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CONGREGATIONALISM AND AFRO-GUIANESE AUTONOMY

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Prepared for publication in Patrick Taylor (ed.),
Nation Dance: Religion, Identity and Cultural Difference in the Caribbean.

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CONGREGATIONALISM AND AFRO-GUIANESE AUTONOMY

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Prepared for publication in Patrick Taylor (ed.),
Nation Dance: Religion, Identity and Cultural Difference in the Caribbean.

Abstract:

As Afro-Guianese Congregationalists tried to negotiate some freedom within colonial Guianese society, they demonstrated the oppositional value of Congregationalism as providing an alternative vision of social order. Yet this vision had a conservative cast and suggested an adherence to a Congregationalism where the traditional verities reigned.

Congregationalism and Afro-Guianese Autonomy

When Henry Kirke – sometime attorney general of British Guiana – described the colony's Congregational ministers as obliged to "consult every sentiment and weakness of their flocks to attain their ends; jealousy, emulation, love of dress and display, [were] all appealed to, and not in vain," he was not far wrong.[1] Afro-Guianese congregations exploited the tenets of the British Guiana Congregational Union (BGCU) – its independence from government support and its willingness to allow congregations to "call" their ministers – to achieve temporal and spiritual ends. Thus, Kirke's comments describe a power imbalance, a dependence of pastors upon church members, which congregations manipulated to realize a limited degree of autonomy. As Congregationalists endeavoured to negotiate some freedom within colonial Guianese society, they demonstrated the oppositional value of Congregationalism as providing an alternative vision of social order, one where Afro-Guianese called the shots. Yet ironically, this vision had a conservative cast and suggested an adherence to a Congregationalism where the traditional verities reigned.

The mission churches had a long history in the Anglophone Caribbean. Protestant missionaries began arriving in the region in the late eighteenth century, providing first slaves and then the newly emancipated not only with spiritual guidance, but also with education and leadership roles. During the period of slavery, these churches saw the emergence of a culture of resistance: membership widened in2dividuals' horizons, and church gatherings could shroud explicitly political meetings. Jamaica's 1831 slave uprising is but one example.[2]

In British Guiana, the London Missionary Society (LMS) was the first religious organization to minister to the colony's enslaved population, posting its missionaries not far from the capital of Georgetown (or Stabroek as it was then known) in 1808 and 1809. By 1817, the LMS had four missionaries in British Guiana; following the 1823 slave rebellion in Demerara and the involvement of LMS adherents (and the suspected complicity of its ministers), the church declined in the colony. By 1824, two of its ministers had died (John Smith succumbing in prison, where he had been held following the uprising) and a third had left, leaving just one working in Berbice. The arrival of Joseph Ketley in 1828 saw something of a slow resurgence for the LMS as he attracted enslaved Afro-Guianese to the Sunday school, prayer meetings and religious classes.[3] The LMS subsequently withdrew from British Guiana, leaving the work in the "hands of the native Christians," but in the 1880s worked with local ministers to create a congregational union there.[4]

Historian Monica Schuler – in her examination of the BGCU's predecessor, the LMS, in early post-emancipation British Guiana – demonstrates church members' agency during the early post-emancipation period. She argues that congregations' willingness to exploit their "rights" under the LMS system – most notably their ability to call a minister – enabled them to compel planters, who were desirous of securing a stable plantation labourer force, to provide schools and chapels. Indeed, even during the period of slavery, Afro-Guianese exercised a measure of control in

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[1] Henry Kirke, *Twenty-five years in British Guiana* (Westport: Negro Universities Press, 1970) 42.

[2] Woodville K. Marshall, "'We be wise to many more tings': Blacks' Hopes and Expectations of Emancipation," *Social and Economic Studies* 17 (1968), rpt. in *Caribbean Freedom: Economy and Society from Emancipation to the Present*, eds. Hilary Beckles and Verene Shepherd (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1993) 15, 16; Mary Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries: The Disintegration of Jamaican Slave Society, 1787-1834* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982) 47, 93, 94, 143, 154.

[3] H.V.P. Bronkhurst, *Among the Hindus and Creoles of British Guiana* (London: 1888) 9; Emilia Viotti Da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 89, 114, 140; Joseph Ketley, *Historical Notices of the Congregational Church at Providence Chapel, Georgetown, Demerara, British Guiana* (London: n.d.) W. Indies-Odds-Box 3, LMS, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, LMS, SOAS.

[4] Foreman to Whitehouse, 23 August 1883, LMS Incoming letters-Br. Guiana-Demerara, Box 11 1883-1894, folder 1 1883-84, LMS, SOAS; Glasgow to Cousins, 26 July 1907, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1900-1908, Box 2, folder West Indies 1907, LMS, SOAS; encl. Thos. Glasgow to LMS and CMS Directors and the Executive Committee of the Congregational Union of England and Wales, 23 July 1907; James Rodway, *The Story of Georgetown* (Demerara: The Argosy, 1920) 105.

