

# CREDIT, IDENTITY, AND RESILIENCE IN THE BAHAMAS AND BARBADOS<sup>1</sup>

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**People of the Caribbean have maintained social networks that provide security in the face of human and natural perturbations. Rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs) constitute one such system, which probably came to much of the Caribbean with African people and persisted through slavery. As a foundation of creole economic systems throughout the Caribbean, ROSCAs are time-tested dimensions of traditional culture and a source of pride and identity. This analysis of the history and contemporary functions of ROSCAs in Barbados and the Bahamas is based on more than a thousand extensive and intensive first-person interviews and surveys. This article argues that ROSCAs continue, much as they did in the past, to provide critical human services, social stability, and a source of African-ancestor identity in these two nations. (Women’s power, rotating credit, Bahamas, Barbados)**

Identity is a central debate for the peoples of the Caribbean (Alleyne 2002; Hall and DuGay 1996; Identities 2008; Small Axe 2008), with questions of “Where did we come from, and are those biological roots tied in any important way to how we live and who we are today?” (Yelvington 2001) asked by locals and university scholars alike. This analysis aims to answer these questions about perceived identities and origins of Barbadians and Bahamians.

Caribbean people, regardless of their phenotype, are choosing to attach cultural origins to key aspects of their culture, and thus privilege them over other origins and cultural patterns. Main labeling trends attribute European, African, Asian, or local origins to the development of contemporary culture, including society and language (Forte 2000; Howard 2002). Once any of these broad cultural lineages is chosen, then localizing cultural roots in space and time adds authenticity to the identity (Payne-Jackson and Alleyne 2004:57–78).

Rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs) are a source of perceived identities and origins for Barbadians and Bahamians. ROSCAs—variously known as

meeting turn, *sou sou*, *asu*, box hand, and partner—are savings and credit patterns that exist throughout the Caribbean and are typically attributed to African origins. ROSCAs also tend to be a source of ethnic pride and are central in contemporary discussions of identity. The use of ROSCAs exemplifies the resilience of people always adapting to the boom and bust economies of the Caribbean.

This article compares ROSCAs in Barbados (known as meeting turn) and the Bahamas (known as *asu*), both islands of former African-ancestry slave-based plantation colonies of Great Britain. They are independent countries whose citizens are struggling to choose which of the various available identity streams should be privileged at the national level. Over a thousand direct interviews document that people in these two nations generally attribute their systems of rotating credit to Africa (especially West Africa), and believe that rotating credit persisted during slavery because it was widely understood among the slaves and could not be controlled by the dominant society. Bahamians and Barbadians also stipulate that rotating credit became a foundation of social and economic exchanges because it could be totally controlled by the participants, thus giving them agency, and maintain that rotating credit persists in modern times because it continues to make positive contributions to community resilience and pride, both of which are key aspects of identity. These findings document the complexity of asking the question “Why are ROSCAs so culturally central?”

#### METHODS AND ASSUMPTIONS

The analysis is informed by more than 30 years of research conducted among the residents of coastal communities in the Caribbean. These research projects occurred in urban and rural areas in Barbados, The Bahamas, Antigua, St. Lucia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Dominican Republic (Rubino and Stoffle 1990; B. Stoffle et al. 1999; B. Stoffle and R. Stoffle 2007; R. Stoffle et al. 1994). This research report is primarily based on more than a thousand quantitative and qualitative interviews collected in Barbados and the Exuma Islands and Cays in the central Bahamas.

The Barbados interviews were conducted during a three-year study of traditional microeconomic systems of exchange, especially those focused on rotating savings and credit associations. During five field sessions in Barbados, 500 interviews were conducted; of these interviews, 120 were with the people of the rural Bath Plantation area. The remaining interviews were of those living in urban Bridgetown. Interviews collected data on microeconomic systems that contribute to a creole economy.

The Bahamian study involved 572 interviews with 193 people from six traditional communities in the Exumas. Gender balance was approached in the 352 formal interviews but an imbalance towards males occurred in the 221 informal interviews. During these five field sessions, approximately the same percentage of each community was formally interviewed with an overall sample size of 34 percent of the census recorded population.

