

The cover features several stylized, light green leaf motifs scattered across a pale yellow background. Each motif consists of a stem with two leaves pointing upwards and to the right.

# **CULTURE AND CUSTOMS OF JAMAICA**

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**Martin Mordecai, Pamela Mordecai**

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Culture and Customs of Latin America  
and the Caribbean

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## Series Foreword

“CULTURE” is a problematic word. In everyday language we tend to use it in at least two senses. On the one hand we speak of cultured people and places full of culture, uses that imply a knowledge or presence of certain forms of behavior or of artistic expression that are socially prestigious. In this sense large cities and prosperous people tend to be seen as the most cultured. On the other hand, there is an interpretation of “culture” that is broader and more anthropological; culture in this broader sense refers to whatever traditions, beliefs, customs, and creative activities characterize a given community—in short, it refers to what makes that community different from others. In this second sense, everyone has culture; indeed, it is impossible to be without culture.

The problems associated with the idea of culture have been exacerbated in recent years by two trends: less respectful use of language and a greater blurring of cultural differences. Nowadays, “culture” often means little more than behavior, attitude, or atmosphere. We hear about the culture of the boardroom, of the football team, of the marketplace; there are books with titles like *The Culture of War* by Richard Gabriel (Greenwood, 1990) and *The Culture of Narcissism* by Christopher Lasch (1979). In fact, as Christopher Clausen points out in an article published in the *American Scholar* (Summer 1996), we have gotten ourselves into trouble by using the term so sloppily.

People who study culture generally assume that culture (in the anthropological sense) is learned, not genetically determined. Another general assumption made in these days of multiculturalism has been that cultural differences should be respected rather than put under pressure to change. But these as-

sumptions, too, have sometimes proved to be problematic. For instance, multiculturalism is a fine ideal, but in practice it is not always easy to reconcile with the beliefs of the very people who advocate it: for example, is female circumcision an issue of human rights or just a different cultural practice?

The blurring of cultural differences is a process that began with the steamship, increased with radio, and is now racing ahead with the Internet. We are becoming globally homogenized. Since the English-speaking world (and the United States in particular) is the dominant force behind this process of homogenization, it behooves us to make efforts to understand the sensibilities of members of other cultures.

This series of books, a contribution toward that greater understanding, deals with the neighbors of the United States, with people who have just as much right to call themselves Americans. What are the historical, institutional, religious, and artistic features that make up the modern culture of such peoples as the Haitians, the Chileans, the Jamaicans, and the Guatemalans? How are their habits and assumptions different from our own? What can we learn from them? As we familiarize ourselves with the ways of other countries, we come to see our own from a new perspective.

Each volume in the series focuses on a single country. With slight variations to accommodate national differences, each begins by outlining the historical, political, ethnic, geographical, and linguistic context, as well as the religious and social customs, and then proceeds to a discussion of a variety of artistic activities, including the press, the media, the cinema, music, literature, and the visual and performing arts. The authors are all intimately acquainted with the countries concerned: some were born or brought up in them, and each has a professional commitment to enhancing the understanding of the culture in question.

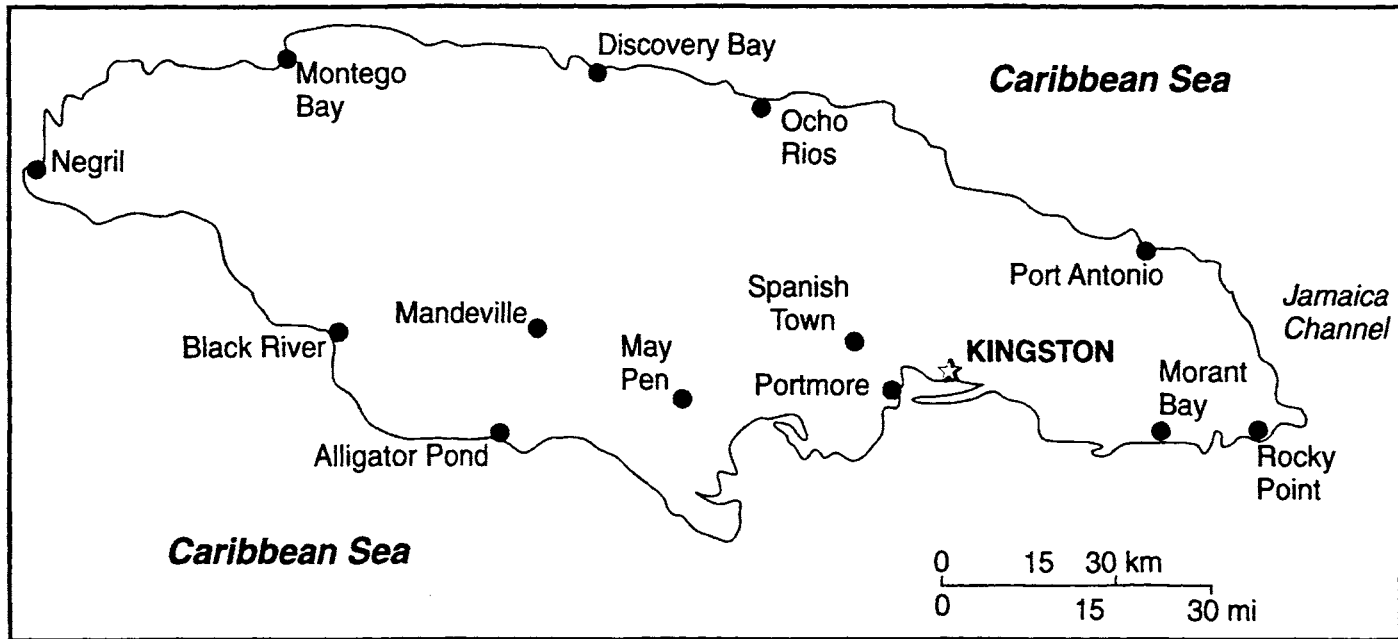
We are inclined to suppose that our ways of thinking and behaving are normal. And so they are . . . for us. We all need to realize that ours is only one culture among many, and that it is hard to establish by any rational criteria that ours as a whole is any better (or worse) than any other. As individual members of our immediate community, we know that we must learn to respect our differences from each other. Respect for differences between cultures is no less vital. This is particularly true of the United States, a nation of immigrants that sometimes seems to be bent on destroying variety at home, and, worse still, on having others follow suit. By learning about other people's cultures, we come to understand and respect them; we earn their respect for us; and, not least, we see ourselves in a new light.

Peter Standish  
East Carolina University

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We also acknowledge the invaluable participation of Peter Standish, the series editor, and of Wendi Schnaufer and Rebecca Ardwin of Greenwood, whose patient encouragement kept the project under sail, through occasionally rough waters, to final harbor.



## Introduction

THIS BOOK is an introduction to the customs and culture of Jamaica. We have taken a generally historical approach, not only in the plainly historical first section but in most of the other sections thereafter. This approach may seem to lead to a certain amount of repetitiveness. But the advantage, which we choose to emphasize, is that across chapters and topics the reader can have an idea of the wider society at a given point in time. Thus, for example, in pointing to the things that black nationalist Marcus Garvey did, in respect to the theater, politics, education, and so forth, the reader will get an idea not only of the breadth of Garvey's interests and vision, but of his impact on his society in several areas. And in placing Garvey within a historical narrative, one can see how the Jamaica of today evolved out of what went before, just as Garvey's work built on what went before him.

At the same time, space and format do not permit more than a cursory treatment of Garvey's *ideas*, or of his personality. This is also true of the treatment of many other individuals and Jamaican customs and cultural facets. Regrettably, important things and persons, of necessity, have been omitted from this narrative altogether. As for the structure, we felt that a narrative best suited not only our personal view of our country but the country's view of itself, as a society still in the process of creating itself.

We have tried to provide as comprehensive a bibliography as possible, and arranged it according to the chapters, so that readers and those wishing to go deeper into a particular topic can find a way. We would also like to acknowledge a few texts that were consulted across chapters, several times on numberless topics.

- *The Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*, by Richard Allsopp, published in 1996 by Oxford University Press;
- *Jamaica Talk: Three Hundred Years of the English Language*, by Frederic G. Cassidy, published in 1961 by Macmillan and the Institute of Jamaica;
- *The A-Z of Jamaican Heritage*, by Olive Senior, published in 1983 by Heinemann and The Gleaner Company. An expanded edition of this important work is in preparation.

Finally, we must also cite two journals, *Jamaica Journal* (Institute of Jamaica) and *Caribbean Quarterly* (University of the West Indies), in which the student will find a compendium of scholarly but accessible writing on every facet of Jamaican life and thought. These journals may not be found in every library but are indexed in the Hispanic American Periodicals Index (HAPI) and available on microfilm.

Despite using these authoritative sources as carefully as we could, we take full responsibility for any and all errors in the text.

## Chronology

- Circa A.D. 600      The Taino (Arawaks) begin establishing settlements
- 1492                Christopher Columbus arrives at Discovery Bay, St. Ann, on his second voyage to the 'new world'
- 1509                Spain takes formal possession of Jamaica
- 1510                Sevilla la Nueva (New Seville) founded; abandoned in 1534, capital moved to Villa de la Vega (later, Spanish Town)
- 1611                Census shows 523 Spanish, 558 slaves, 107 free blacks, 74 Taino, and 75 'newcomers'
- 1655                English army captures Jamaica; Spanish retreat; rogue soldiers and freed slaves (maroons) wage guerrilla war until 1660
- 1670                Jamaica ceded to England in Treaty of Madrid
- 1692                Earthquake destroys Port Royal
- 1738                Peace treaty with Maroons signed
- 1760                First large-scale slave rebellion, in northeastern parish of St. Mary, put down by militia and troops
- 1764                Population estimated at 166,454, of which 140,454 are slaves