

### Jenny M. Jemmott

*Ties That Bind: The Black Family in Post-Slavery Jamaica, 1834–1882.* Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2015. x + 263 pp. (Paper US\$ 30.00)

*Ties That Bind* is a significant contribution to the historiography of the “black family” in postslavery Jamaica. It breaks new ground by focusing on the period from the abolition of slavery in 1834 to the final years of pure Crown Colony government in 1882, when “the legislative effort to shape the ‘morality’ of the black family reached its apex” (p. 11), and by drawing on correspondence between the Colonial Office and the colony’s governors. From these previously neglected perspectives, Jemmott shifts the focus from slavery to the opening decades of freedom and shows the strength of the black family at this time in contrast to proslavery writers, the legislature, and early sociologists and anthropologists who viewed the black family as “disorganized.”

Chapter 1 focuses on familial values and relationships, including consanguineous ties and informal conjugal unions (rather than the European nuclear family), contending that these are West African legacies. Chapter 2 underscores black activism, including “family advocacy” pursued through the courts and by self-help and cooperative schemes. Chapter 3 documents efforts to reunite family members separated in enslavement. Chapter 4 shows that the colonial state, churches, and elites aimed to educate the children of the formerly enslaved to become agricultural laborers with Eurocentric values, though black parents resisted this social control. Chapter 5 reveals the impact of the suppression following the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion on the black family, which however survived. Chapter 6 discusses legislation idealizing the Eurocentric Victorian family and shows how black familial culture nevertheless endured. The conclusion reiterates that black family activism within a strong familial culture derived from West Africa helped to end apprenticeship and shape freedom.

The book is impressive, but it could have been strengthened in four inter-related ways. First, it could have engaged anthropological studies that demonstrate the strength of the black family in the Caribbean and Jamaica from slavery to the twenty-first century, as explored, for example, in work by Karen Fog Olwig and myself.<sup>1</sup> This would not only have reinforced Jemmott’s conclusions on strong kinship ties in postslavery Jamaica, but would also have revealed that the reconstruction of the black family began during enslavement, rather than after the abolition of slavery in 1834 as she contends.

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1 Karen Fog Olwig, *Cultural Adaptation and Resistance on St. John* (1985) and Jean Besson, *Martha Brae’s Two Histories* (2002).

Second, Caribbean contexts could have received more attention, as West African continuities are often asserted rather than demonstrated. For example, Jemmott cites my work on Caribbean family land<sup>2</sup> to bolster her argument on West African legacies, but sweeps aside the issue of the Ashanti derivation of Jamaican family land posited by Edith Clarke and questioned by me, asserting that regardless of this issue my conclusions reinforce hers on West African continuity. She thereby overlooks the Caribbean culture-building reflected in family land, which transformed the principles of both European plantation primogeniture and West African unilineal landholding by creating a system of cognatic descent and transmission traced through both women and men. This cognatic system maximizes scarce land rights and formerly forbidden kinship lines among the descendants of chattel slaves, who were not only legally landless and kinless but also property themselves. While paralleling to some extent West African kin-based landholding, Caribbean family land (forged in contexts of enslavement, land scarcity, and postslavery labor and tenancy disputes) therefore differs from the restricted matrilineal land transmission of the Ashanti with their more extensive land resources and autonomous history. Likewise, the efforts by freed Blacks to reunite families separated during slavery and to rescue children kidnapped in Jamaican seaports for enslavement in Cuba and the American South do not necessarily reflect West African continuity.

Third, Jemmott's insistence on West African continuities constrains her own references to possible creolization (e.g. pp. 14–15, 19, 199), most of which are not developed. A more effective perspective on creolization as reflecting Caribbean culture-building and the overturning of colonial European institutions could have been explored, drawing on ideas developed by Sidney Mintz, Richard Price, and myself rather than relying on Brathwaite's early view of creolization as "a cultural blending of African and European traditions" (p. 14).

Despite these drawbacks relating to anthropological processual perspectives on strong Caribbean kinship from slavery to the present, Jemmott's book is an important contribution to the historiography of Jamaica from 1834 to 1882.

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2 Jean Besson, 1984, *Family Land and Caribbean Society*, in Elizabeth M. Thomas-Hope (ed.), *Perspectives on Caribbean Regional Identity*, pp. 57–83.