Puerto Rican migration to the U.S. Virgin Islands*

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Resumo

Entre 1848 y 1917, grande parte da população de St. Croix, a maior e com mais orientação para a agricultura das Ilhas Virgens, foi sendo transformada em um proletariado rural sem terras no entanto um grande número de plantações iam a bancarrota com o crescimento em número de plantações. A ilha perdeu população, a terra que, antes era utilizada para o cultivo da cana, caiu em desuso. Muitos trabalhadores optaram pela emigração. Diante deste dilema os donos das plantações trouxeram trabalhadores dos municípios mais próximos de Puerto Rico. A grande onda de migrações de Puerto Rico a St. Croix começou em 1927 com o recrudescimento das manobras dirigidas para transformar o trabalho nas plantações de cana. A população incrementou seu número de 152 em 1917 a 2002 em 1940. Com o objetivo de entender este processo foi necessário examinar esta migração no contexto da política dos Estados Unidos em relação à migração na época. Portanto, o propósito do artigo é analisar a migração porto-riquenha dentro deste contexto e mostrar como este fato produziu uma específica sociedade multicultural no Caribe.

Palavras-chaves: Migração, Plantação, Caribe.

Resumen

Entre 1848 y 1917, gran parte de la población de St. Croix, la mayor y con más orientación a la agricultura de las Islas Vírgenes, fue transformádandose en un proletariado rural sin tierras mientras un gran número de plantaciones

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iban a la bancarrota con el crecimiento de éstas. La isla perdió población y la tierra que era antes utilizada para el cultivo de la caña, cayó en desuso. Muchos trabajadores optaron por la emigración. Frente a este dilema los dueños de plantaciones trajeron trabajadores de los municipios más próximos de Puerto Rico. La gran ola de migraciones de Puerto Rico a St. Croix comenzó en 1927 con el recrudecimiento de las maniobras dirigidas a transformar el trabajo en las plantaciones de caña. La población incrementó su número de 152 en 1917 a 2002 en 1940. Con el objetivo de entender este proceso fue necesario examinar esta migración en el contexto de la política de Estados Unidos en relación a la migración en la época. Por lo tanto, el propósito del artículo es analizar la migración puertorriqueña dentro de este contexto y mostrar como este hecho produjo una específica sociedad multicultural en el Caribe.

Palabras claves: Migración, Plantación, Caribe

Abstract

Between 1848 and 1917, great part of the population of St. Croix, (the largest and most agriculturally oriented of the U.S. Virgin Islands), was being transformed into a rural landless proletariat as a growing number of plantations were going bankrupt. The island lost population as the land which was previously used to produce cane fell into disuse. Many workers thus opted to emigrate. Faced with this dilemma, planters opted to bring in laborers from nearby island municipalities of Puerto Rico. The largest wave of migrants from Puerto Rico to St. Croix commenced in 1927 as a consequence of a recruitment drive aimed at supplying labor for the sugar plantations. Eventually, the number of people of Puerto Rican origin living in the Virgin Islands jumped from 152 in 1917 to 2002 in 1940. In order to understand this migration, it is necessary to examine the broader migration issues being considered in the United States at the time. Hence, the purpose of my paper is to look at the Puerto Rican migration to the U.S. Virgin Islands within this context, and show how it produced a unique multicultural society Caribbean society.

Keywords: Migration, Plantation, Caribbean

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Introduction

The population of the United States Virgin Islands is heterogeneous with a predominance of persons of African

descent, 78.3%, according to the Census of 2000. In the 1980's only around a quarter of the population was classified as native while 35 to 40% originated from the neighboring Caribbean islands (PAXTON, 1987, p. 1563). The 2000 Census now places the native population at 2/3 of the whole. A significant portion of the population of St. Croix is either Puerto Rican or of Puerto Rican descent. The origin of this population is directly tied to the changing circumstances of the Virgin Islands in the 20th Century as they passed from one colonial power to another.

At the time of their purchase by the United States (1917), 21% of the population of the Virgin Islands was composed of people born in the British Virgin Islands (ALBUQUERQUE; MC ELROY, 1982, p. 65). As the United States transformed the Virgin Islands into a tourism/export economy, the number of migrants from the English speaking Caribbean increased. Klaus de Albuquerque has affirmed that it was precisely this segment of the population that formed the basis for the economic transformation of the territory (ALBUQUERQUE; MC ELROY, 1982, p. 96).

