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**Fifty years of Jamaican Independence: Developments and Impacts**

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**"MAROONS, FREE VILLAGERS AND 'SQUATTERS'  
IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF INDEPENDENT JAMAICA"**

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**Introduction**

In July 1962, one month before the colony gained Independence, I left Jamaica for the first time to begin my university education in Edinburgh. After my undergraduate studies, I embarked on an Anthropology PhD there based on fieldwork in the Independent Jamaican nation-state (Besson 1974). My focus was the Trelawny free village of Martha Brae. I continued post-doctoral research in Trelawny Parish, culminating in the book *Martha Brae's Two Histories: European Expansion and Caribbean Culture-Building in Jamaica* (Besson 2002). By then, I had also conducted comparative research in four other Trelawny free villages: The Alps, Refuge, Kettering and Granville. I later undertook fieldwork in the free village of Aberdeen in St Elizabeth and Maroon Town, which includes Maldon, the first free village in St James. In addition, I worked with the Accompong Maroons in St Elizabeth. I also

returned to Trelawny to continue research in Martha Brae's satellite "squatter" settlement of Zion.<sup>1</sup>

This brief paper draws on that research over a period of forty-four years, from 1968 to 2012. The research, based in three west-central parishes (Trelawny, St James and St Elizabeth), reveals important contributions by maroons, free villagers and informal occupiers or so-called "squatters" to the development of Independent Jamaica. These contributions are significant, as the rural parishes comprise the greatest area of the island (and also fuel rural-urban migration to the capital city of Kingston).

I will first outline how the Accompong Maroons have developed a maroon polity that serves as a national symbol for Jamaica and are also contributing to the nation's international tourist industry. Secondly, I will show how free villagers have consolidated a small-farming economy and a Jamaican national culture. Thirdly, I will highlight how informal occupiers have created a new community (the Trelawny "squatter" settlement of Zion). In conclusion, I will argue that these developments during the 50 years of Jamaican Independence are rooted in a culture-building process that began in the slavery and post-emancipation pasts.

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## I. Accompong Maroons Forge a National Symbol for Independent Jamaica

Accompong Town (generally known as Accompong) in St Elizabeth is the oldest corporate maroon community descended from rebel slaves in the Americas, enduring on common land. It is in the southern mountains of the precipitous Cockpit Country and is the only surviving village of the historic Leeward Maroon polity that defeated the British after the First Jamaican Maroon War of 1725-38. The Leeward Maroons were led by the Afro-Creole Captain Cudjoe, who made a treaty with the colonists in 1738/39.<sup>2</sup> I conducted fieldwork in Accompong over a period of thirty years, from 1979 to 2009, and have kept in touch with events there up to 2012.

In addition to a productive economy based on house-yards, provision-grounds, pastures and forest (Barker and Spence 1988), the Accompong Maroons have created a sacred landscape on their common treaty land through a process of creolisation. This Caribbeanisation process reflects a transformation from African ethnicities to Caribbean freedom and Jamaican nationhood (Besson 1995, 1997, 2005, 2011).

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<sup>2</sup> Accompong was initially the secondary village of the Leeward Maroon polity, the primary community being Cudjoe's Town in St James. After the Leeward Maroon treaty of 1738/39 between Cudjoe and the British Governor of Jamaica, Edward Trelawny, Cudjoe's Town was renamed Trelawny Town. Following the Second Maroon War of 1795-96 between the Trelawny Town Maroons and the colonists, the Trelawny Maroons were deported to Nova Scotia and a non-maroon community developed on the former site of Trelawny Town and was named Maroon Town in memory of the deported maroons.

The sacred landscape is reinforced by the annual Myal Dance or Play.<sup>3</sup> The Myal Play is rooted in the Jamaican Myal slave religion, in which enslaved Africans and their descendants created an Afro-Creole worldview whereby it was believed that ancestral power could be accessed through spirit-possession or "Myal" to protect them from the "sorcery" of slavery (Schuler 1980; Besson 2002). In Accompong, Myalism became transformed in marronage to focus on the spirits of the First-Time Maroons<sup>4</sup> who led the War and forged the Peace (Besson 1997).

In Accompong, the Myal Play is held on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January under the Kindah Tree, a fruitful mango tree at the edge of the village. In the bush surrounding this tree are cairns that are said to be the "tribal" burial grounds of the early African maroons, "Kongos" and "Coromantees" or "Ashantis", who escaped into the Cockpits from the lowland plantations that still surround Accompong. These African ethnic groups are said to have stood under the Kindah Tree to forge an alliance, through intermarriage, against the plantation-military regime.

