

Reflections of a Jamaican Father

By

Donald J. Harris

As a child growing up in Jamaica, I often heard it said, by my parents and family friends: “membra whe yu cum fram”. To this day, I continue to retain the deep social awareness and strong sense of identity which that grassroots Jamaican philosophy fed in me. As a father, I naturally sought to develop the same sensibility in my two daughters. Born and bred in America, Kamala was the first in line to have it planted. Maya came two years later and had the advantage of an older sibling as mentor. It is for them to say truthfully now, not me, what if anything of value they carried from that early experience into adulthood. My one big regret is that they did not come to know very well the two most influential women in my life: “Miss Chrishy” and “Miss Iris” (as everybody called them). This is, in many ways, a story about these women and the heritage they gave us.

My roots go back, within my lifetime, to my paternal grandmother Miss Chrishy (née Christiana Brown, descendant of Hamilton Brown who is on record as plantation and slave owner and founder of Brown’s Town) and to my maternal grandmother Miss Iris (née Iris Finegan, farmer and educator, from Aenon Town and Inverness, ancestry unknown to me). The Harris name comes from my paternal grandfather Joseph Alexander Harris, land-owner and agricultural ‘produce’ exporter (mostly pimento or all-spice), who died in 1939 one year after I was born and is buried in the church yard of the magnificent Anglican Church which Hamilton Brown built in Brown’s Town (and where, as a child, I learned the catechism, was baptized and confirmed, and served as an acolyte).

Both of my grandmothers had the strongest influence on my early upbringing (“not to exclude, of course, the influence of my dear mother” Miss Beryl” and loving father “Maas Oscar”).

Miss Chrishy was the disciplinarian, reserved and stern in look, firm with ‘the strap’, but capable of the most endearing and genuine acts of love, affection, and care.

Photo Below: Miss Chrishy dressed up in her usual finery, standing in front of the home at Orange Hill, St Ann parish where I spent my early years.



She sparked my interest in economics and politics simply by my observing and listening to her in her daily routine.

She owned and operated the popular 'dry-goods store' on the busy main street leading away from the famous market in the centre of Brown's Town. Every day after school, I would go to her shop to wait for the drive home to Orange Hill after she closed the shop. It was here that she was in her groove, while engaged in lively and sometimes intense conversation with all who came into the shop about issues of the day.

Business was front and centre for her, a profession and a family tradition that she embodied and carried with purpose, commitment, pride, and dignity (next to her devotion to the church that, as she often said, her ancestor built). She never paid much attention to the business of the farm at Orange Hill. Her sons took care of that side of the family business. Her constant focus was on issues that affected her business of buying and selling imported 'dry goods' as well as the cost of living, issues that required understanding and keeping up with the news – a task which she pursued with gusto. She was also fully in charge of 'domestic affairs' in our home and, of course, had raised eight children of her own at an earlier age.

There was a daily diet of politics as well. She was a great admirer of 'Busta' (Sir William Alexander Bustamante, then Chief Minister in the colonial government and leader of the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP). She claimed, with conviction and pride, to be a "Labourite" (as members of the JLP were called) and for the interesting reason that, as she argued, "labour is at the heart of everything in life". Little did I know then, what I learned later in studying economics, that my grandmother was espousing her independently discovered version of a Labour Theory of Value!

Her philanthropic side shone through every Easter and Christmas when she had my sister Enid and me package bun and cheese (a favourite Jamaican Easter fare) and other goodies in little boxes that we carried and delivered to families living in the area around our home.

She died in 1951 at the age of 70. Her departure left me, then only fourteen, with a deep sense of sadness and loss.

Miss Iris, mother of eight children too, was the sweetest and gentlest person one could meet, but underneath it was a tough farming woman who ran the cane farm at Thatch Walk (near Aenon Town) jointly owned with her husband "Mr Christie". She was always ready to go to church on Sunday to preach and teach about the "Revelations" she saw approaching the world at that time (during and after World War II) in accord with the Bible.

I spent summers with her, roaming around the cane field, fascinated by the mechanical operation of cane 'juicing' by the old method (a wooden pole extended out from the grinding machine and tied to a mule walking round and round to grind the cane), and eager to drink a cup of the juice caught directly from the juice flowing into the vat to be boiled and crystallized as 'raw sugar'. No Coke or Pepsi could beat the taste of that fresh cane juice!

It was a joy and a learning experience for me to hang out with the workers on the cane farm, see them wield a 'cutlass' (the machete) with such flourish and finesse, listen to their stories of exploits (some too x-rated for me to repeat), and sit with them as they prepared their meal by putting everything in one

big 'Dutch' pot, cooking it over an open fire in the field and serving it out on a big banana leaf for all of us to eat sitting there.

Looking back now I can say, with certainty and all due credit to Miss Iris, that it was this early intimate exposure to operation of the sugar industry at the local level of small-scale production with family labour and free wage-labour, coupled with my growing curiosity about how these things came to be, that led me, once I started reading about the history of Jamaica, to a closer study of the sugar industry. I came then to understand its origin as a system of global production and commerce, based on slave labour, with Jamaica as a key component of that system from its very start.

Miss Iris died in 1981 at the grand old age of 93 and I grieved over the loss of someone so dear and close to me. She is shown here in photo (taken by me in 1966), just back from church, proudly holding in her lap little Kamala, and confident in her firm prediction even then of the future achievements of her great-granddaughter (after giving her 'blessings' by making a cross with her finger on the child's forehead).



