

3-1-2009

Africa and the Americas: Interconnections during the Slave Trade

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Recommended Citation

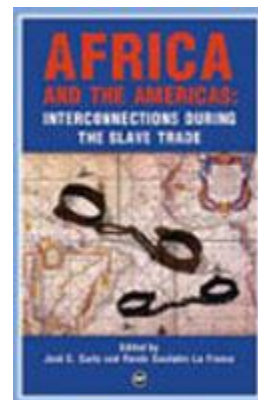
Curto, Jose C.; Soulodre-LaFrance, Renee; and Mamigonian, Beatriz G. (2009) "Africa and the Americas: Interconnections during the Slave Trade," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 31.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol12/iss1/31>

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Book Review

José C. Curto and Renée Soulodre-LaFrance. *Africa and the Americas: Interconnections during the Slave Trade*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, ISBN 1-59221-271-9 (hardcover), 1-59221-272-7 (paperback), 338 pp., 2005.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by Beatriz G. Mamigonian, Professor of History, Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (Brazil).



The collection *Africa and the Americas: Interconnections during the Slave Trade* stems from a conference held at York University in October 2000. It testifies to the fruitful dialogue among specialists of Africa and the Americas established through the efforts of Paul Lovejoy and his associates in the Nigerian Hinterland Project, now Harriet Tubman Institute for Research on the Global Migrations of African Peoples.[1]

Editors José Curto and Renée Soulodre-LaFrance introduce the collection by asserting its original contribution to the reconceptualization of Atlantic History, a field that according to them suffered from the Eurocentrism embedded in one of its most influential propositions, and from limitations in the ones that acknowledged Africa's central role in the Atlantic.[2] Unlike the one-way flow in Thornton's classic book, the editors wanted this collection to stress a multi-directional flow of people, products, and ideas, not only from Africa to the Americas, but also back to Africa. And while acknowledging Gilroy's commitment to the idea of interconnections between Africa and the Americas, they rightly stress the need to document those interconnections prior to 1850 and in the South Atlantic. The book is therefore framed to explore "the circuitous linkages between Africa and the Americas during the era of the slave trade," and aims at providing "a refreshing statement on the state of the scholarship in the field, a road map for future research, and an integrative model for studying the Atlantic world in all of its complexity and fluidity" (p. 7). The emphasis on Brazil (eight out of twelve essays) stems from the conference itself and accounts for imbalance if one claims to be dealing with the whole of Atlantic history. Despite the conceptual gap, the focus on the peculiar dynamic and unique features of the Portuguese South Atlantic strengthened the collection's demonstration of a complex approach to the theme of trans-oceanic connections. To the editors' credit, the remaining essays, while dealing with other regions of the African Diaspora in the Americas entertain a close dialogue with the central questions addressed in the collection: cultural transformations, negotiations of authority and the social nexus of spiritual or religious practices.

The first essay, an assessment of the volume of the Atlantic slave trade conducted by the major carriers (British, Portuguese, French, Dutch, Spanish, North American and Scandinavian) prepared by David Eltis, Stephen Berendt and David Richardson with the records of the Transatlantic Slave Trade Database, has been outdated since their own new

research, conducted in collaboration with Brazilian scholars has filled gaps and resulted in the fuller documentation of Portuguese voyages, particularly prior to the nineteenth century.[3] Some points should not be lost, however. It is well known that Brazil received nearly 40 percent of all Africans brought forcibly through the Atlantic during the slave trade era. Eltis, Berendt and Richardson stress that the fact that the Portuguese conducted the slave trade from Brazil resulted in shorter voyages, cheaper slaves for Brazilian plantations, and the employment of African slaves in non-export economic activities. The other feature of the Portuguese slave trade was that over time the ties between regions economically connected by the trade became also social and cultural. Such was the case for Rio de Janeiro and Angola, Bahia and the Slave Coast, and would have been the case for Rio de Janeiro and Mozambique had the slave trade lasted longer.

