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Gender and Labor in Three Communities of Enslaved African Americans

Amy L. Young, The University of Southern Mississippi

Introduction

Labor was central to the experiences of enslaved African-American men and women (Berlin and Morgan 1993). Historically, when we think of slaves and labor, we tend to conjure up an image of gangs of field hands picking cotton, ignoring the important role of gender. This, of course, is an oversimplification because all across the South, enslaved men and women worked in a variety of contexts with deeply-rooted gender meanings. Here I discuss how enslaved men and women, created or reinforced their gendered roles, and working within them, labored to reduce risk for themselves, their immediate family, and for the entire slave community. Sometimes this labor was conducted for the master, and sometimes the labor was conducted during "free time" for themselves or family. To illustrate, I focus on three case studies.

Oxmoor

Oxmoor, the first case study, is a large plantation near Louisville, Kentucky (Young 1997a). I examined hundreds of Oxmoor documents for information regarding aspects of daily life for the slaves there. Additionally, I conducted a limited archaeological survey of the slave quarter area. These data sets allow for an examination of the role of enslaved women who served as domestics in the bighouse.

Letters written by plantation mistress Mrs. Matilda Bullitt and her daughters, along with the archaeological data, provide a glimpse of the roles of female domestic slaves at Oxmoor. Five slave women are prominently mentioned in letters. They are "Aunt" Betsy the cook, Charity, Beck, and Louisa who was also called "Mammy" Teush.

The work described in the letters (laundry, cooking for many people, nursing the sick, cleaning the house) was difficult, and sometimes stressful. The labor, however, seemed to be associated with special privileges. For example, a letter dated 1841 illustrates not only the special place domestic slaves occupied in the Oxmoor big house, but also the extent of the privileges that Mammy Louisa (Teush) felt she deserved:

I have been busy lately making a wedding dress; Becky is to be married on the 27th day of this month. I suspect she will have a very fine wedding; Teush [Beck's mother] wanted me to write invitations to all the company; but I rather thought it would be a burlesque on fashion to be writing invitations to people that couldn't read, so we gave that up. Teush wants you and brother Josh to be specially invited to the "wedding." [quotes in original] (Bullitt family papers, The Filson Club).

Another letter stated that:
Beck was married in the holidays & as they thought looked very beautiful, & had quite a handsome entertainment, & a select company. Cynthia [a slave] & Martha [a Bullitt daughter] presided at the brides [sic] toilette, & arranged the table; every thing went off to their satisfaction with the exception of a disappointment in the brides cake . . . . (Bullitt family papers, The Filson Club).

There were other slave weddings at Oxmoor at the same time as Beck's. These did not seem to garner the same attention in the big house, reinforcing my interpretation that Mammy Louisa and perhaps her daughter Beck, earned special consideration. A few days later a letter stated that:

I suppose sister & the papers have told you all the news, about Becky and Harry Howard, Aunt Betsy and Uncle Jack, Caroline and Ben all being married. These are all the marriages among the blackies that I know of, and now for the white folks . . . .(Bullitt family papers, The Filson Club).

The descriptions about preparations for Beck's wedding, and the party afterward seem to illustrate that some negotiation of rights and obligations occurred between Mammy Louisa (Beck's mother) and the Bullitt family. Relations seemed to be rather carefully balanced. It is interesting, too, that sometimes the kinship terms Aunt or Mammy are used, and at other times they are omitted in letters. In the passage about all the slave weddings, it may also be significant that Aunt Betsy's wedding to Uncle Jack received so little attention from the Bullitts because Betsy was their cook. Caroline was also a cook, but she probably worked in the slave kitchen rather than the Bullitt kitchen, explaining the lack of kinship terms.

The tone of the Bullitt letters seems to indicate that Mammy Teush, Beck, and others used the traditional meanings associated with gendered kin/occupational terms they were assigned to remind the Bullitts of their reciprocal obligations. The power that slave women gained from these roles was used to protect themselves and their family and to insure the security or happiness of children. For example, in 1846, Beck communicated via a letter from Mrs. Bullitt to her son which stated, "Beck asked me to let you know she has a fine little waiting maid for you. She insists on it her children must all belong to you" (Bullitt family papers, The Filson Club). The following year, Beck again communicates: "Beck says after a while she can furnish you with an officeboy" (Bullitt family papers, The Filson Club). Knowing that the death of the master of Oxmoor might well result in splitting slave families, Beck attempts to control where here children might go. If successful, it means all her children will remain together, and in predictable circumstances. In addition, if for some other reason, her children all went to John Bullitt and she remained at Oxmoor, she knew she would not completely lose touch.