LMS churches, acting as deacons and teachers.5

To an extent, the attainment of this local power can be attributed to the peculiarities of Congregationalism. The origins of Congregationalism, or Independency, lay in sixteenth-century England, when a group of Puritans left the Church of England and its hierarchical form of church governance to found independent congregations which emphasized their right to choose their ministers and deacons. Congregationalism constituted the core of the London Missionary Society. The LMS was established in the late eighteenth century and, though intending to be interdenominational, was primarily Congregational.6

From such a position, Afro-Guianese Congregationalists exercised a limited degree of autonomy and articulated an alternative social vision. Throughout their intertwined history, the LMS and Congregationalism contained oppositional possibilities, both culturally and politically. In part, this opposition was subtle, lurking in the dissonance implicit in the simultaneous acceptance of African and Christian belief systems. Historian Brian Moore argues that although by the 1830s most Afro-Guianese were enthusiastic Christians, recipients of "Euro-Christian values," their retention and adaptation of aspects of African religious practices permitted a measure of opposition.[7] Schuler also posits a complex and dynamic relationship between Christianity and African religious beliefs in British Guiana. She maintains that African LMS converts in British Guiana outnumbered creole members and that these individuals – who helped found LMS congregations in the colony – probably saw Congregationalism as "a vehicle of social regeneration," aided as they were by the "temporal orientation of African and African diaspora religions and their tendency to adopt new ideas and symbols during periods of change." Thus, missionary demands that new converts relinquish traditional beliefs may have been accepted by African converts willing to abandon, for example, "the pursuit of private interest [Obeah] ... in favour of a renewal of the public sector."[8]

The relationship between African beliefs and Congregationalism is ambiguous for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The number of Congregationalists in the colony was not specified in the census returns until 1931 and even then it is not possible to relate birth place to religion. Africans constituted a tiny group which was diminishing by the turn of the century (the last Africans having arrived in the colony in the 1860s and considered elderly by the early 1890s), and the proportion of them belonging to the BGCU (itself not excessively numerous, totalling 4,996 members in 1901) in the later post-emancipation period is uncertain. Whether African cultural patterns continued to influence Congregationalism or popular responses to it in the absence of new African immigration is difficult to establish.[9]

Congregationalism's opposition can be seen more obviously in the self-conscious public statements of its ministers who vocally opposed the status quo. Some Congregationalist pastors

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5 See Da Costa; also see Monica Schuler, "Plantation Labourers, The London Missionary Society," *Journal of Caribbean History* 22.1-2 (1988) 94, 91, 93, 95.

6 Dale Bisnauth, *History of Religions in the Caribbean* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1996) 120, 121.

7 Brian Moore, *Cultural Power, Resistance and Pluralism: Colonial Guyana, 1838-1900* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995) 125, 137, 138, 142, 153.

8 Schuler 89, 91.

9 See L. Crookall, ed., *Manual of the Congregational Union for 1894* (New Amsterdam: 1894); L. Crookall, ed., *Manual of the Congregational Union for 1895* (New Amsterdam: 1895); *Congregational Union of British Guiana. Part I. Proceedings of the Annual Assembly, Summary of Reports, &c., &c. (1916)* (Georgetown: The Daily Chronicle, 1916); *Congregational Union of British Guiana. Part I. Proceedings of the Annual Assembly, Summary of Reports, &c., &c. (1917)* (Georgetown: The Daily Chronicle, 1917); *Manual of the Congregational Union of British Guiana. The Report of the Thirty-Fourth Annual Assembly. 1918* (n.p., 1918), West Indies Odds Box 3, LMS, SOAS; British Guiana Statistics 1901, LMS Reports West Indies Box 1 1866-1901, LMS, SOAS; see also the census reports for 1891, 1911, 1921, and 1931.

testified before government inquiries on behalf of popular concerns; others attended such gatherings as the 1905 public meeting held to inaugurate the People's Association – a loose collection of individuals fired by opposition to the colonial government and advocating, among other objects, an extension of the franchise and a reduction of the property qualification for a seat in government. Individual ministers publically condemned policies they perceived as harmful to the Afro-Guianese labouring population.[10] Thus, Joseph Ketley decried state-supported immigration of indentured East Indians, regarding it as "a scheme for reducing wages," and H.R. Shirley called for British Guiana's labourers to organize a trade union to protect their interests. Shirley took his advocacy a step further, founding and editing the *People*, a small newspaper that articulated popular positions.[11] Perhaps the nature of its ministry – targetting largely poor Afro-Guianese – made Congregationalist ministers sensitive to the problems of British Guiana's labouring population, encouraging them to articulate opposition to the status quo and to support the colony's workers.

