

African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

Volume 9
Issue 4 December 2006

Article 13

12-1-2006

Murder at Montpelier: Igbo Africans in Virginia

Douglas B. Chambers

Gloria Chuku
Millersville University of Pennsylvania

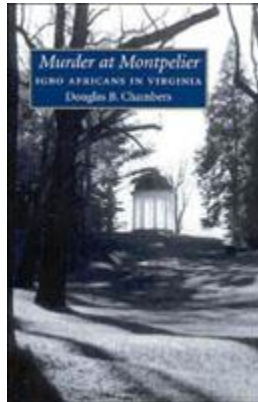
Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan>

Recommended Citation

Chambers, Douglas B. and Chuku, Gloria (2006) "Murder at Montpelier: Igbo Africans in Virginia," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 4 , Article 13.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol9/iss4/13>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

Book Review



H-NET BOOK REVIEW

Published by H-Atlantic, <http://www.h-net.org/~atlantic/> (October 2006).

Douglas B. Chambers. *Murder at Montpelier: Igbo Africans in Virginia*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005. x + 325 pp., Illustrations, maps notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 1-57806-706-5.

Reviewed for H-Atlantic by Gloria Chuku, Department of History, Millersville University of Pennsylvania.

Enslaved Igbo and the Foundation of Afro-Virginia Slave Culture and Society

Based largely on court and county documents as well as the recently published transatlantic slave database, Douglas Chambers uses the circumstances surrounding the 1732 death of Ambrose Madison, the paternal grandfather of President James Madison, to reconstruct the history of the Igbo slaves in Virginia. Thus, the book is primarily about the dominant role of enslaved Igbo in the formation of early Afro-Virginia slave culture and society. In the words of the author, it discusses "the process of historical creolization in eighteenth-century Virginia . . . [which] effectively mean[s] the Igboization of slave community and culture" in the region (p. 18). The book breaks into two parts: part 1 consists of chapters 1-4, and part 2 consists of chapters 5-10.

Three slaves, two men and a woman, were accused of causing Madison's death by poisoning. They were tried and found guilty. While one of the accused, a male slave owned by a neighboring planter, was executed for his alleged lead role, the other two, owned by Madison, were punished by whipping and returned to his estate.

As a foundation for his thesis, Chambers attempts to trace the history of the enslaved Africans from their points of embarkation in the Bight of Biafra and, more specifically, Calabar to their disembarkation in Virginia. Thus, while part 1 of the study focuses on the Igbo and their culture and society during the era of the transatlantic slave trade, part 2 centers on the experiences of the enslaved in Virginia. The author argues that the

emergence and expansion of Aro influence in Igbo region, as the foremost slave merchants, and the demise of Nri hegemony in the north-central Igbo region in the mid-eighteenth century resulted in increased exportation of Igbo people out of the Calabar and the Niger Delta ports. According to the author's calculations, the Igbo accounted for about 1.3 million of the 1.7 million people exported from the Bight of Biafra during the era of the Atlantic slave trade. Out of a total of 37,000 Africans that arrived in Virginia from Calabar in the 1700s, 30,000 were Igbo (p. 23). The significance of this pattern of slave trade between Calabar and Virginia, Chamber argues, is that the increased exportation of enslaved Igbo from their homeland to the Chesapeake region coincided with the expansion of colonial settlement from the Upper Tidewater to the fertile Central Piedmont, an era when the transatlantic trade transformed the region into a slave society that was dominated by the Igbo and their culture.

In 1721, Ambrose Madison inherited an estate at Mt. Pleasant from his father-in-law. To secure title to this estate, he purchased newly imported African slaves and sent them there to clear and cultivate crops. In early 1732, he moved to the new estate with his family. Six months later, while still in his mid-thirties, he died, allegedly as a result of poison. As the author states, while Madison's biographers and hagiographers helped to create a general impression that he died a strange death at a very young age, his family members attributed his death to a poisoning conspiracy involving two of his slaves and an outside male slave. To buttress his claim that Igbo slaves were responsible for their master's death, Chambers, in a chapter of only five pages, attempts to link the use of poison as a weapon of slave resistance to the enslaved Igbo in Virginia and the Caribbean colonies. This is very subjective, since the knowledge and use of plant medicines to heal the sick, placate the spirits and punish enemies and deviants was not the exclusive prerogative of the enslaved Igbo.

In part two of the book, which focuses on Virginia, the author delineates five phases of the creolization of Mt. Pleasant (later Montpelier), namely, the Charter generation (1720s-1730s), the Creolizing generation (1740s-1760s), the Creolized generation (1770s-1790s), the "Worrimment" generation (1800s-1820s), and the Ruination generation (1830s-1850s). The charter generation of Atlantic Africans marked the development of Mt. Pleasant as a regional slave community of the Madison family with twenty-nine slaves. It was an era when enslaved Africans employed their cultural heritage to adapt to their new environment. They not only employed their expertise in tropical agriculture to cultivate tobacco and corn, but also put into use their knowledge of herbs and plants to make preventive, curative, and poisonous medicines. Upon Madison's death, his family shared his slaves between his two quarters: the Home House and Black Level, an action which signifies a new settlement pattern.