The Bahamas research is inductive, iterative, mixed methodologically, collaborative, and consultative. The broadest research goal was to understand how potential Marine Protected Areas (MPA) could affect local communities and which of these would best

predict local community responses to the MPAs. Conducted over six years, the eight field sessions permitted an iterative cycle of collecting data, analyzing findings, and returning to the field with new and revised data collection instruments. During these interviews, Exumian people noted that the Bahamian rotating credit association (asu) was and continues to be an essential aspect of how people work together to strengthen their communities and make them resilient. The study team conducted interviews specifically about asu.

This article assumes that broader patterns of Caribbean life, especially those occurring over the life cycles of individuals and through traditional patterns established over many generations, can be understood through interviews and a few typical stories from a single settlement. These thousand-plus interviews documented the cultural centrality of ROSCAs.

### ROSCAS IN THE CARIBBEAN

ROSCAs are a system for compulsory saving and microcrediting that involves people who come together based on interpersonal knowledge and trust. In many cases members tend to belong for life, thus making well established ROSCAs multi-generational. The behavior of members reflects on past, present, and future generations and affects an individual's social status in the community and to some degree in their society at large. A ROSCA, for example, that is run on an annual cycle may be structured to involve 12 members, each of whom places a sum of money in a common pool, the total of which is given each month to a member based on a predetermined order and rotating schedule. The cycles for many of the "meeting turns" persist, with members continuing to participate even though a cycle may have ended. In some cases, there are meeting turns that have existed for over 65 years, replacing members as necessary. In Barbados, each ROSCA is led by an "organizer" (B. Stoffle 2001) or "meeting holder" (Gmelch and Gmelch 1997). The "meeting holder" is almost always an older woman, something that is common throughout the Caribbean. It is possible that this relates to the idea that saving money is a woman's responsibility and probably even more specifically tied to the roles of women in the Caribbean as expressed in Barrow's (1992) work on the matrifocal family. Even though women are the predominant leaders of ROSCAs, members vary regarding age, ethnicity, and gender (Yelvington 1995:217). The key is to be of good standing in the community and able to meet the financial responsibilities of participation. Shifting cycles or the inability to make a payment involves a significant change and is negotiated by the organizer, who hears a request to change a hand rotation and then explains it to the members. A change can only be made with the approval of the members. Stability results in predictable amounts of money being available to individuals at agreed times. Flexibility of the ROSCA to meet unanticipated crises makes individuals and communities more resilient to social and cultural turbulence.

Determining the origin of Caribbean ROSCAs is difficult because there is little direct evidence that identifies a place, group, or time as the point of origin. Similarities in linguistic and organizational structure and ideology suggest a link between Caribbean ROSCAs and those from West Africa and Asia (Ardener 1964; Ardener and Berman

1995; Geertz 1962). Ardener (1964) states that while no one knows precisely how ROSCAs began in Africa, indications are that the institution in West Africa is indigenous. People in Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Cameroon are said to have had rotating funds that predated the arrival of European currency and were operated in kind. Among the Yoruba of Nigeria, contributions were made in cowries (Ardener 1964). Purcell (2000) suggests, without speculating on the specific institutional roots of ROSCAs, that the elements of co-operation, communality, and reciprocity are characteristic of many indigenous African social organizations. For this reason many believe that historical and contemporary Caribbean ROSCAs are based on traditional African cultural organizations.

Linguistic comparisons further support the argument that some Caribbean ROSCAs are linked to African ROSCAs. For example, the *susu* in Trinidad (Herskovits and Herskovits 1947), the *sousou* in Martinique (Laguerre 1990), and *asu* (*esu*) in the Bahamas (Craton and Saunders 2000) are all linguistically similar to the *esusu*, *susu*, and *isusu* in West African countries. In Africa, 33 countries are recorded as having rotating credit associations, but only names from West Africa match those used in the Caribbean (Bouman 1995). Names for rotating credit associations from 20 Asian countries do not match linguistically. The combination of linguistic similarities and dissimilarities, as well as the fact that many of the people in the Caribbean were from African ethnic groups, suggests that meeting turn in Barbados (which is also called *sou sou*) and *asu* in the Bahamas are derivatives of traditional West African associations.

Creole economics (Browne 2004) is a term used to describe the informal economic systems of exchange developed in situ by the people of the Caribbean. Such systems generally were experimented with during slavery and have subsequently been carried into modern times because they still serve average people better than colonially established economic systems and because people prefer them. Browne argues that the people of Martinique drew on African cultural practices during slavery to make economic systems that were invisible and largely uncontrollable because such exchanges were illegal. People carried these African-based creole economic systems forward in time because they function well and are in opposition to formal economic systems of the colonial nation. Men who operate the creole economic systems are called *debrouillards*, who use cunning to succeed, and so become trickster folk heroes.