Congregationalism's oppositional possibilities, though, can also be seen in the actions of church members themselves as they manipulated their membership to confront the systems oppressing them: in 1823, slaves "appropriated the missionaries' language and symbols," using church affiliation to facilitate participation in the 1823 Demerara slave uprising, and somewhat later, apprentices manipulated LMS principles.[12] This willingness to turn a system against itself is addressed by Richard Burton in *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition, and Play in the Caribbean*. He contrasts opposition to resistance, arguing (courtesy of Michel de Certeau) that opposition, unlike resistance, emerges from the interstices within a system and manipulates "the means and materials the system offers to outwit and subvert it." Yet, Burton maintains, this kind of opposition tends to replicate the system it counters, suggesting its inherent conservatism.[13]

In the later post-emancipation period, Afro-Guianese Congregationalists manipulated the principles of the church for their own purposes, attempting to secure spiritual and social ends, and in the process articulated an alternative to the dominant order. Yet, as Burton suggests, this opposition contained a conservative element, one which seemed to uphold elite ideological structures.

The very composition of Congregationalism contained the possibility of social opposition. Congregationalism allowed for a counter social vision which saw, in the face of white European hegemony, a black African suzerainty. Thus, in contrast to a white, European power structure, Congregationalism provided more employment and social opportunities for Afro-Guianese than did the colony's other denominations. Walter Rodney argues that the BGCU led the colony in appointing "Native Pastors," and indeed a difference can be seen with both the Methodist and the Presbyterian churches in British Guiana; in 1883, the BGCU had four Afro-Guianese pastors of a total of ten and by 1911, six of seven. The Union encouraged this

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[10] See, for example, Walter Rodney, *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981) 171 and MCC, *Report of the Commission Appointed to Enquire into and Report upon the General and Infantile Mortality; Together with Minutes of the Sittings, Evidence of Witnesses, Etc. (No. 334, 1906)* (Georgetown: The Argosy, 1906), CSL.

[11] *DC*, 4 April 1905, 4; *The Creole*, 19 May 1906, 5; C.O. 111/522, Confidential 39787, 16 November 1900; qtd. in Rodney, 171; see also, for example, Rodway 95, 103; see also Wilson to Thompson, 19 February 1911, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1909-1923, Box 3, folder West Indies 1911, SOAS; encl. *DC*; see also Shirley to Cousins, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1900-1908, Box 2, folder West Indies 1900, LMS, SOAS.; encl. Shirley to the editor, "A Plea from British Guiana"; Wilson to Cousins, 23 March 1903, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1900-1908, Box 2, folder West Indies 1903, LMS, 5, SOAS.

[12] See Da Costa vii, 78; see also Schuler.

[13] Richard Burton, *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition, and Play in the Caribbean* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997) 50, 51, 8.

development, frequently educating its future Afro-Guianese ministers, both in British Guiana and abroad.[14]

Yet the very openness of Congregationalism could be manipulated by its members. Ambitious Afro-Guianese men could acquire a foreign education and a position of some respect and stature in British Guiana. Though such training was ideally directed towards producing ministers for the colony, young Afro-Guianese men at times exploited it to secure personal goals. Thus, some young men seized the opportunity of church-supported education in the United States to remain there, much to the dismay of Guianese Congregationalist officials and the congregations themselves.[15] In 1877, Congregationalist minister John London took advantage of a visit to England to begin medical studies. Despite some resistance from the BGCU, London got his way; he became a medical doctor and ultimately one of the leading Congregationalist ministers in British Guiana.[16]

Congregationalism also offered opportunity for other Afro-Guianese adherents. This may have been due, in part, to the small number of ministers in the BGCU. In 1895, for example, the Union had only eight pastors ministering to 15 main churches and 29 mission stations, with the likely result that church members were responsible for much of the work. In each of three years at the end of the 1910s (1916, 1917, and 1918), the 45 churches and outstations had a total of over 100 catechists and lay ministers.[17] Church members led Bible classes, and deacons partly administered their churches, assisting ministers with financial and religious operations.[18]

Deacons could manipulate their positions to amass a certain amount of local power. A Misson Chapel deacon, Mr. Pitt, was described as having gathered too much power into his hands and as having the other deacons under his influence. The BGCU treasurer felt pressed to respond by placing four "intelligent active" men on the finance committee "as a sort of counter balance" to Pitt and was pleased when two of them became deacons.[19] Yet power, though limited, could result in conflicts between minister and deacons as each tried to preserve their bailiwick. Ministers who tried to have catechists or deacons removed or disciplined could face "serious opposition" as did those who tried to deny the deacons their traditional role. When Hopetown Chapel's Congregationalist minister Rev. Issacs – who had been "almost at open strife" with his deacons – sent his son, a religious student, to

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[14] Minutes of District Committee, 27 February 1883; Foreman to Whitehouse, 23 August 1883, LMS Incoming letters-British Guiana-Demerara, Box 11 1883-1894, folder 1 1883-84, LMS, SOAS; Wilson to Currie Martin, 6 February 1911, 2nd letter, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1888-1899, Box 1, folder Demerara A.W. Wilson 1903/06/09/09-10/10/13/14/15, 26 LMS; Rodney 114; see also British Guiana Report 1901, 40, 53; Wilson to Cousins, 20 November 1888, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1888-1899, Box 1, folder 1895-99, LMS, SOAS.