The Creolizing generation of the Montpelier slave community saw a steady growth in the slave population, resulting largely from inheritance and births. Under the leadership of James Madison Sr., the family embarked on major construction projects that made each of their quarters resemble a small village. They also established large tobacco barns, corncrib, and a mill. Wealth generated through slave labor enabled Madison to enhance his economic and political status. For closer supervision and increased productivity, he broke

his slaves into small workforces and deployed them annually to live in different quarters in a rotating order. However, following the building of the Home House and the slave quarter, the Walnut Grove, Madison brought many of his slaves to stay at the core Montpelier community in the late 1760s.

The Creolized generation (1770s-1790s) marked the high point of Montpelier as a slave community that was centered on the Walnut Grove, with over hundred slaves in the mid-1770s (p. 129). While tobacco remained the main export crop, Madison was able to diversify his business operations to include blacksmithing, carpentry, and brandy distilling. He also added wheat and hay to his list of crops. Before he died in 1801, Madison also invested in plows, scythes, and other grain-cultivating tools which facilitated increased production and specialization by the slaves.

The "Worriment" (1800s-1820s) and "Ruination" (1830s-1850s) generations marked the death of James Madison Sr., the disputes over the division of his estates, the first substantial separations of slaves from the home community, the death of President Madison, and the final divestment of what was left of the Montpelier community. By 1860, under a new owner, the Montpelier slave population had been so drastically reduced, either through intra- and inter-state slave trade or the manumission process, that only twenty slaves were left on the estate.

As the author aptly observes, in spite of the predominant role of enslaved Africans in the development of Mt. Pleasant and their contribution to the rise of the Madison family to regional prominence, historians have tended to overlook them, focusing on Montpelier only as the family home of President Madison. A few of the blacks mentioned in the historiography of the Madisons were Sawney, Billy Gardner, Granny Milly, Paul Jennings, and Surkey. Paul Jennings, who published a small pamphlet in 1865, was a sixteen-year-old house slave at the White House in 1814, attending to the president until his death, and Sawney accompanied the young James to his college in New Jersey and served as his manservant. He also served as an overseer, cultivated yams and cabbages, and raised chickens before his death in the 1830s.

In the last chapter, the author tries to reinforce his claims that Igbo slaves killed Ambrose Madison and that their predominance in Virginia gave them the opportunity to lay the foundation of the Afro-Virginian culture and community. For this purpose, he uses the personal names of the enslaved to mark their individuality and to connect them to the Montpelier slave community and the broader history of the region. The author mentions names such as Calabar (male), Eboe Sarah (female), Juba (male,) and Breechy (male). He also uses yams (a staple food) and okra (a vegetable) as evidence of the foodways of Igbo origins, as well as *mojo* for charms, and the slave *Jonkonnu* (a Christmastime slave masquerade), all in the attempt to make a case for what he calls "creolized Igboism" in Virginia.

Chambers also associates the eighteenth-century low-fired ceramic cooking pots and eating bowls (generally called colonoware) with the enslaved Igbo. According to the author, the "description of precolonial Igbo potting technology fits quite well with what is known of

eighteenth-century Virginia colonoware . . . [and] gourds (calabashes) were another important Igbo material cultural item that continued in Virginia" (pp.172-173). Other material culture the author lists in the book, as signifying Igbo connection, are dugout canoes, styles of fences, blue glass beads, and an iron sculpture which he claims evokes the kinds of figures made from wood or clay that littered southern Igbo *mbari* art or even *ikenga* (p. 174). The author identifies musical instruments such as box drums and the *banjo* stringed instrument as uniquely Igbo. He also points to slave patterns of settlement, Igbo belief in reincarnation, the practice of not celebrating birthdays, and the nudity of enslaved children and youths as practices which resonated in Afro-Virginian culture and suggest the dominance of Igbo influence. The author draws on the extreme lactose intolerance among Virginia's black adults of the nineteenth century and the related notion that the Igbo and Yoruba were the only major African ethnic groups with a known lactose intolerance (p.186). In addition, he says that the high proportion of Igbo women in the colony might have given them disproportionate influence in the socialization of Creole children.