Beyond the Kindah grove, are other sacred sites among provision-grounds and pastures, symbolising the graves of the Afro-Creole maroon leaders born in Jamaica, including Captain Cudjoe who is said to be buried beside his "sister" Nanny at a grove named "Old Town". Further on, in the forest, is the "Peace Cave", said to

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<sup>3</sup> The Myal Play is attended by the Windward Maroons of eastern Jamaica.

<sup>4</sup> As Kopytoff (1979: 52) notes, "First-Time Maroons" refers to the (local born) maroons who won the treaties rather than to the first (African) runaway slaves.

be the site of a maroon ambush that defeated the British and where the treaty was reputedly signed. Boulders around the cave are said to mark the graves of maroons and colonists who fell in battle there.<sup>5</sup>

At the Myal Play the maroons make a pilgrimage from Kindah through Old Town to the Peace Cave that represents a symbolical journey through time, embedding maroon history in the landscape. The pilgrims then return to Kindah, carrying sticks and dressed in carcoon vines (which provided both camouflage and food during marronage). As they dance under the Kindah "Family Tree", which symbolises the Creole community that claims descent from Cudjoe and Nanny, some maroon women are perceived to become possessed by the male ancestral spirits who are believed to protect the maroon polity in the face of the global economy and the post-colonial state. However, paradoxically, this virtually autonomous maroon state (within a state) has become a national symbol for Independent Jamaica and a significant focus for the island's tourist industry.

When I began my fieldwork in Accompong in 1979, there were only a few tourists who came to observe the Myal Play and non-maroons were not allowed

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<sup>5</sup> As I have discussed elsewhere (e.g. Besson 1997, 2005, 2011), the sacred landscape of the Accompong commons includes symbolic shifts of historical sites (such as Old Town and the Peace Cave) from the primary Leeward Maroon village of Trelawny Town (now Maroon Town) in St James to the secondary Accompong community in St Elizabeth. These shifts tighten the corporate boundary of the shrunken Leeward polity around its sole surviving community (Accompong) and symbolically repair the ruptures of Leeward Maroon history that resulted from the deportation of the Trelawny Town Maroons to Canada in 1796 following the Second Maroon War.

beyond the Kindah grove.<sup>6</sup> Non-maroons at the Play occasionally included a representative of the Jamaican Government at Kindah, accompanied by bodyguards. However, in recent years, the numbers of tourist and other non-maroon visitors to the Play have escalated into thousands. In addition, a Civic Ceremony has evolved at Accompong's parade ground as the culmination of the Play. After the maroons return from Old Town and the Peace Cave to Kindah, the pilgrimage now continues on to the Parade. This Civic Ceremony is conspicuously attended by representatives of the Jamaican Government (including the Tourism Product Development Company, an Agency of the Government's Ministry of Tourism and Sport). Government politicians, as well as maroon leaders, make speeches at the ceremony, concluding a ritual that has become a symbol of Jamaican nationhood. This role of Accompong as symbolic of Independent Jamaica is underlined by the inclusion of the national flag at the ceremony.

This year, at the Civic Ceremony on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January 2012, which was attended by the Director of Culture (Sydney Bartley) in the Jamaican Government's Ministry of Youth and Culture, Accompong's role as a national symbol was highlighted through the portrayal (by the Jamaican Government, the national media and the maroons themselves) of the Myal Play as the start of the celebrations of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Jamaican Independence.<sup>7</sup> In his speech in Accompong, Mr

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<sup>6</sup> However, I was taken by maroons on the route of the pilgrimage before and after these rituals.

<sup>7</sup> The prominent participation of the Jamaican Government in the maroon celebrations was marked by its Ministry of Youth and Culture providing: "facilities for the event, including the Jamaica 50 backdrop,

Bartley observed that “As the ministry which has responsibility for Jamaica 50, it is very good and strategic that we start Jamaica 50 here in the first part of the year”.<sup>8</sup> Bartley went on to point out that “the movement for Independence 50 years ago started with the resistance of Africans who were captured in their homeland and shipped to the region as slaves”;<sup>9</sup> thereby underlining the role of the maroons as a symbol of the Jamaican nation-state.