As for the influx of Puerto Ricans to the Virgin Islands, the largest wave began in 1927 as a consequence of a recruitment drive aimed at supplying labor for the sugar plantations (LEWIS, 1972, p. 199). According to Virgin Islands historian J. Antonio Jarvis, the number of people of Puerto Rican origin living in the Virgin Islands jumped from 152 in 1917 to 2002 in 1940 (JARVIS, 1944, p. 57). In order to understand this migration, it is necessary to examine first the broader migration issues being considered in the United States at the time.

The U.S. Immigration Laws

Between 1890 and 1930 immigration to the United States was at its highest. Some 22 million immigrants arrived into the country during this time. Many of them came from Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Russia, and Spain. In the

United States the older immigrants from Protestant western Europe felt threatened by the rising tide of immigrants from the more Catholic southern and eastern European countries and the immigrants from Asia. Organizations were created urging laws to restrict such immigration. Successions of laws were passed adding restrictions to immigration policy. The US Congress passed in 1921 the first legislation restricting the number of immigrants allowed into the country. Americans however wanted stricter limits. People moving north from the south filled factory jobs and companies no longer needed immigrants to work for them. Hence, in 1924 Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1924 that restricted the number of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. The reasoning behind the new law, as stated in a *New York Times* article by Senator Reed (Republican from Pennsylvania) author of The Senate Bill, is instructive:

> 1. America realizes that she is no longer a desert country in need of reinforcements to her population. She realizes that her present numbers and their descendants are amply sufficient to bring out her natural resources at a reasonable rate of progress. She knows that her prosperity at this moment far exceeds that of any other land in the world. She realizes that unless immigration is numerically restrained she will be overwhelmed by a vast migration of peoples from the war-stricken countries of Europe. Such a migration could not fail to have a baleful effect upon American wages and standards of living, and it would increase mightily our problem of assimilating the foreign-born who are already here. Out of these thoughts have risen the general demands for limitation of the number of immigrants who may enter this country.
> 2. There has come about a general realization of the fact that the races of men who have been coming to us in recent years are wholly dissimilar to the native-born Americans; that they

> are untrained in self-government — a faculty that it has taken the Northwestern Europeans many centuries to acquire. America was beginning also to smart under the irritation of her foreign colonies — those groups of aliens, either in city slums or in country districts, who speak a foreign language and live a foreign life, and who want neither to learn our common speech nor to share our common life. From all this has grown the conviction that it was best for America that our incoming immigrants should hereafter be of the same races as those of us who are already here, so that each year's immigration should so far as possible be a miniature America, resembling in national origins the persons who are already settled in our country.

What does *the Immigration Act of 1924* have to do with this discussion of the Virgin Islands? The period from 1917 to 1931, which comprehended the first years under the U.S. flag, was known as the Navy Stewardship period. It was during this period that the aforementioned Immigration Act of 1924 was applied:

> The (U.S.) Department of State gave the opinion that the Immigration Act of 1924 should be construed to entitle all aliens born in territory belonging to the United States to enter the United States under the non-quota classification. The (U.S.) Department of Labor held that it had no jurisdiction over the Virgin Islands in immigration matters, but that the governor had full power to act under the 1924 law (EVANS, 1945, p. 24).

So why is this law important if it had no bearing on the movement of Virgin Islanders or Puerto Ricans (for that matter) to the U.S. mainland? The reason will become clear shortly but first I must paint a picture of the Post-Emancipation Virgin Islands.

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Post-emancipation in the Danish Virgin Islands

Author James W. Green contrasts the post-emancipation labour situation in the Danish versus the British islands in his article *The British West Indian Alien Labor Problem in the Virgin Islands*. According to him, the laws applied to workers under the Labour Act of the Virgin Islands were much more rigid than similar laws applied in the British West Indies. This had the effect of perpetuating the oppressive conditions which had existed under slavery. This in turn hindered the formation of a subsistence peasant agricultural class in the Virgin Islands as had occurred in the rest of the Caribbean.