National and ethnic identity debates are never neutral in the Caribbean (Yelvington 1993, 2006). They are hotly argued in the streets, the newspapers, and even in parliament. Basic to all these debates is their emergence since the end of the nation's colonial status. Under a colonial government one's identity as a citizen was imposed. The colonial government, usually based in Europe, determined the proper language, family system, education, religion, economy, and even the colony's flag. With independence, the former colonies had the power to redefine aspects of their culture. Tensions arose when the former colonies were unable to control the credibility and authenticity of potential changes. Is marriage by an Obeah priest legal? Are generational land title claims equal to fee simple titles? Should the national language be Ashanti? Educational content and school leaving exams, for example, were set by Oxford and Cambridge Universities for English colonies in the Caribbean, and this continued for decades after

independence because these standards were widely recognized while local standards were not. Identity debates tend to focus initially on the question of who the people genuinely are.

Biculturalism is the outcome of societies made to serve a European colonial nation but whose workers are primarily composed of unfree laborers from many cultures forced to work for others (Williams 1944:7). The most robust model of bicultural societies was presented by Wilson (1969, 1973) who maintained that two mirror-oppositional cultures exist in each colonial society and in the minds of its citizens. The official culture (called respect or colonial) was defined and legally imposed by Europeans and the oppositional culture (called reputation or creole) was developed by the people of the colony and hidden from the ruling gaze. Most people can code-switch in a moment between colonial and creole language, legal and creole economics, pronouncements on appropriate family practice, and what constitutes an appropriate religious practice. The biculturalism of the Caribbean is the only robust explanation of widespread creole economics in Martinique (Browne 2004) and the persistence of the creole family system in Barbados (R. Stoffle 1977).

Resilience is a term used to describe the ability of a society and its natural environment to recover from social and natural distresses (Holling 1973). Recovery is defined as returning to a similar, but not necessarily identical, state which involves almost the original number of people and their physical distribution, but also their fundamental social structure, quality of life, and key components of their core culture that are central to well being and identity. Key dimensions of resilience in Caribbean societies involve having redundant natural and social connections “occupational multiplicity” (Comitas 1964) or “environmental multiplicity” (Stoffle and Minnis 2007).

### MEETING TURN IN BARBADOS

Barbados is a small island, approximately 166 square miles, located in the extreme eastern Caribbean, which was claimed by the British in 1625 and settled shortly thereafter. Bridgetown, the capital of Barbados, is located in the protected west-coast harbor, and Bath is a rural settlement on the rugged northeast coast.

The first unfree laborers in Barbados were Scottish and Irish prisoners of war sent by Lord Cromwell between 1650 and 1660 and sold to planters (Frank 1920:372–373). This practice of importing political prisoners as unfree laborers continued until 1746. By the mid-1600s, sugar replaced cotton, African people replaced the Scots-Irish as the major source of labor, and large plantations supplanted small farmers (Watts 1994:176–231). By the third quarter of the seventeenth century there were more people in Barbados than in any of the mainland English colonies.

#### *Origins of Meeting Turn*

A cultural practice hidden during slavery usually remains undetected, so it is not surprising that meeting turn does not appear in the early historic records of Barbados. Survey and documented data suggest that its roots are of West African cultural and

socioeconomic practices adapted to a cash economy dominated by slaves and free African-ancestry women.

The most obvious source of cash for slaves was female huckstering—taking some product, whether grown, traded, or stolen, to sell for cash. According to Beckles (1999:140–155) slaves, particularly females, participated in the market economy as producers and distributors, with and without their owners' permission. After the 1816 slave revolt, the official inquiry reported that “each negro cultivates a garden of his own in which he raises, with great facility, corn, ocros, yams, etc. A great part of the ginger exported is raised in these gardens. They also raise hogs, goats, and poultry and the market is chiefly supplied by the negroes” (Craon 1982:257). African-ancestry people so dominated the domestic market that a series of laws was passed to regulate, tax, or prevent huckstering. These laws were largely unsuccessful. The persistence of Barbadian internal marketing demonstrates that male and female slaves struggled against laws and regulations to achieve an economic life of their own. Cash from these exchanges had to be hidden, and based on interviews, it seems that meeting turn was one feature of this invisible economy.