[15] Wilson to Thompson, 4 June 1913, LMS Incoming letters--West Indies (with British Guiana) 1909-1923, Box 3, folder West Indies 1913, LMS, 5, SOAS; *DC*, 13 June 1922, 5.

[16] *DC*, 13 June 1922, 5; Mullent to Foreman, 28 September 1877, LMS Outgoing letters-W. Indies 1 April 1876-16 November 1887, Box 9 LMS, SOAS; see also British Guiana Report 1901, LMS Reports West Indies Box 1 1866-1901, LMS, 17, SOAS.

[17] Crookall, *Manual (1895)* 30; see also Crookall, *Manual (1894)*; British Guiana Statistics 1901, LMS Reports West Indies Box 1 1866-1901, LMS, SOAS; *Congregational Union of British Guiana. Part I. Proceedings of the Annual Assembly, Summary of Reports, &c., &c. (1916)*; *(1917)*; *Manual of the Congregational Union of British Guiana. The Report of the Thirty-Fourth Annual Assembly. 1918* (n.p., 1918), West Indies Odds Box 3, LMS, SOAS.

[18] See, for example, Weeks to Lenwood, 19 March 1915, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1909-1923, Box 3, folder West Indies 1915, 2, LMS, SOAS; Foreman to Thompson, 4 June 1884; Ketley to Whitehouse, 23 April 1884, LMS Incoming letters-British Guiana-Demerara, Box 11 1883-1894, folder 1 1883-84, LMS, SOAS; encl. questionaires; Wilson to Cousins, 14 August 1901, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1900-1908, Box 2, folder West Indies 1901, LMS, 3, SOAS.

[19] Foreman to Thompson, 1 February 1887, LMS Incoming letters-Br. Guiana-Demerara, Box 11 1883-1894, folder 2 1884-87, 1893-4, LMS, SOAS.

preach in his place, some of the deacons objected.[20] The deacons at the Canal II chapel, having been without a settled minister for some 50 years, were upset by the arrival of a new minister, Rev. J.T. Issacs. The deacons had always managed the church's finances and paid the pastor a salary but had never kept books, leading one observer to suspect they "found a salary for themselves." Issacs' attempt to rationalize their financial practices was resented by the deacons. Other disagreements followed, and finally, Issacs had to leave.[21]

Yet Congregationalism provided more than temporal opportunities for ambitious individuals. Its ministers and buildings served a social and spiritual purpose. Churches were important recreational places; the frequent cake walks, pink teas, concerts, "excursions [and] ice-cream banquets" and the like originated as fundraising strategies but doubtless also functioned as significant social occasions. In a "cake walk," for example, individuals gathered in their best clothes could win a cake.[22]

Ministers constituted a key component of Congregationalist churches' spiritual and social life. They gave communion, doled out advice, comforted sick members and buried the dead. Pastors had other important and recognized functions. Good ministers facilitated fundraising – money that could be used for the church and its members – and large congregations – which ensured state aid for the church school. Ministers and their wives ran the church schools and organized Bible classes for adults and young people.[23] Indeed, Congregationalist minister Rev. Woods argued that the "parson" was a central figure to the people, consulted on every matter. A mother brought her almost grown son to see Rev. Woods, to have the parson speak to him "severely" as he had become "a bit of a scapegrace" lately; estranged wives and husbands regularly applied to have the parson settle their disputes.[24]

Though such minister-produced accounts are no doubt self-serving, they suggest Congregationalism's popular significance on both religious and social grounds. When some members of Berbice's Lonsdale church expressed dissatisfaction with the Union ministers and the intention to call another, these individuals were articulating their assessment of the key duties ministers performed. The complaints largely centred on the irregular provision of communion. The congregation had not received communion from a Congregational minister for six months, and though it had asked a Presbyterian minister to administer communion, this state of affairs was unsatisfactory as he could not come once a month. The congregation seemed to want more than the regular dispension of communion; it wanted a minister who could visit when the congregation wanted him. Rev. T.B. Glasgow, the minister in charge of Lonsdale, was, according to the congregation, "80 miles distant" and had eight churches in his care. The congregation maintained it was "impossible for any minister living so far away from his members to do any good to them [as h]e [could not] visit them when sick and [could not] bury them when dead." The congregation thus called a nearby minister, Rev. Frank, as its pastor.[25]

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[20] Algernon to Thompson 26 September 1913, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1909-1923, Box 3, folder West Indies 1913, LMS, 1, SOAS; Foreman to Whitehouse, 23 April 1884, LMS Incoming letters-Br. Guiana-Demerara, Box 11 1883-1894, folder 1 1883-84, LMS, SOAS.

[21] Wilson to Cousins, 29 March 1904, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1888-1899, Box 1, folder Demerara A.W. Wilson 1903/06/09/09-10/10/13/14/15, LMS, 4, SOAS.

[22] Kirke 43, 44; Wilson to Thompson, 30 August 1913, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1909-1923, Box 3, folder West Indies 1913, LMS, 3, 4, SOAS.

[23] See, for example, Weeks to Lenwood, 19 March 1915, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1909-1923, Box 3, folder West Indies 1915, LMS, 2, SOAS.

[24] Wood to Lenwood, 10 April 1917, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1909-1923, Box 3, folder West Indies 1917/1918, LMS, SOAS.

[25] Beaton and others (Lonsdale) to Cousins, 23 January 1909, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1909-1923, Box 3, folder West Indies 1909, LMS, SOAS.

Popular recognition of the importance of ministers and their ability to revitalize communities emerged particularly when new pastors appeared. Their arrival could energize communities and attract larger congregations and more money to individual churches. Thus, church communities responded enthusiastically to the arrival of new ministers. Even allowing for the possibility of newcomers' exaggerating the warmth of their reception, the similarity of descriptions suggests the church members were genuinely happy. The English Congregationalist minister Rev. Green was surprised at the enthusiastic public reception greeting his arrival. The church was crowded and became more so, "almost crowded out," for his inaugural sermon the following Sunday evening; "[s]eats in the aisles, gallery, stairs, and porches [were] all full." When Green arrived at his new church, he found close to 900 people present for the service and afterwards shook the hands, so he believed, of all 900 including those of an old woman who, after grabbing both his hands, fell to her knees before him from sheer joy.[26]

Congregationalism also provided a significant physical locus for Afro-Guianese spirituality. The Congregationalist system – "a standing protest against State patronage and endowment" – and the rapid decay of wooden buildings in a tropical climate placed considerable financial demands upon individual congregations to maintain and repair buildings. Alone of British Guiana's churches, Congregationalism remained aloof from government aid. Indeed, this independence was a point of pride for ministers and members of the church hierarchy alike. Prior to the late 1890s, the colonial government supported the clergy of the Church of England and the Church of Scotland, paying their salaries and providing for their accommodation. It also tendered an annual amount for the salaries of Roman Catholic and dissenting clergy. In the late 1890s, however, the colonial government initiated the slow reduction of grants to these churches and the gradual disestablishment of the Scotch and English churches, a process estimated to take some 20 years.[27]

As a consequence, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century BGCU churches were chronically penurious. Contemporaries posited a halcyon age of Guianese Congregationalism, an early period following emancipation when the churches prospered from members' donations. Some observers blamed the moral failings of the later generation of Afro-Guianese for the churches' subsequent poverty, condemning them for not working sufficiently hard.[28] However, more charitable and perhaps less biased commentators cited instead the generally poor state of British Guiana's economy. A depression in the sugar industry from the 1880s continued through the 1890s and into the first years of the twentieth century, not easing appreciably until an international agreement to end subsidies for European beet sugar was established. The consequent hard times for British Guiana's working population was no doubt reflected in their inability to dig deep. Thus, in 1885, Rev. Downer of Betervenwating blamed the sugar depression and high unemployment for his congregation's meagre donations, points repeated periodically by his colleagues.[29]

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[26] Green to Thompson, 27 March 1889; for example, see also Green to Thompson, 6 December 1887, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1888-1894, Box 1, folder 1888-1894, LMS, SOAS.

[27] Alleyne Leechman, ed., *The British Guiana Handbook 1913* (Georgetown: The Argosy, n.d.) 121, 122; Rodway 96.

[28] See Rodway 102, 103; see also, for example, Wilson to Cousins, 29 March 1904, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1888-1899, Box 1, folder Demerara A.W. Wilson 1903/06/09/09-10/10/13/14/15, LMS, SOAS; Wilson to Thompson, 25 October 1912, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1909-1923, Box 3, folder West Indies 1912, LMS, 1, 2, SOAS.