## II. Free Villagers Generate a National Culture

While the Accompong maroon society has its roots in marronage, the free villages that I studied were created by emancipated slaves in the context of the post-slavery flight from the estates (Besson 1992, 2002). The Alps, Refuge, Kettering and Granville in Trelawny and Maldon (now part of Maroon Town) in St James were founded by ex-slaves in alliance with Baptist missionaries. Aberdeen in St Elizabeth was established in association with the Moravian church (Besson 1999, 2000a, 2005). Martha Brae was transformed from a slave-trading planter town (and the first capital of Trelawny), when freed slaves from the adjoining plantations of Holland and

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stage and lighting” (“Maroons Celebrate – Mark 274<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Signing, *Jamaica Gleaner*, Saturday January 14, 2012). The *Gleaner* article further stated that this event, as well as marking “the 274<sup>th</sup> [anniversary of the] signing of the treaty of peace and friendship between Captain Cudjoe and the British ... was also part of Jamaica 50 celebrations”.

<sup>8</sup> “Maroon celebrations kick starts ‘Jamaica 50’”, *Jamaican Observer*, Thursday January 19, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Irving Tower (who belonged to the William Knibb Baptist Church in Falmouth, Trelawny's second capital) captured and then purchased land in Martha Brae (Besson 2002).

In all these free villages, the descendants of plantation slaves have consolidated a small-farming economy that is the backbone of rural Jamaica and have also generated a national culture. The origins of this economy and culture are rooted in the "proto-peasant" adaptation of the slaves (which drew on but also transformed African heritages through Caribbean culture-building), which was later transferred to free villages (Mintz 1989; Besson 2002). Major dimensions of this economy and culture include the agricultural and marketing systems, kinship and family land, and the Revival and Rastafarian religions.

During slavery, planters allocated marginal plantation land (as well as yards in estate villages) to slaves to cultivate their food. However, the slaves developed this system beyond the masters' intentions, selling surpluses in urban markets. In 1774, at the height of Jamaican slavery, the slaves controlled twenty percent of the colony's currency through such marketing activities (Mintz 1989: 199). In Trelawny, a major focus for the proto-peasant and free-village economy has been the Falmouth market, which is now the largest rural market in Jamaica – including the "Ben' Down"

dry-goods market whose international trading networks span the Caribbean, the Americas and Britain (Besson 2002).<sup>10</sup>

As well as developing small-scale agriculture and marketing, the slaves appropriated marginal plantation land to forge landholding lineages traced through both women and men (Besson 2002). This gendered customary system transformed African unilineal principles to maximise scarce land rights and forbidden kinship lines among Jamaican chattel slaves. These Afro-Creole lineages were transferred to free villages, where ex-slaves created and transmitted "family lands". As in slave villages, such family lands often include lineage burial grounds. In Independent Jamaica, such family lands provide a foothold in the rural economy and serve as transnational sites of identity and channels for migrant remittances. In addition, the principles of family land, which includes all descendants regardless of age, gender and birth status, have generated a new national law; namely, the Status of Children Act (1976), which overturned the exclusive principles of colonial primogeniture and so-called "illegitimacy".

Interrelated with family land and its burial grounds is the Revival religion, which originated in the Myal slave religion with its elaborate mortuary ritual that was believed to integrate the worlds of the living and the dead (Besson 1995, 2002, 2009). Trelawny and St James were the vanguard of Myalism, which appropriated

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<sup>10</sup> In addition to weekly food markets on Fridays and Saturdays, the Ben' Down Market (so-named because traders have to bend down to buy and sell from the stalls on the ground) is held on Wednesdays and originated in the craft markets of the slaves. Falmouth's Ben' Down Market is a magnet for dry-goods traders throughout the island, including Informal Commercial Importers (ICIs).

and transformed Baptist Christianity<sup>11</sup> and the Great Revival<sup>12</sup> to generate the Afro-Creole Revival religion that is now recognised by the Jamaican nation-state (Besson and Chevannes 1996).

The Rastafarian religion in free villages (and in the Accompong maroon society and the Trelawny "squatter" settlement of Zion) is both a continuity and a transformation of Revival (Besson 1995, 2002, 2009; Chevannes 1994, 1995; Besson and Chevannes 1996). Rastafarians in all these communities contribute to the rural economy through farming, to craft markets in the national tourist industry and to the music of Independent Jamaica.

### **III. Building Zion: Informal Occupiers Create a New Community**

In 2011, the ships returned to Falmouth. Founded around 1770 and consolidated as Trelawny's capital by 1815, Georgian Falmouth had burgeoned as a slave-trading sea-port replacing the colonial planter town, river-port and parish capital of Martha Brae (Besson 2002; Conolley and Parrent 2005). However, with emancipation in 1838 and the diversification of the plantation economy, Falmouth had declined by the

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<sup>11</sup> Myalism appropriated Baptist Christianity to forge the "Native Baptist" variant during slavery.

