

NJAC Viewpoint

TOBAGO - A LEGACY STOLEN

Since 1970 the National Joint Action Committee has recognised the importance of land ownership to the development of Tobago. When the Chief Servant, Brother Makandal Daaga, visited Tobago in 1970, he found over 70% of the best lands in Tobago to be owned by foreigners. He had to lead thousands of people in demonstrations to the four corners of the island in order to sensitize the population on this issue. The new consciousness this brought engendered new attitude to land for a while. Under pressure from the masses, the government acquired some estates.

Today Tobago is once again on the auction bloc for the highest bidder. Already we have lost much more than we realise. Exclusive zones have already began to creep back into our island, such as guest houses which accept Italians only (no locals allowed), or in areas where access is denied, such as to the Arnos Vale Bay where you are greeted by signs stating “Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted”. The very dignity and pride of our people is being threatened in this tragic process.

Tobago is daily becoming a most popular destination point. Visitors are coming in their numbers seeking relaxation and refuge. The island has become more attractive to many who want to escape from the violence, chaos and stress elsewhere. These people are prepared to invest millions of dollars to purchase or erect havens of peace for themselves and their families. The local households cannot compete with the kind of high finance that is coming from the outside on their own. The powers that be must implement measures

immediately to protect what little is left of this vanishing legacy of our grandparents.

Our history should be a guide in our present dilemma. In so doing we must pay homage to the foresight shown by our parents in their efforts to own land. We must honour the sacrifices they made to save their cents and pennies to be able to purchase some piece of land that could guarantee shelter and life for themselves and the generations to come. We must remember the struggles of 1970 to reclaim our island and restore some dignity to the people of Tobago. We owe it to all those who were imprisoned and suffered, but who fought valiantly so that succeeding generations could inherit some property.

Traditionally land has been very close to the Tobagonian who valued the importance of agriculture. A mere forty years ago Tobago was self-sufficient in food production. At that time Tobago was considered the “bread basket” of the nation. Tobago used to export over **one million pounds** of pigeon peas, **three hundred thousand pounds** ground provisions, as well as an abundance of avocados, cocoa, coconuts, tobacco, fruit and livestock. Today, Tobago cannot survive without the daily food imports from Trinidad. Past generations respected the value of the land and used its rich fertility to feed themselves, their families and the nation. They sought to hold on to their land and pass it on to their children. Today those children are selling out that legacy for a fast life which has no foundation.

The decline in agriculture has been a major blow to Tobago’s economy. During the nineteen forties and fifties and even the early nineteen sixties, agriculture had been the mainstay of the island’s economy. Agriculture was, however, allowed to die a slow death due to a number of factors including inadequate land and support, as well as the stigmatization of agriculture as a

demeaning profession of second class status. The obvious result has been the failure to attract young persons to the profession. Even today, most of the farmers are those elderly ones who are merely holding on to keep some semblance of the industry alive.

In this context, therefore, the question of land ownership is central to the nature and quality of growth and development in Tobago. On the one hand, the availability of land for housing is becoming a very scarce commodity with a price range that is beyond the average family. On the other hand, the areas designated as agricultural lands could soon be something of the past. These areas are falling like the proverbial **nine pins** to the new developments that are emerging on the island. This development compromises any future effort to rescue this so maligned, yet so important sector of our economy.

The National Joint Action Committee is of the view that agriculture should be developed, not only for its benefits at the primary level. More importantly is the employment and revenue this sector could create at the secondary and even tertiary levels of the economy. The need for agricultural lands must therefore be seen as the basis for the development of agro-industries over a period of time.

We should always remember that our ability to determine our own destiny will be largely dependant on our self-reliance and our economic independence. Let us therefore rekindle the principles of old which teach that land is sacred. In the words of one of the native American leader (Tecumseh of the Shawnees) one hundred and fifty years ago:

“How could we sell you the sparkle of the waters, the warmth of the sunshine and the coolness of the breeze? The idea is strange to us.”

Let us cherish these gifts of God and revive some of the old Tobago values for life, humanity and independence.