. However, he does not differentiate between town and country higglers as described by Katzin (1959, 1960), thus perhaps this majority is misunderstood and does not include the country higgler suppliers.

Rather than the self-empowered image of the resilient women choosing to become higglers as portrayed by Katzin, Witter paints a portrait of women forced into higgling because of a lack of other options. He contends that 70 percent of higglers were unemployed before they began higgling, and only began the work because of negative reasons such as business failure, illness of a partner, advanced age or that they were

unqualified to do anything else. Katzin's case studies show the average number of years spent in higgling to be approximately thirty. Yet Witter's work asserts that 45 percent of Jamaican higglers have been in the business for less than four years, and 62 percent for less than nine years. Unlike the women in Freeman's (2000) study of contemporary Barbados who engaged in two to three different economic activities to make a subsistence wage, only eleven percent of those discussed by Witter engaged in other financial activities. In prior work on higgling, Katzin (1959, 1969) and Mintz (1959) have argued that higglers received assistance in collecting goods and selling at the markets from children or other relatives. Yet Witter argues that higglers receive very little assistance from family members. In addition, while Katzin and Mintz claim that mothers often trained their children in the art of higgling, Witter maintains that these women went into higgling as a secondary strategy, and were not taught by their friends or family.

Due to the large time gap between their studies, it is possible that a difference in study sampling led to this diverse set of findings, or that the demographic of the higgler women changed over the nearly three decades. Over time, mothers' efforts to make enough money to send their children to school ended higgling as a family business that was passed down from mother to children. The higglers of Mintz and Katzin's generation, by successfully enabling their children to move out of the marketplace and into other occupations, would then be seen by Witter as contemporary women higgling on their own without a family legacy to support them. It is possible that the children of higglers are enjoying upward social mobility, and are being replaced by a generation of higglers who are self-taught and move into the marketplace because of necessity rather than choice.

The character of higgling practice changed over the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Witter elaborates on the differences between traditional and modern higglers, arguing that the traditional higgler linked the "small farmer to the urban consumer" while her modern counterpart, who often sells a mixture of local and imported foods and consumer goods, "links the manufacturer, primarily foreign, but also local, to the consumer" (1988,8). Le Franc reinforces this notion, arguing that the structural adjustment policies in Jamaica during the 1980s "transformed the internal marketing function of the traditional higgler into the complex activities of the informal commercial importer (ICI)" (Le Franc 1994,52). She asserts that while the traditional higgler linked the small farmer to the urban centers, the modern higgler is the conduit between the local consumers and local and foreign manufacturers. True though this transition may be for many women, she offers no explanation for the visible market women still selling produce on the streets in the Caribbean, and she herself describes a farmer consulted in her project from 1980-1991 who explains that he would sell his bananas to local higglers when their prices were sufficiently high (Newman and Le Franc 1994,158). This intriguing shift calls for additional research.

### *Conclusions*

From the earliest provision grounds granted to slaves during the slave era to the contemporary higgler women in large urban markets, people in the Caribbean have proven to be resourceful. Given small amounts of ground and autonomy, the slaves created a marketing system that afforded them benefits that were financial as well as psychological. When the post-Emancipation colonies offered few economic alternatives, women built a marketing system that became the basis for the informal economy. In the twentieth century, women's marketing activities allowed them to push their children out of low-income and low-status higgling into upward social mobility.

Data from Mintz (1955), Katzin (1959, 1960) and Witter (1988) seem to indicate an essential shift happening; higgling as a family practice with skills being passed through generations, was giving way to a practice being newly adopted by women with limited employment options. Based on this evidence, it appears that the higglers of the 1950s and 1960s, the Mintz and Katzin generation, were successful in their intentions to provide their children with educational opportunities beyond what they, themselves, were able to achieve. I hypothesize that rather than learning and practicing higgling as their mothers and grandmothers did, higglers' children of the Mintz and Katzin generation have achieved upward mobility and are no longer involved in this type of market activity, but comprise a section of the middle class.

Yet, because the demand for higglers remains constant due to their crucial role in the internal distribution system on the islands, other women are stepping into the roles left open by the generation that moved beyond higgling. So rather than remaining a family profession, higgling has become a job opportunity for women who have few other options. While the profession of higgling remains, the women participating in it have changed. It seems that as recently as 1988, higgling remains a source of income for women who lack any other alternatives.

Working with few alternatives and limited resources, women in the Caribbean have used provision grounds, and later small farms, as economic foundations for their households. Engaging with marketing as "training grounds for freedom" (Mintz 1996,41), they developed an efficient means of internal distribution for foodstuffs, and play a crucial role in the national economy. While lived experiences on the islands have varied slightly, higgling served as a crucial element of the modern agricultural system in the Caribbean, and evolved into a critical link in the informal foreign goods economy.

However, in the present day, it is possible that the situation has changed even further. While higgler women selling produce are still visible on the streets of some islands such as Barbados, it is impossible to speculate whether the practice still functions in the crucial manner in which it formally comprised the internal distribution system, and who the women involved in the practice are. Sidney Mintz's more recent perception of the system is that "the agricultural sector of many Caribbean societies has been reduced over time by out migration and by the importation of more and more cheap produce from the U.S." (Personal communication, December 11, 2006). Informal interviews during the author's fieldwork on a separate project indicated that many of the women selling produce on the street were indeed procuring it from local farms, but that many of these contemporary higglers were migrants from other Caribbean nations, such as St. Lucia and Guyana. Thus, while higglers are still visible, what they are selling, where the goods came from, and how they became higglers are topics that invite further research.

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