The presence of "Mozambique" slaves in Brazil and the political connections between Mozambique and Brazil are addressed by Edward Alpers and José Capela respectively. In both cases, the evidence exposed is significant and had remained obscured by the focus on the links between Brazil and West or West-Central Africa. A relatively late development, the slave route that brought enslaved men, women and children from East Africa to Brazil started in the late eighteenth century and flourished in the next half-century, facilitated by the reorientation of trade and administrative flows once the Portuguese capital moved to Rio de Janeiro in 1808, and by the geography of British slave trade suppression. Rejecting the often-opposed concepts of creolization and African retentions, Alpers seeks to gather evidence for a study of the cultural transformations that people from East Africa lived, from enslavement to transportation, to adaptation in the New World, that led them to identify themselves more generally as "Mozambique", "Inhambane", or "Quelimane", to remain "Macua" or "Mucena" or else to blend into the population of African descent. José Capela's discussion of the long-standing political links between Brazil and Mozambique addresses the instability of political authority at the time the Portuguese court sat in Rio de Janeiro, evokes the adaptation of liberal ideas among slave traders and administrators in Mozambique, and discusses how they envisioned breaking-up with Portugal and establishing allegiance to Brazil, seen as the only independent nation to defend the slave trade against British abolitionist policies.

Dale Graden's essay on African responses to the abolition of the Brazilian slave trade in 1850 and to early abolitionist discourse picks up the reactions to the illegal slave trade and its abolition from the other side of the Atlantic and of the social spectrum. He gathered evidence of unrest among African slaves and liberated Africans in Bahia from 1850 to 1865, aiming to prove that, by giving a hard time to masters and government officials, Africans were protagonists of the changes that took place in those years: the prohibition and repression of the illegal slave trade (1850) and the final emancipation of the liberated Africans (1864). As engaging as this argument might be, Graden does not present sufficient evidence to prove it, and misreads some of it to present instances of individual resistance, or collective forms such as Candomblé as attacks on the institution of slavery, which they clearly were not.

African agency is an underlying theme in this collection, like in most recent literature on the African Diaspora. Here, it takes the shape of different approaches to the question of

authority and hierarchy among Africans in the Americas. The essay on the organizations of urban laborers called "cantos" (corners) in nineteenth-century Bahia by João José Reis is a case in point. He discusses the extraordinary organization established by African slaves and freedmen in Salvador who handled all the transportation of goods, large and small, in the harbor city. The "cantos" that corresponded to sectors of the city were groups with an internal hierarchy and rules of conduct. Reis demonstrates that, as the century progressed, more police control bore over these organizations, and more creole individuals joined in. The existence of "cantos" constitute very significant proof of African labor organization in nineteenth-century Brazil, of the type that organized a strike that paralyzed Salvador in 1857, and helps explain the dialectic between African agency and social and racial tensions resulting in repression of African-led activities.

Hierarchy and authority within collective organizations are also addressed by Jane Landers and Elizabeth Kiddy in their essays on maroon societies in the Americas and black brotherhoods in Brazil respectively. Both also deal with the interactions among Africans of different origins and between Africans and creoles in their reconstruction of identities and adjustment to (or rejection of) the societies at large. Landers uses relatively well-documented cases of maroon communities in Spanish America and Brazil to delve into the scant evidence about their ethnic composition and their internal criteria to legitimize leadership. She finds that the maroons settlements of 16th century Ecuador, and 17th century Colombia, New Spain, Spanish Florida and Brazil were multi-ethnic communities, generally ruled by African-born men who claimed seniority, religious power, boasted military feats and had family or corporate connections. Landers tried to explain those cases through Igor Kopitoff's frontier thesis, that addresses the reproduction of African societies and internal hierarchy in frontier regions, rightly considering America a frontier case, but were constrained by the fragile sources to make more precise connections across the Atlantic.[4] The same theoretical approach was adopted by Elizabeth Kiddy with less success. The variation in the composition of the slave and free black population throughout Brazil and across time prevents any meaningful generalization about the associations and rivalries that guided the founding of brotherhoods, and their attraction of followers. Moreover, her description of the internal hierarchies of brotherhoods of the Rosary of Blacks in Mariana, Minas Gerais and Recife, Pernambuco; and of Saint Elesbão and Saint Ephigenia in Rio de Janeiro lacks analytical power once the organizations are disconnected from the local social and historical context in which each one existed. It is clear that a king or queen of Congo negotiated African identities in the process of asserting authority over others within a brotherhood, for example, but the reader is left without a clear sense of whether the meanings attributed to those posts had real parallels in Africa.