The traditional meanings associated with female domestic slaves, especially those associated with Mammy seemed to result in a limited but possibly significant source of power that enslaved women employed to protect and provide for themselves and family. It is obvious that Mammy Teush was trying to attain more for her daughter Beck's wedding. Beck is obviously reminding her owners of those traditional rights and obligations when she informs John Bullitt that he owns all her children. Enslaved women working in and around the big house used opportunities to ease their situations, only a small sample of which may have been recorded in family letters.

Locust Grove
Locust Grove, the second case study, is a small plantation near Louisville, Kentucky (Young 1995, 1997b). Few documents refer to the enslaved labor force. However, three field seasons of intensive archaeological testing at three slave house locations have provided a wealth of information about their daily lives including how women may have used generalized reciprocity or giving gifts in the slave quarter community to reduce risk, build solidarity, and extend family connections.

Polly Weissner (1982) outlined this strategy as pooling risk by sharing (generalized reciprocity), often through giving gifts. Gift giving, especially nonfood items, is a way of symbolically extending and strengthening family ties or kinship bonds. This strategy is described for twentieth-century poor black urban communities. Studies of the antebellum period illustrate how "family" became virtually equated with "slave community" where families were created by linking nonkin together and creating feelings of solidarity (Webber 1978:158).

Evidence from the archaeological record at Locust Grove suggests that slaves lived in at least three households: the south, central and north houses. I suggest that these families sought to create ties with each other and with other slave families on neighboring farms and plantations. Kinship ties, unfortunately, are difficult to detect archaeologically. However, items like decorated ceramics and buttons obtained in matched sets might be used to track how artifacts were distributed across the plantation and may reflect gift giving. Matched items in ceramics and other artifacts not resulting from cross mending or hand-me-downs from the big house may indicate that these objects were shared or given among slave families on the plantations.

The result of the analysis of decorated ceramics was that 32 different ceramic decorative types were shared among the slave families at Locust Grove. The south and central households shared 20 different ceramic types, the south and north households shared seven, and the central and north households shared five types. When vessel forms were considered, it was not uncommon to find one pattern of decorated ceramic on a whiteware or pearlware teacup from one house, and a matching piece from a saucer in another.

Button analysis also reveals a match. A single blue transfer printed (calico) milk glass button was recovered from each of the three slave house sites.

These data suggest that generalized reciprocity in the form of giving gifts of nonfood items may have transpired between slave families at Locust Grove. Because of the nature of the gifts, domestic materials like ceramics and buttons, this activity was probably the domain of slave women. It is possibly significant that the matched objects are considered luxury items by archaeologists. Sharing of these items, however, suggests that such "luxury" objects may have had different meanings for African-American women (Singleton 1995:128). It might not have been important to have a matching tea set. Rather a saucer from a friend or family member symbolizing the reciprocal obligations may have been significant. For the enslaved African Americans at Locust Grove, the gifts of plates, teacups, or buttons, rather than being viewed as high status items, could have been seen as objects used and appreciated in friendly social contexts and symbolic of the reciprocal bonds between slave households and families. Gifts forged families from nonkin.
The extension of bonds of kinship outside the immediate family would have been particularly important where there was a high risk of being sold away. In the event that a parent (either mother or father) was sold away, and the child or children kept behind, strong bonds of kinship would help insure the future of dependent offspring robbed of biological parents. Further, when faced with being overworked, driven too hard, or beatings, a reaction from the entire slave community would have been difficult for the planter to withstand. Finally, emotional support from within the community during crises like birth, illness, and death would have been particularly important to a group of people often denied access to comforts of a formal church and professional medical care.

Saragossa

Saragossa, the final case study, is a large cotton plantation near Natchez Mississippi (Young 1998, 1999). Archaeological testing, especially at the Fourth House yielded data concerning housing, possessions, and diet, especially hunting (Jenkins 1999; Tuma 1998, 1999a, 1999b). A total of 1368 animal bones was recovered from the Fourth House.

The identifiable portion of the Saragossa assemblage consists of both domestic and wild species. Domestic animals include pig, cow, sheep/goat, and chicken. A number of wild species were also identified. Interestingly, even though white tailed deer is commonly the dominant wild species in southeastern archaeological assemblages, only 11 specimens were identified from the Fourth House. Box turtle, oyster, squirrel, opossum, rabbit, aquatic turtle, gar, bigmouth buffalo, raccoon, Canada or blue goose and other fish were identified from the Fourth House. Catfish is the dominant wild resource represented by 27 specimens and probably reflects easy access to the Mississippi River.