Photo Above: Miss Iris with great Granddaughter Kamala

From the start, I strived to retrace for my children the path on which I had traveled: from Miss Judah's primary school at Top Road in Brown's Town to Park School 'Elementary' just around the corner, to Titchfield High in Port Antonio, to University College of the West Indies (UCWI) then to Berkeley where Kamala was born, to Illinois where Maya was born, and subsequently to Cambridge University, Wisconsin, Yale, and Stanford.

Throughout this retracing, my message to them, from the lessons I had learned along the way, was that the sky is the limit on what one can achieve with effort and determination and that, in this process, it is important not to lose sight of those who get left behind by social neglect or abuse and lack of access to resources or 'privilege'; also not to get 'swell-headed' (a favourite expression and command of Miss Chrishy); and that it is important to 'give back' with service to some greater cause than oneself.

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Experiencing their Jamaican heritage

In their early years, I tried to convey this message in very concrete terms, through frequent visits to Jamaica and engaging life there in all its richness and complexity. In Brown's Town, we walked the streets during 'market day', chatted up the 'higglers' in the market and were rewarded with plenty of 'brawta' (Jamaican word for bonus offerings) in naseberries, mangoes and guinep after each purchase. We checked out the location of the old Park School which had become transformed into Brown's Town Comprehensive High School, strolled into St. Mark's Church and graveyard, and traversed the road up the hill to Orange Hill where my uncle Newton had taken over the family property and started a limestone mining and brick producing operation in addition to the cattle, grass, fruit and pimento farming of earlier times.

Images of Brown's Town courtesy of Bruce T Photography

We drove up to Thatch Walk and worked our way, with lots of cuts and bruises, through the same cane fields where Miss Iris had run a thriving business in the 'good ole days' of sugar and, a long time before, had probably been part of a slave plantation. We played around on the lovely white sand of the beach at Dry Harbour and in the forceful but soothing waters of the world famous Dunns River Falls.

In Kingston, we visited the campus of the former UCWI, today The University of the West Indies ranked in the top 5% of world universities (in my role then as member of the faculty) to view its remarkable physical setting in the misty morning light, the buildings comfortably spread out over the vast lands of the Mona Commons and against the imposing backdrop of the Blue Mountains.

In Port Antonio we visited my high school alma mater at Titchfield, still sitting there (as a powerful symbol of the privileged system of education that existed before the progressive reforms of the Manley era) at the end of the little peninsula overlooking Navy Island and in the historic setting of an ancient battery and cannons pointed out to sea to defend the harbour. We trekked over to the ruins at 'Folly', and to the 'Blue Hole', and took a swim at the exquisite little beach tucked away in a little cove at Fairy Hill.



Of course, in later years, when they were more mature to understand, I would also try to explain to them the contradictions of economic and social life in a ‘poor’ country, like the striking juxtaposition of extreme poverty and extreme wealth, while working hard myself with the government of Jamaica to design a plan and appropriate policies to do something about those conditions. The [National Industrial Policy](#) promulgated by the Government of Jamaica in 1996 and the [Growth Inducement Strategy](#) of 2011 were the outcome of that continued effort.

Now, far away in the diaspora in 2018, one of the most vivid and fondest memories I have of that early period with my children is of the visit we made in 1970 to Orange Hill. We trudged through the cow dung and rusted iron gates, up-hill and down-hill, along narrow unkempt paths, to the very end of the family property, all in my eagerness to show to the girls the terrain over which I had wandered daily for hours as a boy (with Miss Chrishy hollering in the distance: “yu better cum home now, bwoy, or else!”).

Upon reaching the top of a little hill that opened much of that terrain to our full view, Kamala, ever the adventurous and assertive one, suddenly broke from the pack, leaving behind Maya the more cautious one, and took off like a gazelle in Serengeti, leaping over rocks and shrubs and fallen branches, in utter joy and unleashed curiosity, to explore that same enticing terrain. I quickly followed her with my trusted *Canon Super Eight* movie camera to record the moment (in my usual role as cameraman for every occasion). I couldn’t help thinking there and then: What a moment of exciting *rediscovery* being handed over from one generation to another!

This early phase of interaction with my children came to an abrupt halt in 1972 when, after a hard-fought custody battle in the family court of Oakland, California, the context of the relationship was placed within arbitrary limits imposed by a court-ordered divorce settlement based on the false assumption by the State of California that fathers cannot handle parenting (especially in the case of this father, “a neegroe from da eyelans” was the Yankee stereotype, who might just end up eating his children for breakfast!). Nevertheless, I persisted, never giving up on my love for my children or reneging on my responsibilities as their father.

So, here we are now



Photo Above: My granddaughter Meena, her aunt Kamala and me.

All grown up now, Kamala is carving a way for herself in America and Meena is doing the same by her own route (as is her mother Maya). Not to be ignored is little Amara, the first of my two great-granddaughters.



In this Photo [above] I am holding her lovingly and joyfully in my lap, and having there perhaps the same thoughts and expectations about her as Miss Iris might have had about little Kamala on that day, half a century ago, when she held her in her lap. Thus, the cycle continues.

The cycle of history repeats itself in remarkable ways, small and large, across the generations of us Jamaicans, though we may be scattered around in the diaspora and far away from home where it all started. It is up to each generation to play its part, using well the legacy it inherits from the previous generation, so as to leave behind something of value for those who follow.

Notes

** Correction: Miss Chrishy died at age 70, not 62 as previously reported.*

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September 26, 2018

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