Between 1848 and 1917, great part of the population of St.Croix was being transformed into a rural landless *proletariat* (salaried working class) as a growing number of plantations were going bankrupt. The island lost population as the land which was previously used to produce cane fell into disuse. Although some of the land was occupied and farmed by this new class of free laborers, it wasn´t sufficient to constitute a viable system of subsistence agriculture. Many workers thus opted to emigrate.

Plantation owners upon seeing their labor force diminish, attempted several schemes of replenishing the island´s labor force. Workers were imported from various parts of the region and the world, most notably from the British Virgin Islands after 1848 (DOOKHAN, 1975, p. 133). In 1851 commenced the importation of workers from Madeira, although the numbers were insufficient to satisfy demand (MILLS, 1998, p. 15). It became the general practice for Crucian landowners to procure labor from the Eastern Caribbean during the 1860's. Workers from St. Kitts were known to have arrived in St. Croix as early as this decade (RICHARDSON, 1983, p. 158), while some 1 700 immigrants arrived from Barbados in 1860 and 1861 (these

included recently emancipated workers from the Dutch Antilles, mainly St. Eustatius) (MILLS, 1998, p. 15).

The period from 1880 to 1917 has been described as the Doldrums by Virgin Islands historian J. Antonio Jarvis (JARVIS, 1938, p. 32). It was characterized by a drop in the price of sugar on the world market and the decline of St. Thomas as a transhipment port of call. The economic decline which had begun around mid-century (1850) with the emancipation of the slaves and the advent of the steam engine (JARVIS, 1938, p. 10), increased the pace of outward migration of Virgin Islanders in search of better living conditions. Between 1835 and 1917, the total population of the Virgin Islands dropped by 39.7% due to a loss of 17 127 inhabitants (EVANS, 1935, p. 31).

The colony, which had started out as a lucrative business for the Danish West India Company was in frank decline and thus losing its importance to Denmark. It was a similar predicament to that of the British West Indian colonies where new colonial interests were threatening the livelihood of the plantation owner[1].

However, in contrast to the situation of the British colonies, the declining economic importance of the Danish Virgin Islands for Denmark coincided with an increasing strategic importance of the islands for another rising world power: the United States.

U.S. Imperialism

The interest of the United States in the Virgin Islands can be traced to developments in the 19th century beginning perhaps with the Monroe Doctrine of 1823. The Doctrine was basically a warning by the United States to Europe to stay out of the western hemisphere, following the loss by Spain of its great South American empire. Following the end of the Civil

War in 1865 the United States underwent a transformation from an agricultural to an industrial society. Factors which contributed to this change included the availability of massive supplies of raw materials like timber, oil and iron ore; the development of new technology and inventions; the availability of a large labor force constantly replenished through immigration, and the emergence of an entrepreneurial class that would eventually rival those of the world´s great powers. As the capitalist society of the United States expanded, it became necessary for business leaders to seek foreign markets as a way of providing an outlet for an increasing inventory of industrial goods. This expansionist industrial-commercial policy went hand in hand with the development of a large naval force which would safeguard commercial routes and spearhead the country´s commercial expansion overseas. Nobody saw this as clearly as did Alfred T. Mahan, a prolific writer of naval history who took his cue from the role of sea power in British imperial history.

As naval technology and theories of naval power progressed, Alfred T. Mahan articulated the economic necessity of U.S. expansionism or imperialism. He developed his large policy or outward orientation, which favored the creation of large naval forces in an effort to head off U.S. commercial rivals. Part and parcel of this was a vigorous policy of acquiring naval bases in the Caribbean and Western Pacific and of course the creation of a canal through the isthmus of Central America. The protection of commercial routes through the Caribbean and elsewhere thus became a paramount concern to United States as the 19th century drew to a close.

As Spain was about to lose its last remaining colonies in the Spanish American War, U.S. showed growing concern at preventing other European and particularly German incursions into the Caribbean. Teddy Roosevelt mentions the Virgin Islands in a confidential letter to Alfred T. Mahan,

there are big problems in the West Indies also. Until we definitely turn Spain out of those islands (and if I had my way that would be done tomorrow), we will always be menaced by trouble there. We should acquire the Danish Islands and, by turning Spain out, should serve notice that no strong European power, and especially not Germany, should be allowed to gain a foothold by supplanting some weak European power.
The sale of the Virgin Islands to the United States was finally undertaken in 1917 as a measure aimed at preventing the establishment of a German base close to the U.S. coastline (EVANS, 1945, p. 41-42).