Barbados settlement patterns changed little after emancipation in the early 1830s. Former slaves, lacking access to new lands and jobs, continued to live on and engage in wage work for the plantations that had enslaved them. The Land Purchase laws required that large quantities of land be bought at very high prices, propelling purchases beyond the means of former slaves. Trollope (1860:199) wrote, “When emancipation came there was no squatting ground for the poor Barbadian. He had still to work and make sugar—work quite as hard as he had done while yet a slave. He had to do that or to starve.” There were few positive changes in the lives of newly freed slaves.

After emancipation, plantation owners would no longer provide former slaves with subsistence, provisions, housing, clothing, and medical support. Especially important was the loss of salted fish, which tended to be the only source of animal protein. Now almost totally on their own in the search for food and shelter, former slaves increasingly depended on house gardens, local small scale farming, animal husbandry, fishing, and huckstering.

Because meeting turn and other matters of money are rarely discussed, there is little to document its existence. Ethnographic research using interviews and oral histories document the perception that meeting turn has been a part of everyday life in Barbadian culture for over a century. Some might argue that such associations only became prevalent in more modern times as people were increasingly integrated into the informal economy, but it is important to note that slaves controlled a remarkable proportion of the cash on the island through the sale of certain products and wares at the markets.

#### *Meeting Turn as Still Useful*

Meeting turn has contemporary relevance in the lives of rural and urban Barbadian people. Though in the urban setting some of the principles of participation have changed, where trust and personal knowledge have been replaced by proximity and regularity, the primary aspect of compulsory savings still exists—participation is based

on social relationships and one's reputation. Access to a meeting turn hinges on one's standing as a person. In the office setting, where many meeting turns are operated, the notion of trust and social standing is replaced by the fact that participants are in proximity to each other on a daily basis and that their paydays occur at the same time. Still, compulsory savings allow people to utilize the benefits associated with participation in meeting turn as opposed to formal banking operations. In fact, for some it is because of the meeting turn that they are actually able to participate in formal banking systems, thus bridging the gap between the horizontal (reputation) and vertical (respect) economic systems that exist in the Caribbean (Wilson 1969, 1973).

People use meeting turn money as a means of gaining access to the formal vertical economic system. They use it for budget planning by choosing to get their turn at specific times, such as at the beginning of school year, to purchase uniforms and books or pay school fees, when their annual car insurance is due, and at Christmas, to upgrade their homes for the holiday season or for presents.

Because informal savings and credit institution can provide better access to money than formal banking institutions, people turn to them rather than the formal institutions in times of social and economic crises. The reason lies in the premise of the motto, "all for one, and one for all." In rural communities, a meeting turn has the flexibility where small amounts of money can be saved and turned into amounts deemed to be appropriate for placing in formal banking institutions. In Bath, a meeting turn run for over 60 years has participants contribute or throw \$10 a week, resulting in a \$520 turn once every year. One member explained why she did not place the \$10 a week in a bank and receive interest on the money. By the time she had reached the bank and returned home she would have spent \$3 for the round trip bus fare and an hour each way to place a small amount of money in the bank. When it is her "turn" or "hand," she can take the \$520 and put it in the bank.

### *Meeting Turn as Identity*

Two examples from Bath highlight the relationship between identity and meeting turn. One man said, "meeting turn is who we are and where we come from and there aren't many on this island that can say they haven't been touched by meeting turn money. For most of us it's how we were able to go to school." His perspective on the role of meeting turn in people's lives, sometimes without them even knowing it until they grow older, goes to the issue of Barbadian identity. Meeting turn is so embedded and central in Barbadian culture that many say it is an essential part of who they are as a people and a reason for their successes. They say it is a means of assuring self reliance and self sufficiency as they become old.