<sup>12</sup> In 1860, an intense evangelical revival originating in Ireland spread throughout Jamaica and was appropriated by Myalism to form a new Afro-Protestant religion "Revival". In 1861, Revival moved even closer to Myalism. These two forms became the basis of two variants of Revival: Revival-Zion and Pukumina, known as "the '60" and "the '61", which persisted into the twentieth century. However, since the 1990s Revival-Zion has become ascendant (Besson and Chevannes 1996; Besson 2002: 243).

time of Jamaican Independence in 1962. Except for market days, this remained the case at the turn of the millennium by which time cargo ships had stopped coming there for several decades.

In 2000, following our visit to Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, USA in 1998, my husband Dr John Besson gave a lecture to the Friends of the Georgian Society of Jamaica in London and published an article in their journal *Georgian Jamaica* suggesting the redevelopment of Georgian Falmouth, along the lines of Colonial Williamsburg, for the Jamaican tourist industry (Besson 2000b). This seemed unlikely then but has now occurred with the opening of Falmouth's deep-sea pier and port, named the "Historic Port of Falmouth, Jamaica", in 2011. This development, by the Port Authority of Jamaica and Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines, has been internationally recognised by Falmouth being given the world's Port of the Year Award in September 2011.<sup>13</sup> During my several visits to Falmouth (my home-town) in December 2011 and January 2012, I observed many of the world's largest cruise ships docked at Falmouth's twin berths.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> "Port of Falmouth Receives Port of the Year Award", *The Gleaner*, Tuesday 4 October, 2011. The Award was presented at the Seatrade Insider Cruise Awards 2011 held in Hamburg, Germany, where Falmouth beat the Port of Antalya, Turkey and Bergen, Norway in a group of three finalists selected from over 89 participants.

<sup>14</sup> These included the world's two largest cruise ships, *The Allure of the Seas* and *The Oasis of the Seas*. *The Allure* is the world's largest cruise ship, with *The Oasis of the Seas* close behind. Other ships that I observed docking at Falmouth over the Christmas and New Year period in December 2011 to January 2012 included *The Voyager of the Seas*, *The Freedom of the Seas*, *The Liberty of the Seas* and *The Mariner of the Seas*, all of Royal Caribbean International. A smaller Norwegian cruise ship also docked there during this time.

However, in the shadow of this impressive transformation of Falmouth, about one mile inland (adjoining the new trans-island Highway 2000), an even more momentous development has occurred – with little recognition or capital investment. I refer to the building of Zion, a new community established by informal occupiers or so-called “squatters” (especially from Martha Brae) who “captured” land and swamp on the former slave plantation of Holland and the adjoining Morass.<sup>15</sup>

I have observed this extraordinary development through long-term fieldwork over more than forty years. As I wrote in my book *Martha Brae's Two Histories* in 2002:

“When I began my fieldwork in Martha Brae in 1968, there were no houses on the part of Holland Plantation owned by the Trelawny Parish Council, ... now known as ‘Zion.’ By the end of 1968, one chattel cottage stood there – on ‘captured land’ – and two more followed in 1971. All three households were headed by established immigrants in Martha Brae, who had been tenants on the land of Born Ya or landed Strangers in the village. A few more chattel houses were moved to Zion in 1972, and by 1979 the area contained around thirty households. By 1995 Zion had become a vibrant squatter settlement of approximately seventy house yards, consolidated on

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<sup>15</sup> While settlers distinguish the two areas of Zion (comprising Top and Bottom Zion) and the Morass in terms of formal land ownership, in effect they are now regarded as one community with the integrated identity of “Zion”.

about thirty acres of captured land as a satellite community of Martha Brae, and the Parish Council was surveying and subdividing the land with a view to retrieval, sales, registration, and taxation .... In 1999, although no land sales had yet been made, these were anticipated .... This was still the situation in 2001.” (Besson 2002: 151)

I returned to Zion many times after the publication of that book (see e.g. Besson 2007). There are now about two hundred and seventy houses,<sup>16</sup> roads, shops, a Seventh Day Baptist Church, an Evangelical Church, a Revivalist tabernacle and a Rastafarian network. In December 2011, the land sales had still not occurred but continued to be anticipated.