Luis Nicolau Parés, Monica Schuler and Terry Rey address, in refined ways, the transformations and social implications of spiritual and religious practices that crossed the Atlantic. Parés sets out in a quest for the origins of the sea and thunder voodoo cults that are part of the Jeje pantheon, often alongside *orisha* deities in Bahia. Through travelers' accounts and anthropological inquiry, he traces their separate development in the Gbe-speaking region of West Africa and their transformation and incorporation in Bahian Candomblé. Monica Schuler gathers an overwhelming number of narratives of astral and aquatic spiritual journeys among slaves, liberated Africans and their descendants in the

British Caribbean and carefully weaves interpretation of those experiences as reactions to the trauma of the slave trade and slavery, associated with illness and death, from which the only escape was the spiritual return to Africa. Terry Rey addresses the Kongolesse influences in the cults professed by some of the "rebel prophets" of the Haitian Revolution. He shows how the Catholic cult of saints and the Kongolesse cult of ancestors, merged in the religion professed in the Kongo region since the fifteenth century, appear in the way rebel prophets Makandal, Macaya, and Romaine-la-Prophétesse established spiritual authority over a predominantly West-Central African population, and inspired their resistance.

Elisée Soumonni's essay deals with the fascinating and often-revisited topic of the Afro-Brazilian communities in West Africa. His particular focus here is on a comparison of the conditions for their development in Ouidah and Lagos, rendered very different by the local policies regarding the continuation of the slave trade.

Finally, Colleen Kriger's essay "The Conundrum of Culture in Atlantic History" serves in a way as a preliminary conclusion and as a research agenda, challenging African historians to approach culture in a more dynamic way, and to account for internal changes related to the developments in the Atlantic face.

The book has a useful glossary, an extensive bibliography and an index which will prove very good reference for future research inspired by the essays in this collection. It offers creative ways at approaching the history of the African Diaspora, and interpreting the vast yet uneven array of documentary, material and oral sources. While no essay makes use of archeological artifacts or material record alone, they are incorporated in the analyses, as in Jane Landers' interpretation of the Mose community, in Soumonni's use of the architecture of Brazilian returnees, in Nicolau Parés' anthropological approach to the "jeje" cults, in Edward Alpers' use of scarifications to identify individuals from East Africa. Nevertheless, I believe the essays demonstrate a good range of approaches taken by African Diaspora scholars to issues of culture and African agency, which in turn should help to leave the dilemma over creolization or African retentions behind.

Notes

1. Other collections stemming from conferences held at York on related topics and from a similar African-centered view of the diaspora include: Paul Lovejoy, ed., *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery*, London: Continuum, 2000; Paul Lovejoy and David V. Trotman, eds., *Trans-Atlantic Dimensions of Ethnicity in the African Diaspora*, London: Continuum, 2003; José Curto and Paul Lovejoy, eds. *Enslaving Connections: Changing Cultures of Africa and Brazil during the Era of Slavery*, Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2004; and José Curto, ed., *Enslaving Spirits: The Portuguese Brazilian Alcohol Trade at Luanda and its Hinterland, c. 1550-1830*, Leiden and Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2004.

2. Bernard Bailyn, "The Idea of Atlantic History," *Itinerario* 20 (1996): 19-44; John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800*, 2nd ed.,

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993.

3. David Eltis, Stephen Berendt, David Richardson, and Herbert Klein, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. The revised version is online at www.slavevoyages.org

4. Igor Kopitoff, "The Internal African Frontier: The Making of African Political Culture," in Igor Kopitoff (ed.), *The African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Societies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987, pp. 3-83.