

Abstract

Between 1807 and 1834 the slave population of Jamaica decreased absolutely, became increasingly feminine, coloured and Creole, and was dominated by an old group of Africans and a growing group under twenty years of age. As coffee plantations and other small properties were abandoned the slaves were moved to coastal sugar estates, and hence the size of the average slave-holding increased. Roughly half of the slaves were located on sugar estates in 1832; there the rate of natural decrease was, in general, at a maximum, whereas the slaves on coffee and pimento plantations, and on pens, were increasing. The demographic structure varied between the land use types, but the rate of natural increase was essentially a function of the tasks required of the slaves. Change in the size and structure of the slave population was a basic cause of diversification in the pattern of land and labour use.

Occupational allocations were based on demographic characteristics---sex, colour, age, birth-place and health. The planters idealized a slave work-force dominated by black males, aged between twenty and forty-five years. Thus the abolition of the slave trade placed great stress on the flexibility of the system, and the planter had to support large proportions in relatively unproductive occupations, or found increasing numbers of female, aged and coloured slaves in his field gangs. The diminution of the slave population was related to a decline in total output, but it is more difficult to demonstrate a relationship between demographic structure and "productivity." For the slaves, demographic change meant that their expectations within slave society were less often fulfilled. In the towns they could escape by running away or being manumitted, but the rural slave saw no advantages in freedom so long as society was founded on slavery, and the stresses within the system led to open rebellion.