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Aspects of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Smoking Pipes, Tobacco, and the Middle Passage

By Jerome S. Handler¹

This paper briefly addresses tobacco consumption and pipe smoking in Western Africa, and the relevance of these practices to the Atlantic slave trade as well as to the material culture of captive Africans during their forced passage to the New World.²

Tobacco and Pipes in West and West Central Africa

Although a New World cultigen, tobacco was introduced to Africa by Europeans and by the very early seventeenth century, it seems to have been well established in West and West Central Africa. Its cultivation was observed in Sierra Leone in 1607, and in 1611 a Swiss surgeon remarked on how soldiers in the Kingdom of Kongo relieved their hunger by grinding and igniting tobacco leaves “so that a strong smoke is produced, which they inhale” (Hill 1976: 115; Jones 1983: 61 and note 97).

Not long after its introduction tobacco became a desired commodity among Africans, and from the mid to late seventeenth century it was one of the trade goods Europeans used to acquire slaves. Most of the tobacco Europeans brought to Africa was intended for slave purchase, but some, probably the cheaper grades – what the French called “tabac de cantine” – was also distributed to captives on board the slaving vessels (see below).

African consumers chewed tobacco, used it as snuff, and also smoked it in pipes they themselves produced. These were frequently short-stemmed clay bowls of one kind or another, so-called “elbow bend” or “elbow” pipes, into which a detachable hollow wood tube or reed stem, sometimes of considerable length, was inserted. A wide range of “elbow bend” pipes, dating from the early seventeenth-century, have been discovered in a variety of West African archaeological sites from the Middle Niger to the coastal areas of Benin and Ghana³ (Figs. 1, 2, 3).



Figure 1. Queen Nzinga, Kingdom of Kongo, smoking a long-stemmed elbow pipe, 1670s. For details, see www.slaveryimages.org, image reference “Bassani-27”.



Figure 2. A Senegalese Marabout holding the long stem of an elbow pipe, 1780s.
For details, see www.slaveryimages.org, image reference “VILE-factitle”.

Although Africans produced their own pipes, white clay pipes of European manufacture, particularly English and Dutch, were commonly used to purchase slaves. The market for these products, as with beads and other commodities used in the slave trade, fluctuated from region to region and period to period, but in general it appears that European pipes were often preferred to African ones; and African consumers even made distinctions among different European pipes.

The most common pipes Europeans traded were long stemmed, but the records also mention “short pipes,” sometimes referred to as “slave pipes.” For example, the cargo lists of eight Dutch slaving vessels (out of a sample of 15) over the period 1741 to 1779, show that tobacco and pipes, sometimes both, sometimes one or the other, were destined for slave use on board the ships; of these pipes, the lists distinguish between “korte pijpen” (short pipes) and “lange pijpen” (long pipes).⁴ The cargo of trade goods on a Danish slaving vessel in the 1770s

included 30 dozen “long tobacco pipes” and 90 dozen “slave pipes,” the former of greater monetary value than the latter, and Jean Barbot, the agent for the French Royal African



Figure 3. Wolof Queen Ndeté-Yalla, smoking a long-stemmed elbow pipe, Senegal, 1850s. For details, see www.slaveryimages.org, image reference “Boilat03”.

company, reported that on a slaving voyage in 1698-99, between meals men were occasionally given “short pipes and tobacco to smoak [sic] upon deck by turns” (Hernaes 1992: 352; Barbot 1992; 2:780).

These “short pipes” or “slave pipes” are not described in any primary or secondary source of which I am aware. However, they could have been the African-type “elbow bend” and “socket stem” pipes that copied African styles and which some European pipe makers were producing specifically for the African trade. Ian Walker (1975: 188-189) describes a pipe maker of German origin who established himself in Copenhagen in 1762 and continued to make pipes throughout the century. He produced various types, including ones with “stub stems produced by breaking off most of the stem before firing, and presumably took an attached stem of wood.” “Stub-stemmed” pipes were also made in the United States, and Walker suggests that this “style may have particularly appealed to West Africans as the basic form resembled that of native West African pipes.” Whatever the case, it is clear that European-manufactured pipes, whether long or short-stemmed, were traded on the coast for slaves. Also, as with tobacco, they were occasionally distributed to captives on board the slave ships while the ships waited on the African coasts, sometimes for many months, to fill their complements of slaves. Tobacco and pipe distributions, however, were more common during the Atlantic crossing itself.