[29] Downer to Thompson, 22 July 1885, LMS Incoming letters-Br. Guiana-Demerara, Box 11 1883-1894, folder 2 1884-87, 1893-4, LMS, SOAS; see, for example, British Guiana Report 1901, LMS Reports West Indies Box 1 1866-1901, LMS, 39, SOAS.; Wilson to Thompson, 9 March 1904, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1888-1899, Box 1, folder Demerara A.W. Wilson 1903/06/09/09-

Though the BGCU received financial support from the LMS in England, primarily subsidies for salaries and building repairs, these funds were never adequate. As a result, BGCU congregations were responsible for maintaining church buildings and paying their ministers' salaries, a task to which even the poorest seemed able to rise.[30] With this responsibility came a degree of power and ownership.[31] Though most church buildings were vested in the BGCU, congregations expressed a moral right to the buildings.[32] Thus, when the congregation at Lonsdale threatened to leave the Union, it wanted to take the church buildings to which it had a right, "moral and otherwise."[33]

The significance of Congregationalism in the lives of its Afro-Guianese congregations – temporally and spiritually – saw disputes emerge as church members struggled to defend the restricted autonomy they exercised within this religious sphere. The opportunity Congregationalism provided to some individuals to amass a degree of power and prestige contributed to the passionate battles over calling ministers. The fervour with which such disagreements were articulated suggests some of the tensions existing within a colonial society where the Afro-Guianese masses had few opportunities to exercise power and where those not born to wealthy families had as few chances to advance socially. It also hints at the different visions of Congregationalism in British Guiana. Whereas some members of the church hierarchy could equivocate on the right of congregations to call their ministers, congregations were often adamant on this prerogative. The author of a 1901 report into Congregationalism in British Guiana believed that it "*ought* not to rest soley with an individual church or group of churches to call [new ministers] to the Pastorate... Congregationalism pure and simple ... does not seem ... to be the best form of church government for [the] people here."[34]

Though the process of calling a minister could vary, essentially it consisted of a dialogue between church and Union. Congregations could appeal to the Union's hierarchy to provide a minister, but they could also take matters into their own hands. Both approaches worked. Thus, following the death of Rev. Dalgliesh, minister of Mission Chapel, the deacons wanted to know what the Union was "going to do about getting a minister for [them]." With the approval of the church members and Rev. J. Foreman, the secretary and treasurer of the Guiana District Committee, the deacons wrote the BGCU appealing for a new pastor "to preside over [them] in the work of the Lord." The Union forwarded the letter, along with a resolution by the BGCU Committee approving its being sent, to the secretary of the LMS.[35] Thus, the members of

10/10/13/14/15, LMS, 1, 2, SOAS; Glasgow to Cousins, 26 July 1907, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1900-1908, Box 2, folder West Indies 1907, LMS, SOAS; encl. Glasgow to Directors.

30 See, for example, Green to Thompson, 20 February 1894, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1888-1894, Box 1, folder 1888-94, LMS, SOAS; Ketley to Whitehouse, 23 April 1884, LMS Incoming letters-Br. Guiana-Demerara, Box 11 1883-1894, folder 1 1883-84, LMS, SOAS.

31 Glasgow to Cousins, 26 July 1907, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1900-1908, Box 2, folder West Indies 1907, LMS, SOAS; encl. Glasgow to Directors of the LMS.

32 Wilson to Thompson, 5 March 1915, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1888-1899, Box 1, folder Demerara A.W. Wilson 1903/06/09/09-10/10/13/14/15, LMS, 5, SOAS; Wilson to Lenwood, 14 August 1914, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1909-1923, Box 3, folder West Indies 1914, LMS, 6, SOAS. Mary Turner makes a similar point for Jamaica during the period of slavery. She points out that Christian slaves contributed financially to their churches, helping pay for building repairs and the like and argues that the slaves' donations "meant that mission development was partly their own creation; they could identify the chapel they attended as their own." Turner 85, 86.

33 The members of Lonsdale Church to the LMS, Nov 1908, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1900-1908, Box 2, folder West Indies 1908, LMS, SOAS; H. Dow and others, Lonsdale to Cousins, 8 January 1909, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1909-1923, Box 3, folder West Indies 1909, LMS, SOAS.

34 British Guiana Report 1901, 57.

35 Foreman to Whitehouse, 23 April, 1884; see

Mission Chapel placed the search for a new minister in the hands of the Union and the LMS.

At other times, church members solicited particular individuals for the pastorship of their churches, a procedure that, although "irregular," achieved the desired results. For example, when S.B. Blean finished studying for the ministry in England, a friend wrote him about a position at Smith Church. Though the offer was transmitted in a "singular" fashion – "by a private member of the Church, and not by the Deacons themselves" or by a member of the Union's hierarchy – a meeting between Blean, the deacons, and a Union official saw a firm offer made to Blean.[36]

Within this context, the controversy around the attempts of Rev. Frank to attain his own church is illuminating. The "Frank scandal" divided congregations and pitted Union officials against one minister and his supporters and demonstrated the passion with which a minister and church members would fight for principles and livelihood, revealing in the process some of the fissures within colonial society.