One of the most affluent men in the community was expected to use only the formal banking institutions. But he was involved in both urban (Bridgetown) and rural (Bath) meeting turns. In the city he participated in one that was run at his office (\$1,000 throw per month) and in Bath he was involved with one run by his mother (\$20 throw per month). He explained his participation in two very different meeting turns by noting that the turn from his office was used for big bills, large purchases, or placed in the credit

union. He participated in the Bath meeting turn not to pay bills but because it was run by his mother; as a boy it had paid his school fees and supplies, and ensured having shoes and a uniform for school. He said, "It is important you remember where you come from and you remember the ones who got you there. Doing this meeting turn in Bath keeps us all together." His Bath participation strengthens his and his mother's social standing in the community, and allows her to be able to call on others for help when he is not around. Having run a successful meeting turn for over 50 years also adds to her social standing in Bath.

One Bath woman provides an example of how meeting turn participation creates self reliance. When she was interviewed in 2000 she had a pile of sand, a pile of bricks, and concrete reinforcing rods near her front porch. She stated that these items represented different turns, each bought with a single hand. Her next turn would be to hire a contractor to build an addition to the side of her house. The addition was to be a little shop, where people could come and have a drink and eat some food. Her plan was to retire from her job and have a little business where she would not have to work so hard. After she retired and opened her shop, she continued running the meeting turn and declared that she would run it until it became time for her daughter to take it over, as her mother did before her.

#### *Meeting Turn as Resilience*

Meeting turn also acts as a safety net for unplanned events, such as an illness or the passing of a family member. The study documented many examples of people switching their turn because of a need to pay a bill or have access to a doctor. One woman stated that her ability to switch turns to meet an emergency is an important reason to be involved in a meeting turn; loans from formal institutions are not always available for immediate emergencies. The social bond that exists with the meeting turn participants, especially in rural communities, makes members more apt to switch places in order to assist a friend or neighbor in a time of need or crisis.

Meeting turn money is important in creating economic stability for an individual or family (and potentially the community) through micro-entrepreneurial activities. For example, when a retired Bath man and his wife were interviewed about their participation in meeting turn, each stated that the money collected was to be used for specific endeavors, unless something unforeseen were to occur. The man used his money to buy stock animals and chickens while his wife used her money to purchase an additional refrigerator to hold refreshments and cakes for sale to local residents. The man's animals provide the family with eggs and meat to eat and sell. His wife's trade is a way to "turn a penny," meaning she uses the small profit from the sale of refreshments and cakes to reinvest into her business.

These small-scale income generating activities may seem insignificant in terms of macroeconomic assessments, but they are important when most members of society turn a penny. As a constant society-wide behavior, turning a penny can create greater economic stability at the individual, family, and society levels (Tax 1963). When visited in

2009 the little rum shop was completed, fully operational, and a second story was being built piece by piece on top.

#### ASU IN THE BAHAMAS

The ancestors of the people who currently live in settlements in the Exuma Islands and Cays in central Bahamas arrived at the end of the American Revolution in 1785 and were English colonists who remained loyal to the king. Most received land from the Crown and took up residence in the Bahamas. Some loyalists received new slaves from the English government, while others brought slaves who had worked on plantations in the American colonies. About 1,600 white slave owners and 6,000 African slaves moved to the Bahamas to occupy more than 100,000 acres of “new land” (Craton 1987:92). With the best land already inhabited, these loyalists tended to be relocated to the most isolated and unoccupied portions of the Bahamas, like the Exumas.

Once relocated, the slaves and small plantation owners began to clear land and build a viable corporation. Their small plantations tended to be occupied by both owners and slaves who interacted with one another on a daily basis in an effort to carve out a way of life in an isolated place. Within ten years, most plantations had failed because of little rain, poor soil, and economic reasons. After the mixed hardwood forests were cleared and sold for whatever could be gained, cotton was planted as the major loyalist commercial crop. This crop is hard on the land, and strong storms stripped the soil from the fields and carried it out to sea. These severe storms led to the slave subsistence crisis in the English West Indies, adding more hardship for the struggling loyalists and their slaves (Sheridan 1976:625–27). Without soil the land was worthless as commercial property and the slaves were increasingly left to support themselves with small garden plots, wild plant collecting, hunting, and shallow water fishing. The plantations were always economically marginal because they produced for distant and poorly connected markets, and because they were Crown lands. The Crown maintained that the loyalists’ conditional tenures depended on the development of the land. After a decade, most loyalist plantations failed to meet development expectations and the land reverted back to Crown ownership. Due to regulations against moving slaves from colony to colony and because of the economic failure of the plantation system in general, most land improvements were abandoned by 1800 (Craton 1987).

Each failed plantation then was occupied by the former slaves as a community, who came to own the land through usufruct. Such customary land holdings are called generational land or family land throughout the Caribbean (Barrow 1992; Besson 1987). The ex-slaves, as individuals and as a corporate community, took the name of their plantation. This remains a recognized mark of ownership of plantation lands for individuals and settlements.

With no food being imported from the outside to support the former slaves, attention must have turned to the most accessible ecozones, like the forests and the littoral (Stoffle and Stoffle 2007). With forests cut down, emphasis was placed on the littoral, which provided animal protein, materials for building homes, and plants for medicine. Were

it not for the resources of the littoral and systems for building communities with symmetrical exchanges, most former slaves would have died soon after abandonment.

### *Asu*

After plantation failures, former slaves struggling on their own pooled resources with other freed slaves to form sustained cooperative communities. The need to work together was presented by their abandonment by the former planter, but these were people from different cultural backgrounds. Could *asu* have been a recognized and respected system that not only provided the needed accumulation of materials, but also once operating, the needed sense of mutual dependence and trust required to make a community? These former slaves quickly formed stable, resilient, and corporate communities that have persisted for more than 220 years (Stoffle and Minnis 2007).

After the English abolished the slave trade in 1803, African people who had been released from ships transporting them for sale were placed in the Caribbean, primarily in the Bahamas (Craton 1987). They had the freedom and the numbers to make ethnically based communities, and Adderley (2006) is able to tie specific African people to communities in the Bahamas. In the Bahamas today, people from these communities continue to identify with specific African cultural activities. *Asu*, one of these African cultural activities, was brought to these communities, where it would adapt and thrive.

Interviews documented the arrival of *asu* in one Exumian community. It is impossible to know whether this case can be extrapolated elsewhere in the Bahamas but it does tie the application of *asu* to the movement into a cash economy. The village of Barraterre (located on a small cay called Barataria) is isolated from the main Exuma Island by mud flats and two deep and fast moving tidal cuts. During an interview with a man in his late 50s, he pointed to a Bahamian dollar, looked at a pre-teen behind the counter of the rum shop and said, "When I was his age I never saw this." He explained that almost no money circulated in Barraterre before the government built the causeway to the main island 20 years earlier. Until that time people sailed small fishing boats north to the Nassau markets, catching fish along the way and keeping them in live tanks in the middle of the boat. Once in Nassau, they used the cash from the sale of fish to purchase things. Generally, all earned cash was spent and so cash was not available back home for exchanges, which tended to involve barter or symmetrical exchanges. Once the causeway was made, people could walk or ride to wage labor jobs on the main island. They would return with small amounts of cash, which began to be invested in *asu* groups. As mentioned by one local, "Most of us now belong to *asu* groups like exist elsewhere in the Bahamas."

Interviews indicate a widespread use of rotating credit association in the Exumas and among people in Nassau. A few quotes and paraphrases are provided to illustrate the cultural centrality of this practice. A woman in her mid-twenties from Nassau described her experiences with *asu* as follows:

I remember my first *asu* experience. I was in Grade 11 and all the prefects got together from my class and we discussed how our *asu* was going to be run and who was going to handle the money. Well we elected someone to head the *asu* and we decided collectively to give one dollar with someone receiving a draw

every week. We then discussed it with the rest of the students in the class to get feedback on who was going to participate. When we had sufficient people we all decided who was going to get which draw. I do plan on joining an asu group when I start teaching, so that I can build my house. I want to attempt the asu system to finance my house, wedding, car, or whatever else. Also, it will prevent me from going through the bank to acquire these things.

A woman in her mid-forties from Williams Town is an active participant in an asu group, which is one of the largest and longest lasting on the island of Little Exuma. She described the group as being composed of only people she knows and trusts. Through these relationships, she was able to collect and save enough money to build her home and a small open-air restaurant and bar in Williams Town. Even though the process of saving enough money for the construction took over two years, she believes that asu is the best savings plan a person can engage in, and in the end a person is debt free.

#### *Asu as Identity*

People who know and use asu normally refer to it as “who we are.” The system and its use has become one of the pieces of the perceived African past that people bring forward to describe with pride their post-colonial identity.