Despite the transfer of the Virgin Islands to the United States, the Virgin Island economy continued in its state of lethargy. Hence the exodus of people from the islands in search of a better life continued with the United States now figuring prominently among the destinations (this, following the granting of U.S. citizenship to islanders). An important consequence of the transfer of the islands was the extension of Federal jurisdiction in matters of immigration and naturalization.

During the Great Depression and following the lifting of prohibition laws in the United States, St. Croix experienced a rising demand for labor. Since U.S. Immigration laws had been applied in full to the territory commencing in 1927, plantation owners in St. Croix were faced with a serious dilemma. They could no longer count on labor from the Eastern Caribbean to work on their plantations — or at least not legally — and were thus obliged to search for alternate sources (SENIOR, 1947, p. 8). Since neighboring Puerto Rico had become a possession of the United States following the Spanish American War and Puerto Ricans had been granted American citizenship under the Jones Act of 1917, this presented itself as the most logical substitute for Eastern Caribbean labor. In particular the Puerto Rican island municipality of Vieques presented itself as the best source of labor within the Puerto Rico territorial jurisdiction.

Although the sugar industry continued to prosper on the Puerto Rican mainland (CLARK et al. 1930, p. 614-647), it had been declining in Vieques since 1910 (SENIOR, 1947, p. 2). Hence a good number of Puerto Ricans from Vieques responded to a recruitment campaign for work in the St. Croix sugar industry. A total of 239 labourers emigrated from Vieques to the sugar plantations of St. Croix between April 15 and July 11, 1927 alone (BOYER, 1985-86, p. 97). Those initial emigres who did not bring their families to St. Croix sent for them later and spread the word throughout Vieques that there was work for Puerto Ricans in the Virgin Islands. Others quickly joined the exodus from Vieques due to the depressed situation on that island municipality´s sugar industry. The acreage dedicated to the cultivation of sugar cane on Vieques had dropped from 7 200 in 1910 to 4 600 acres in 1945, while the cane yield dropped from 24 tons to 19 tons (SENIOR, 1947, p. 8). Since sugar was the biggest industry by far on the island municipality, it should come as no surprise that over a quarter of the population had left between 1930 and 1940.

On the other hand the Virgin Islands Colonial Council in 1928 offered a bonus of a six dollar bonus per head for "capable field workers". Emphasis was placed on the transfer of entire families. While the 1930 census showed a total of 766 Puerto Ricans resident in the Virgin Islands, ten years later the number would have gown to 2 002 on the island of St. Croix, alone. This dramatic increase would be attributable not only to the presence of immigrants but the temporary presence of Puerto Rican construction workers engaged in the building of facilities for the United States Armed Forces (more on this topic later).

The University of Puerto Rico survey

A survey of eighty one families of Puerto Rican descent resident in St. Croix was carried out by researcher Clarence

Senior between July 21 and August 4, 1947 for the Social Science Research Center of the University of Puerto Rico. It provides a clearer picture of the nature of the migration. According to his findings, almost half of those interviewed,

> had come (to St. Croix) to work for other Puerto Ricans on cattle ranches, sugar fields or stores. Most of those (51%) who came without definite jobs found work within one week and 21% more within one month. Twelve percent found work only in the second month and 11% in the third (SENIOR, 1947, p. 8).

While most of those interviewed by Senior came from Vieques, nine percent came from the Puerto Rican island municipality of Culebra and several originated from the eastern part of mainland Puerto Rico (Fajardo and Ceiba). It should be noted that Culebra shared a high rate of out migration with Vieques.

Senior also describes the dynamic between the host culture and the new arrivals, which produced some friction and mis-understandings given the difference in their customs and language. In his words, the arrival of Puerto Ricans to St. Croix,

> has resulted in a conflict of cultures with consequences quite analogous to those found in other similar situations. The employer group favours the newcomers, who work harder and produce more than the natives. The working class is split and probably predominantly distrustful, since they respond to the cry that the Puerto Ricans are *taking the bread out of our mouths*. A middle class is almost non-existent. The small store-keeper takes the working class attitude, however, since he is feeling competition from stores set up by the migrants (SENIOR, 1947, p. 2).