When Congregationalist minister Rev. Frank returned to British Guiana after studying for the ministry in England, he was ready to lead a church. However, the decision of the BGCU that he be employed as a reserve pastor for ministerless churches offended Frank who wanted a church of his own. Though two members of New Amsterdam's Mission Chapel requested that Frank be allowed to act as pastor for this church while its minister – Union secretary Rev. Glasgow – was absent, Glasgow refused permission. Frank's determination to confront the Union hierarchy, the willingness of church members to "call" him, and the adamant opposition of the BGCU suggest the importance of religion in the lives of Afro-Guianese as an area to exercise a degree of autonomy.

Frank disregarded the rejection and began a young people's improvement society at Mission Chapel. The Union responded by having its chairman write Frank a "strong letter"; in turn, Frank made the dispute public by giving the letter – he described it as "most unchristian" – to a Berbice newspaper and permitting himself to be interviewed by the colony's main newspapers (which consequently became the media for a "violent and vulgar attack" upon several Union officials). When the Union's executive eventually banned Frank from preaching in its churches, he ignored the prohibition, continuing to preach in several Congregationalist churches, sometimes at the invitation of other Congregationalist ministers or congregations themselves. Eventually, Frank began a new denomination, "In defence of Congregationalism."[37]

The "Frank scandal" emerged out of a clash between three parties: the BGCU, the Rev. Frank, and individual congregations. Union officials tended to emphasize Frank's machinations and to assume he was manipulating those churches which supported him. To one minister, Rev. Wilson, Frank's actions were part of a long-standing plan to "smash the union" and manipulate the vacancy at Mission Chapel to Frank's advantage.[38] Yet church members were clearly equal participants. The members of New

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also Foreman to Thompson, 4 June, 1884; see also Deacons of Mission Church, New Amsterdam to the BGCU, 18 May 1884, LMS Incoming letters-British Guiana-Demerara, Box 11 1883-1894, folder 1 1883-84, LMS, SOAS.

[36] Foreman to Thompson, 23 July, 1885; see also Foreman to Thompson, 15 September 1885; Wilson to Lenwood, 5 March, 1915, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1888-1899, Box 1, folder Demerara A.W. Wilson 1903/06/09/09-10/10/13/14/15, LMS, 5, 6, SOAS; for a similar situation at New Amsterdam's Misson Church, see Foreman to Thompson, 25 November 1885; Foreman to Thompson, 1 Feb 1886, LMS Incoming letters-British Guiana-Demerara, Box 11 1883-1894, folder 2 1884-87, 1893-4, LMS, SOAS.

[37] Frank to Cousins, 8 January 1909, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1909-1923, Box 3, folder West Indies 1909, LMS, 2, SOAS; London to Cousins, 29 May 1908, 7, 8, 9, 10; Wilson to Cousins, 10 July 1908, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1900-1908, Box 2, folder West Indies 1908 LMS, 2, SOAS.

[38] Wilson to Cousins, 31 October 1908; Wilson to Cousins, 1 June 1908, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1900-1908, Box 2, folder West Indies 1908 LMS, 9, 10, 11, 12, SOAS.

Amsterdam's Mission Church criticized the Union's handling of the entire affair and defended their right to chose their own minister. They objected to the Union's decision to appoint Glasgow temporary minister of their church instead of Frank, rejecting Glasgow's position that "the people had no right to call an acting minister." They pointed out that "according to Congregational principles every church ha[d] the right of calling its own minister."[39]

The members of Berbice's Lonsdale Chapel expressed a similar independence and a willingness to exercise what autonomy they possessed. They asked Glasgow, their acting minister, to preach one weekend when he was in New Amsterdam. They responded to his refusal – he had pleaded a previous commitment to preach elsewhere that day – by declaring their intention to make their own arrangements; they invited Frank to preach to them. A division within Lonsdale soon developed. A majority called Frank to be the church's minister – he accepted – but a minority refused to have anything to do with the scheme, opting for Glasgow. The members of other Congregational churches seemed to have done much the same. Their actions, and that of the Lonsdale congregation, made the BGCU determined to decide matters; it applied to the colony's Supreme Court for an injunction to prevent Frank from preaching in any church building vested in the Union.[40] The members of Lonsdale chapel regarded the Union's actions as an attempt to take away their right to call their own minister "according to Congregational principle." As a result, the members began to consider leaving the BGCU.[41]