As a counter-thesis to that of the author, it should be noted that yam-growing was and is not peculiar to the Igbo; more importantly, North American yams are actually sweet potatoes, not the *genus Dioscorea* associated with West Africa. Similarly, the paraphernalia associated with the Christmastime slave masquerades that the author links with the Igbo were actually more related to mid-twentieth-century Kalabari masks. As for calabashes, as the author notes, these were used as gourds in Virginia; by contrast, calabashes were used as cups, bowls, and drinking ladles in Igbo society. Regarding musical instruments, while many central African peoples called their version of stringed gourd *mbanza*, there is no Igbo name for the musical instrument the author identifies as *banjo*. The author believes that most of the enslaved Igbo who came from Calabar were from the north-central Igbo region, the home to the famous Umudioka woodcarvers. I would argue that the absence of carved doors and panels in Virginia undermines the idea of a north-central Igbo provenance of Calabar slaves and a pervasive Igbo presence and culture there.

While there may be some credibility in the above claims, it is apparent that some of the cultural practices attributed to the Igbo in this study were neither unique nor exclusive to them. To start with, the Igbo were not the only enslaved Africans who originated from the Niger Delta and Calabar ports, and ended up in Virginia. There were also the Ibibio, the Efik, the Andoni, the Ubani, the Okrika, the Kalabari, and, later, the Ejagham, the Ekoi, the Idoma, the Igala, and even the Hausa and Nupe -- captives from the nineteenth-century Muslim-engineered wars. Besides, Virginia had slaves from the Yoruba, the Akan area, Mande, Fulani, Angola, the Congo basin, and Madagascar. The period covered by the book also coincided with the Islamic militancy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the Senegambia, an upheaval that resulted in the enslavement of the natives. Virginia was, in other words, a very multi-ethnic slave society. The lack of attention to other Africans in Virginia and the related neglect of their obvious contributions to the development of the region is a major weakness of this study.

It is clear that the author's interpretation and analysis was handicapped by his limited knowledge of Igbo history, culture, and language. For instance, he erroneously regards the

Nri as the "first Igbo" (pp. 36-38) and treats them as founders and leaders of the entire Igbo nation. This explains why he spends considerable time in discussing the Nri kinglist and genealogical history, which is less important for purposes of his study; the book would have benefited more if he had instead focused on the Aro, Nike, Abam, Aboh, Ngwa, Ndoki, Nkwerre, and others who participated in the transatlantic slave trade. It is also erroneous to claim that the Nri were the only people in Igbo society with the power to cleanse abominations. The author asserts that the "expansion of Aro merchant warlord settlements" (p. 35) in the mid-eighteenth century led to the growing power of client village groups within Nri area. However, no examples of such Aro-client villages in north-central Igbo region are provided.

It is misleading to suggest that there was no cassava in the region until the twentieth century and that "fufu in Igboland was invariably made of yams, not cassava" (p. 40). Cassava was introduced in different parts of Igbo region at different points in time. While some areas started cultivating and processing the crop in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, others adopted it in the twentieth century. Moreover, fufu was also made from cocoyam, unripe plantain, and banana and, later, cassava. The incident attributed to the "Nkwerre," who supposedly plundered Onitsha women traders when they brought European goods to the Nkwerre markets, and the author's interpretation and suggestion that the women were molested for usurping males' trading prerogative that violated Nkwerre taboo, are examples of his limited knowledge of Igbo society and history. The town in question was Nkwelle, which is twenty miles from Onitsha, not Nkwerre, which is much farther away. Moreover, Onitsha women were famed traders who not only bought and sold local and European goods, but also had direct commercial relations with European merchants from the moment the latter arrived in Onitsha. As studies on the development of trade and commerce in the Onitsha region show, it was not until the twentieth century that Onitsha men, who regarded trade as women's work, began to take part in trade with the European firms.

The author's claim that "Igbo people brought the term ['buckra'] into English" (p. 110), as in "buckra," a term used by slaves to refer to their white masters, is doubtful. While "buckra" might be a corruption of Ibibio *mbakara* (*mb* equals plural; *kara* equals to encircle, rule, or abuse), one cannot see the connection of this word with the Igbo. Similarly, he suggests that the slave name "Juba" was Igbo (meaning: *ji* for yam and *uba* for canoe, literally translated to mean "yam barn"), "and that Juba" could actually be translated into Igbo words for "ask /enquire," or "refuse," or "possession of wealth" (*ji-uba*), or "plentiful yam." It is more likely that "Juba" was an Akan name (as in the case of Akan female name in South Carolina and Jamaica) than Igbo name.

In spite of the drawbacks I have pointed out, and occasional typographical errors, the author has assiduously provided an African-centered perspective that helps in our understanding of the circumstances surrounding the death of Ambrose Madison in 1732 and the development of his family into a prominent regional, and indeed, national economic and political power, as well as the contributions of his slaves in achieving these feats and to the foundation and growth of slave culture and society in Virginia. The book represents a limited but significant contribution to the history and historiography of

slavery and, therefore, a valuable resource to students and scholars in the study of Africa and the diaspora.

Copyright (c) 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes.