

## **ABSTRACT**

“St. Kitts- A Plantation Society 1624-1999”

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The aim of this study is to show that the Kittitian society has maintained the major characteristics of a plantation society for four centuries. The system was instituted in St. Kitts when production was organised around the production unit- the plantation. Initially this system was aimed at producing one crop, sugarcane. This crop was produced for export and the entire commercial system reflected an external orientation. It was dominated by a small white European elite who controlled factors of production: land, capital and labour. The majority of the rest of the population was comprised of a large unskilled, enslaved labour force. This mode of economic organization was quite the norm for the Caribbean in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The major challenge to the system came with emancipation and declining economic fortunes in the nineteenth century. These developments caused economic modifications in other territories. However the thesis argues that these modifications were slower in coming and had less impact in St. Kitts.

After emancipation the escalating cost of sugar production and declining preferential rates encouraged the government to seek alternative means of

obtaining revenue. In the early twentieth century industrialisation by invitation, a concept advocated by Arthur Lewis, was seen as the solution to the problem of diversification of the economy. It was a means of stemming the high levels of unemployment while encouraging foreign investment to the island. Light industries were identified as the conduits to resuscitate the economy. In the latter twentieth century tourism was also seen as the panacea for the economic problems that were plaguing the island. However, these two remedies merely perpetuated the servitude that characterized the plantation system during slavery. The pillars, which supported and fuelled the plantation system, were also apparent in these new sectors. For example, a large unskilled labour force, management by expatriates, and a trading system designed to benefit the landowning oligarchy. Thus, alternatives have not resulted in much change in economic conditions of the workers.

It is with problems such as, the decline in foreign exchange earnings, lack of employment, the deplorable social conditions and the resultant social unrest in the 1930s in mind that the writer has conducted this research. Interviews were used from a cross section of people. Primary and secondary sources of information were elicited to find out why the social, economic and political organisation of Kittitian society has not fundamentally changed. It has been found that land reform and other developments that are consistent with an independent and transforming society failed to take root in St. Kitts. In time, even the emerging nationalist leaders in St. Kitts recognised that the plantation system, which they had advocated against, was the means by which they could acquire

and maintain power. As a result, they too have encouraged foreign ownership in a bid to get foreign currency. Hence, one sees the plantation system taking root in the seventeenth century and reproducing itself with only slight modifications well into the present century.