The bulk of the diet for the enslaved African Americans at Saragossa, as represented in the faunal assemblage, came from domestic species, most often, pig. Beef was not uncommon. Wild species, it seems, provided occasional fare for the slaves. Deer, squirrel, raccoon, rabbit, and various fish are still available in the immediate area today. Much of the smaller game species are attracted to cultivated areas or poultry yards, and could have been obtained through opportunistic or garden hunting. The importance of hunting, however, may not be immediately apparent based on the relative frequencies of wild animal bones in the archaeological assemblage.

In addition to the archaeological research, ethnographic fieldwork in the slave descendant community is also underway. Hunting and fishing were just some of the many activities investigated during the course of the ethnographic work. In the case of hunting, this work was done by a male ethnographer who "apprenticed" himself to the older male hunters in the community. The hunters were quite accustomed to teaching young men how to hunt, and the student was well received.

Hunting in the descendant community, as in the South generally, is traditionally a male dominated activity with a long history (Marks 1991). While some of the techniques, especially the technology, of hunting have changed considerably since the antebellum era, it was believed that hunting today, as a tradition passed from father to son, would reflect some of the practices of
the past. In other words, the harvest of wild resources in this modern community may inform the research of similar activities of the antebellum slave community.

The modern descendant community consists of just over 60 people living near the old plantation (Tuma 1999b). Most residents are related to four sisters who own the real estate. Men marry into the neighborhood. The small community suffers constantly from economic hardships. Many adult women work outside the home in fast food restaurants in Natchez. One constant topic of conversations in the community revolves around money (or the lack of it). Another constant topic of conversation, especially among men, is hunting.

Hunting is an exclusively male activity (women are considered "bad luck"), but women and children fish. Most hunters are adults, but youngsters learn to hunt by participation. As for many Southerners, hunting seems to be a rite of passage into manhood in the descendant community. Unemployment in the community is very high, many adult males (over 20 years of age) are unemployed for part of the year and underemployed for much of the rest of the year. As welfare is greatly scorned, hunting is viewed as a way that unemployed/underemployed men can contribute economically to the household and the community (Tuma 1999b).

Hunting is typically a group activity. Communal deer drives are held in which men with shotguns and rifles line up in the woods, spaced several hundred meters apart, and other hunters with dogs drive the deer into an ambush. In this case, dogs are considered as absolutely necessary for a successful hunt (Tuma 1999b). Communal deer drives necessitate cooperation of the men in the community.

The game and fish, once acquired, are distributed thought the descendant community in a number of ways. Typically, the first activity after successful hunting or fishing is a communal feast. Therefore, when someone (or in the case of communal drives) a group is successful, the whole community benefits. Surplus from the hunt or fishing trip is distributed among various freezers in the community (Tuma 1999b).

As for many southerners, hunting is considered to be very important from a number of perspectives. First, hunting feeds the community, so must be considered a significant subsistence, and therefore economic, activity. Considering the high rate of underemployment, this activity is very important. Hunting in the antebellum community would have had similar functions.

The second function of hunting is to create and maintain gender identity. As lines demarcating the sexes are blurred in the modern workplace, hunting seems to be an important way of reaffirming masculine identities in this neighborhood. Designations like "field hand" which ignored gender differences also blurred lines between men and women in slavery. Today, "To engage in hunting is to emulate, to defend, and to advocate what is a tried, proven, and proper way of becoming and being a man." Hunting on Saragossa Road is definitely a source of male pride.

The third function of hunting in the Saragossa community is to integrate strangers into the community. For Southerners in general, regardless of race, hunting "allows residents the
opportunity to assess the stranger's behavior and assign him a known category of persons."
Because the men have married into the Saragossa community in recent years, they have learned
to live together and cooperate (as kin) through group hunting. In a community where pooling
scarce resources and cooperation is essential for the survival of all, effectively assessing and
integrating newcomers is a very important activity. It gives newcomers a chance to prove
themselves by providing an important economic commodity to the group. As the enslaved
population at Saragossa was constantly shifting, hunting would have integrated newly purchased
strangers into the community.

Conclusions

Archaeological, historical, and ethnographic studies have provided important data that illustrate
how enslaved African Americans across the South labored in a variety of contexts, often utilizing
their assigned or created gender roles to promote solidarity within the slave quarter community
and to protect and provide for their families. Such behaviors helped to offset the dangers inherent
in the institution of slavery and minimize risk. Both men and women operated within their
separate gender spheres to effect better lives for themselves and their families.

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