The differences between the newcomers and the Crucian population extended beyond language to encompass other aspects covered by Senior in his research findings.

Puerto Ricans were generally lighter skinned, being either white or of mixed race, in contrast to the largely black Crucian population. According to Senior, 56% of those surveyed for his study were classified as white (SENIOR, 1947, p. 9). This contrasts with information from the 1940 Census of St. Croix wherein 72.7% of the island´s population described itself as "black". Another difference had to with the age differential. The median age for the native Crucian population was 25.3 years of age for men and 26.6 years for women, according to the 1940 Census. The Puerto Rican immigrants, on the other hand, were much younger with the median age between 15 and 19 years of age (SENIOR, 1947, p. 11). Finally a third difference is probably a minor affair, nevertheless it does serve to underscore the difference in cultural traditions. While Crucian women did engage in agricultural work (work in the fields), this was frowned upon by the male Puerto Ricans in what was essentially a patriarchal culture. Consequently, Puerto Rican women were most likely to work in the home in such tasks as sewing.

Due to the difference in cultural traditions, there was little mixture between the populations. The Puerto Rican population mingled with their own, marrying within their nationality while the english speaking population (that included immigrants from the Eastern Caribbean) mingled within their own linguistic group. This was later reiterated in a study by Rosenberg, whose survey of agricultors in St. Croix did not reveal any intermarriage between the two groups (ROSENBERG, 1966, p. 17). It is necessary to turn our attention to the issue surrounding the traditional sources of labor for the Virgin Islands, namely the Eastern Caribbean.

Despite the application of the U.S. Immigration laws, there were still decendents of citizens from the Eastern

Caribbean present in the Virgin Islands in 1943. According to the 1940 census 8.3% of the population in St. Croix identified itself as black born outside the territory (SENIOR, 1947, p. 9). A total of 3 807 persons residing in the Virgin Islands indicated they had been born in the Eastern Caribbean, excluding Puerto Rico. The reality of the situation was that the immigration laws, though in the books, were not enforced (MILLS, 1998, p. 17). During the war years, the laws were relaxed albeit temporarily.

The Impact of the War Years on Virgin Island Immigration

The war years saw a new role for the Virgin Islands within U.S. strategic view of the world. In 1904 Theodore Roosevelt had spelled out his policy in what became known as the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine. He enunciated that if any nation in the western hemisphere acted "wrongly" and in a fashion that might incite foreign intervention in its affairs, the United States would act to prevent such an occurrence. This "fear" of foreign intervention in the hemisphere, which had driven U.S. policy since the Monroe Doctrine would become even more acute in the years leading up to the World Wars. We saw previously how Teddy Roosevelt, in his letter to Alfred T. Mahan, perceived the Virgin Islands within overall U.S. plans for the hemisphere. With the advent of the Second World War and the eventual participation of the United States in it, the Caribbean became of even greater strategic importance due to its close proximity to the United States (coastline).

In September 1940, the United States formally arranged with Britain the acquisition of 99 year leases on British territories in the Western hemisphere for the establishment of naval and air bases in exchange for U.S. destroyers, military equipment and material. In the Caribbean basin, those included the Bahamas, Jamaica, St. Lucia, Trinidad, Antigua and British Guyana. As noted in Boyer:

> President (Franklin D.) Roosevelt as early as 1935 had personally intervened to establish in St. Thomas a marine corps air base and, in 1939, a submarine base. The need for laborers on these construction and later defense projects rapidly boosted employment which hastened the exodus of workers from St. Croix cane fields.... Alien workers from other islands, particularly from nearby British islands, were attracted by the higher wages both in St. Croix and St. Thomas (BOYER, 1983, p. 192).