#### *Asu as Resilience*

Being able to withstand natural and social trials is a key for personal and community resilience. Some quotes emphasize the important role of rotating credit associations in personal relationships, while others value their role in preparing for the unanticipated changes of life. A 55-year-old man who went to Nassau to do contracting work fell on hard times and discovered that his girl friend was holding out a portion of her money for security.

See, what happened, I went off the soft drug, and I goin' onto the hard drug, and I know it was a curse from the whole general public if I smokin' coke here. And it was sorta hurtin' my pocket even a little more, because sometime I chiselin' her grocery money for it, you see? I used to take her to a bank every Friday night before we go to the grocery store. I didn't know she had a savings in that bank. Well, she was saving all the time. Rent is once a month, and from the grocery she don't buy that much clothes for her children. She have X amount of money from the grocery that she could take care o' paying—throw in the asu drawer. I never see where that asu drawer made good for us, because I don't remember occasion, or celebration, or some entertainment from some asu drawer funds. She was banking it up all the while, but I never touched that asu money.

Despite his drug need, he never went into her asu drawer because he recognized it would be wrong and would end the relationship.

An 83-year-old woman stated that asu is alive and well in the Exumas and that local people attribute it to coming from Africa. She stated that people like her daughter, who attained a job at a newly opened resort, were more actively participating in asu groups. The money from these jobs is being invested in asu groups as a way of building an economic safety net to survive the potential demise of tourism.

## DISCUSSION

Two research projects conducted with different purposes and methodologies in separate Caribbean islands found that ROSCAs are similar in function, widespread in use, respected, and perceived as originating in West Africa. The studies document such organizations as symbols of local and national identities, when during the colonial period they would have been kept hidden and not discussed with outsiders.

These findings support Peter Wilson's (1973) premise that the people of the Caribbean are bicultural—one culture made by others and imposed on them, and the other culture made by themselves and used to create their own oppositional space. Whatever purposes ROSCAs served in precolonial Africa, once they arrived in the Caribbean and in the minds of African peoples they were used to thwart the power of the plantocracy as much as they usefully served their members and host communities. As such, ROSCAs, like the Caribbean-born people who carry them forward in time, are creole as well as African.

In 1966 the people of Barbados marched in parades to celebrate their independence. They carried their new national flag through Trafalgar Square past the statue of Lord Nelson. These events were conducted by African-ancestry people who were proud to be called British in a place nicknamed Little England. Thirty-five years later these African-ancestry people had erected a large statue of Bussa, the leader of a failed slave revolt, who stands with broken chains dangling from his wrists (Craton 1982). People now debate whether to remove the Lord Nelson statue and rename Trafalgar Square. These people, who Greenfield (1966) called English Rustics in *Black Skins*, have looked to new identifications, such as their pride in ROSCAs.

According to Johnson (2000), the Bahamian government in 1973, approaching independence, conducted debates regarding the establishment of an official new collective self-image. There was agreement that the new identity had three foundations: a sense of place, a sense of history, and a heightened awareness of African origins of the nation's black majority. While the discussion included some of the more dramatic aspects of African ancestry, like the popular Junkanoo winter festival and Obeah religious practices, the people interviewed in this study believe that the less dramatic but nonetheless persistently useful ROSCAs are key elements of the new identity.

Meeting turn and *asu* have not only survived into the twenty-first century, they have thrived in the face of competition with colonial banking institutions and social changes that have weakened stable rural settlements and urban neighborhoods. The efficacy and longevity of ROSCAs rest on their combination of cultural and economic rewards (Purcell 1998:267). Instead of becoming outdated, *asu* groups in the Bahamas continue to be popular because they are useful and because they are not colonial banks. In the late 1990s, Barbados meeting turns came under attack from banking institutions, which wanted the money destined for ROSCAs to be placed in the formal economy. This attack took the form of free credit cards being issued by local banks. Initially the banks only let out a small number of credit cards and only to the most financially qualified people. About a year later the banks flooded the population (about a quarter-million people) with more than 50,000 credit cards. Interviews with banking leaders revealed that they

believed this venture into the formal banking system would benefit new members, when in reality it was much more likely that the credit card failures would not only disrupt the meeting turn but also the stability created by the micro-entrepreneurial investment derived from participation. The cards could and would be reissued, but the social and economic standing of participants might be severely affected. Even if this is the case, there is little doubt that meeting turn will continue, resisting the pressures of modern economic systems, while maintaining its social and economic usefulness to individuals and communities.

## NOTE

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