The strategies and narratives of development recounted to me in Zion are amazing. Settlers narrated how they dealt with the various stages of confrontation, threatened eviction and subsequent negotiation that have marked this informal land settlement. They described how they made their rocky roads, initiated the establishment of water and electricity and captured and developed their lands – transforming bush and swamp into productive house yards with kitchen gardens and fruit trees.

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<sup>16</sup> This estimate, which includes Top and Bottom Zion (approximately 130 houses) and the Morass (around 142 houses), is calculated from “The Line Map of Martha Brae” prepared by the Social Development Commission (SDC) in Falmouth and included in the “Community Profile: Martha Brae, Trelawny” (p 10) compiled by the Social Development Commission, February 2010 and updated by the SCD on CD to January 2012. I am grateful to the SDC for permitting me access to this map and the report.

Phrases that often punctuated these narratives were “before Gilbert” and “after Gilbert”. Hurricane Gilbert in 1988 had a devastating effect on Zion, tearing off roofs and wrecking yards while settlers sheltered in the nearby William Knibb Memorial High School. After Gilbert, the people of Zion began building more secure homes and in many cases concrete houses have replaced the initial wooden cottages.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to the William Knibb Memorial High School (attended by Usein Bolt), established by the Jamaica Baptist Union on the northern side of Zion in 1961,<sup>18</sup> Zion is now flanked on the west by Holland High School, opened in 2005. Soon there will be the new housing development of Holland Estates (Jamaica’s first agricultural University town) adjoining the eastern side of Zion. However, despite the growing urban ambience of this area, Zion’s origins are rooted in the process of peasantization that reaches back to the slavery and post-emancipation pasts. Moreover, the recent development of Zion’s house-yards parallels the creation of yards by the proto-peasants in the Holland plantation slave village and by their descendants in the free village of Martha Brae, as well as in other free villages; a process that was also significant in the creation of Accompong during marronage (Besson 2002, 2005, 2007, 2011).

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<sup>17</sup> One household makes building blocks.

<sup>18</sup> The school marked its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 2011.

## Conclusion

The contributions to the development of Independent Jamaica by the maroons, free villagers and so-called “squatters” among whom I have worked for over forty years are a variation on a creative peasantization<sup>19</sup> process that has its roots in the slavery and post-emancipation pasts. This process, which was central in the cultural re-creation strategies of the enslaved, has throughout Jamaica’s history challenged and transformed the colonial development model of large-scale landholding including plantations (see Mintz 1989; Besson 2002).

Rebel slaves established the Accompong maroon community beyond the plantations through capturing land for small-scale cultivation, later consolidated by a treaty and still preserved through Myal rituals. Emancipated slaves transferred proto-

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<sup>19</sup> My use of the concept of peasantization draws on Sidney Mintz’s (1989: 132) definition of peasantry as “a class (or classes) of rural landowners producing a large part of the products they consume, but also selling to (and buying from) wider markets, and dependent in various ways upon wider political and economic spheres of control”. Mintz qualified the criterion of land ownership by noting that peasants are “small-scale cultivators who own or have access to land” (ibid: 141). He further argues that “Caribbean peasantries are, in this view, *reconstituted* peasantries, having begun other than as peasants – in slavery, as deserters or runaways, as plantation laborers, or whatever – and becoming peasants in some kind of resistant response to an externally imposed regimen” (ibid: 132; see also Besson 2002: 6-8). Mintz’s modes of Caribbean peasantization include various sixteenth-century “squatters”, seventeenth-century post-indentured European “yeomen”, “proto-peasant” plantation-slaves from the eighteenth century, “runaway peasantries” or maroons during the entire slavery period and post-slavery peasantries (1989:146-56). He argues that squatter peasantries, which typified the Hispanic Greater Antilles (especially Puerto Rico, Cuba and Santo Domingo held longest by Spain), were wiped out by the early nineteenth century with the escalation of the plantation system (ibid: 147-48). The Jamaican case of Zion, however, reflects the re-creation of this mode of Caribbean peasantization.

peasant economies from the slave plantations into free villages, through both informal occupation and land purchase.<sup>20</sup> The informal occupiers of Zion are repeating this process. Moreover, they have not only built a new community for Independent Jamaica but have also transformed a former slave plantation that was at the very heart of chattel slavery in the Americas (Besson 2002, 2007).

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<sup>20</sup> Informal occupation was a mode of early land acquisition in both the free villages of Martha Brae and Aberdeen.

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