Though the Frank scandal demonstrates the opposition that limited religious autonomy allowed, it also reveals a vein of popular conservatism, a willingness to accept or to appear to accept the status quo. Union officials, Frank and congregations appealed to British practice and principle as their ultimate defence. Union officials condemned the reluctance of individual ministers and congregations to be controlled, a response seemingly informed by a racialism that denigrated Afro-Guianese. During a time when individuals of African descent were moving into the professions and entering the government, beginning to exercise a more prominent leadership role in the colony as a whole, Rev. Wilson, for one, represented the Frank affair as demonstrating the "risks" of Afro-Guianese "rule." He adduced the dispute as evidence that salvation for Congregationalism lay outside British Guiana, with English men and financing. Native churches, he believed, were unfit for responsibility and the people "innately" quarrelsome and "divisive by nature." Though Congregationalism suited "English people of a certain class," it did not suit the Guianese.[42] The Union "would be all the better in every respect if [it] had a few Englishmen in the Union."[43] Though his rhetoric was extreme, Wilson was not the only BGCU minister to believe a Briton alone could solve local problems. Other Union officials did not waver in their determination to acquire a British minister, even a temporary one, to look

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[39] Drainer and others to Thompson, 16 October 1908, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1900-1908, Box 2, folder West Indies 1908 LMS, 1, 3, 4, SOAS.

[40] London to Cousins, 17 October 1908; Wilson to Cousins, 31 October 1908; encl. newspaper clipping "Congregationalism in the Law Courts"; see also Glasgow to Cousins, 11 November 1908, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1900-1908, Box 2, folder West Indies 1908, LMS, 1, SOAS.

[41] The members of Lonsdale Church to the LMS, Nov 1908, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1900-1908, Box 2, folder West Indies 1908, LMS, SOAS; H. Dow and others, Lonsdale to Cousins, 8 January 1909, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1909-1923, Box 3, folder West Indies 1909, LMS, SOAS.

[42] Wilson to Cousins, 1 June 1908, 14; Wilson to Cousins, 2 October 1908, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1900-1908, Box 2, folder West Indies 1908 LMS, 2, 3, SOAS; Wilson to Cousins, 9 January 1909, 5, 6; see also Wilson to Thompson, 3 September 1909, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1909-1923, Box 3, folder West Indies 1909 LMS, 2, SOAS.

[43] Wilson to Cousins, 23 March 1903, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1900-1908, Box 2, folder West Indies 1903, LMS, 3, SOAS.

after the churches in crisis. The offer of the LMS to mediate the dispute was thus accepted on condition it send to British Guiana a minister to act as a "special commissioner" as well as acting pastor of Mission Chapel and "superintendiary minister" of the vacant Berbice churches.[44]

Ironically, Frank, though not echoing such sentiments, also articulated a belief in "English" values. He defended his right to have his own church on the basis of his training and Congregationalist principles. He was, he argued, a fully trained minister, not a "catechist" or a "local preacher," and he wondered why he should be "denied the rights exercised by other ministers who [had] had an English training." Frank argued not only for himself – for his right to have his own church – but also for the right of the members of Congregational churches to call their own ministers which, he argued, "all Congregational churches claim[ed]."[45] Indeed, he believed that the letter written him by Rev. Glasgow would not have been written by an "English minister."[46] Church members expressed their concerns in similar language. The Mission Chapel deacons wanted a relationship such as obtained in Congregational churches in England where the churches did as they thought fit and the Union had no power over them.[47] (However, the sincerity of such statements is uncertain, and perhaps they represented a further attempt to manipulate members of the LMS and BGCU hierarchy.)

Congregationalism in British Guiana provided a site for poor Afro-Guianese to exercise a degree of local autonomy and constituted opposition to the status quo. Church members demonstrated a willingness to exploit the limited power they possessed in an attempt to control religious space in British Guiana. Yet this brief examination of LMS documents suggests the possibility for further research for scholars of colonial Guianese history. This rich material illuminates racial and class conflict in British Guiana and describes popular and elite attitudes which in turn casts light upon the struggles to control colonial Guianese society in the crucial years of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a time when an Afro-Guianese middle-class was attempting to exercise more political power and when the Afro-Guianese masses were beginning to organize as workers through trade unions and strike actions.

Abbreviations

CO	Colonial Office
CSL	Commonwealth Studies Library
DC	*Daily Chronicle*
LMS	London Missionary Society
MCC	Minutes of the Combined Court
PRO	Public Record Office
SOAS	School of Oriental and African Studies

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[44] London to Cousins, 22 January 1909, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1909-1923, Box 3, folder West Indies 1909 LMS, 1, 2, SOAS; encl. London to Cousins, Resolution of Committee, 23 January 1909.

[45] London to Cousins, 29 May 1908, 11, SOAS; see also encl. Frank to Union Executive 22/3/08; Wilson to Cousins, 10 July 1908, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1900-1908, Box 2, folder West Indies 1908 LMS, 2, SOAS.

[46] Frank to Cousins, 8 January 1909, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1909-1923, Box 3, folder West Indies 1909, LMS, 2, SOAS.

[47] Drainer and others to Thompson, 16 October 1908, LMS Incoming letters-West Indies (with British Guiana) 1900-1908, Box 2, folder West Indies 1908 LMS, 1, 3, 4, SOAS.

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