In 1943, the U.S. Attorney General emitted an order that legalized the status of all immigrants without proper documentation, on the condition that they had entered the Virgin Islands prior to July 1, 1938. Not withstanding this, an exception had already been made in 1941 to U.S. immigration laws allowing for the temporary entrance of workers (mostly from the English speaking Caribbean) to work on military installations. This exception proved to be a brief episode as it was canceled in 1944. Boyer notes, however, that this "national defense" construction in the Virgin Islands also spurred immigration from Puerto Rico (BOYER, 1983, p. 166).

Many of the hundreds of workers that had arrived to the Virgin Islands during this brief period from islands like St. Kitts and Nevis and the British Virgin Islands tried to remain thus prompting authorities to resort to deportation. By the end of 1945 and the beginning of 1946, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services deported 700 illegal aliens to the British Virgin Island of Tortola (RICHARDSON, 1983, p. 158). Although many workers were deported, many of these tried to re-enter the U.S. Virgin Islands, using Tortola as a platform.

Despite the deportations, this 1941-1944 episode would be the forerunner of a temporary worker program similar to the *bracero* or in-bond program in Mexico. The program would be applied initially to the British Virgin Islands in 1956 but would

later be extended to much of the rest of the Caribbean (MILLER; BOYER, 1982, p. 48). Recruitment of workers from St. Kitts-Nevis and Antigua had reportedly resumed for the cane harvest in St. Croix after 1945 (GREEN, 1971, p. 59).

In the 1950's the historical pattern of labor migration to the Virgin Islands from the Eastern Caribbean was re-established. For this to occur, the Virgin Islands had to be excluded or accorded differential treatment under the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1952. The law had established a special category for temporary workers denoted non-immigrant worker. However, the Immigration and Naturalization Service was reluctant to apply this classification for workers from the Eastern Caribbean who intended to enter the U.S. Virgin Islands since many of these were not temporary. Nevertheless, after a period of negotiations, special provisions were adopted under the 1952 law as applied to the Virgin Islands.

These special provisions permitted the temporary entrance to the U.S. Virgin Islands of workers destined for the hotel industry, agricultural workers, domestics, non-skilled workers and project workers. In 1959, the program was widened to include workers from the French and Dutch Antilles (MILLER; BOYER, 1982, p. 48). This exception accorded to the Virgin Islands was just one of a few that were permitted to the United States Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1952. Other authorized exceptions included: 1) U.S. territories in the Pacific such as Guam, 2) Jamaican apple pickers in Virginia and New York, and 3) Haitian cane cutters in Florida. Hence the evolution of this case gave rise to the temporary worker program in the Virgin Islands while at the same time reducing the flow of Puerto Ricans into the territory.

Another factor which reduced the entry of Puerto Ricans into St. Croix in particular was the final demise of the sugar

industry. Despite efforts by local authorities to maintain the viability of the industry through centralization and Federal funds, the last crop was harvested in 1963 (GREEN, 1959, p. 150). The tourism industry and other modern industries were able to absorb not only the labor that had been displaced by the demise of the sugar industry but also created within themselves a demand for labor that brought a rise in illegal immigrants to the territory during the 1960's.

Conclusion

The large waves of Puerto Rican migrants to the Virgin Islands (and St. Croix in particular) occurred in a relatively brief time span and were due to very specific circumstances originating from the need to replace traditional sources of labor obtained from the Eastern Caribbean which were no longer available under the new U.S. jurisdiction. The fact that Puerto Rico had also been brought under U.S. jurisdiction and its people made U.S. citizens offered a plausible solution to the Virgin Islands-labor problem. The depressed conditions of the sugar cane industry in Vieques and Culebra provided the St. Croix planters with the opportunity to source labor from these two Puerto Rican island municipalities, and so it was that began the eventual incorporation of people of Puerto Rican descent into Virgin Islands society. Additional migratory waves occurred in later years due to the Second World War, when the United States was engaged in the construction of military bases and facilities. Despite attempts by Virgin Islands employers to resume traditional sourcing of labor from the Eastern Caribbean, it wouldn´t be until after the conclusion of the War that such efforts would bring fruit. The resumption of these traditional routes of labor immigration had the effect of finally reducing the influx of Puerto Ricans.

Notes

[1] For an analysis of this historical process, refer to the monumental work by Eric Williams. *Capitalism and Slavery.* London: Andre Deutsch Ltd., 1964. For a summary, you can consult Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History.* New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1985, p. 174-177.

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