Tobacco, Pipes, and the Middle Passage

The motivations of European slavers to distribute tobacco and smoking pipes were the same as those which prompted them to distribute beads and allow African board games aboard the ships, that is, an attempt to mollify or placate the captives in situations that were always fraught with tension and possibilities of insurrection. Although sometimes rationalized in self-

serving terms of humanitarianism or a similar sentiment, European slavers apparently believed that such measures were useful in their efforts to control their “cargo” and avoid or minimize social unrest and revolts – or even put the enslaved in a better mood prior to their being sold or transshipped from one American port to another.

By the late seventeenth century, tobacco, sometimes with pipes, was periodically, albeit irregularly, distributed to captives in English/British, French, and Danish slaving vessels during the Middle Passage. For example, a typical load of provisions for slave vessels leaving London for Africa during the 1720s, as described by an official of the Royal African Company, included various foodstuffs as well as “1 waight [sic] of tobacco” and “5 grosse of Pipes” for use by an estimated 200 captives during the Middle Passage (Public Record Office n.d.). The British slaving captain, William Snelgrave (1734:163), describing his voyages to the British West Indies between 1727 and 1730, reported: “every Monday morning, they are served with pipes and tobacco, which they are very fond of.” In 1768, the Danish slave ship, *Fredensborg*, following a common practice aboard Danish ships, distributed pipes and tobacco to the (adult) slaves, also on a weekly basis (Svalesen 2000: 107, 112). A detailed account of the Atlantic crossing from Ouidah to St. Domingue aboard a French slaver during August 1773 (no data are given for other months) gives a more specific idea of these distributions. During the first week, only women received tobacco on one day; in the second week, there were two distributions of pipes and tobacco to both men and women as well as one distribution of tobacco only to both groups. In the third week, men and women received one distribution of tobacco, and in the final week, both groups received tobacco rations, but no pipes. Thus, although both pipes and tobacco were distributed to captives during the Middle Passage, neither item was distributed consistently or regularly (Yacou 2001: 49, 192-193).

As for pipes on French vessels, in the late eighteenth century a French slave ship captain advised that only tobacco, not pipes, be permitted on board. “One must never permit the Negroes the use of pipes,” he cautioned, “for fear of fire; tobacco should be grated and given as a powder” (Brugevin 1982: 97; my translation). Yet, other primary sources are quite clear that smoking pipes were sometimes distributed on French vessels (e.g., Barbot 1732: 547; Yacou 2001:192-193; Plasse 2005:140). There was probably no hard and fast rule and captains followed different practices; the same variability surely took place on the ships of other nations.

Pipes and tobacco distributions to male and female adults may have occurred more regularly on British slaving vessels by the latter half of the eighteenth century, particularly during the period when criticisms of the slave trade intensified and more British voices were clamoring for its abolition. With pipes, “both sexes sometimes will smoak [sic],” reported an experienced British slave trader (Lambert 1975: 117), but in the absence of pipes, the tobacco was consumed as snuff or chewed, following the African practice.

Whatever the frequency of distribution, the national carrier or cultural background of the ship’s captain, or the time period, there are no data on whether the enslaved were allowed to keep the pipes they received aboard the slave ships. Chances are that pipes were collected by the ship’s crew after each use to be re-used at another time. However, this does not exclude the possibility that occasionally a pipe could be stolen and hidden, perhaps even taken ashore when the captive was landed in the New World.⁵ Although the vast majority of European-manufactured white clay pipes utilized by enslaved men and women in the Caribbean and North America were probably obtained in the Americas, it may be that an occasional pipe was brought by some captive African via the Middle Passage – ultimately finding its final resting place,

usually as a bowl or stem fragment, in some New World African descendant archaeological site (Figs. 4, 5).



Figure 4. Unidentified man smoking a long stemmed white clay pipe, circa 1800-1825; location unknown. Courtesy, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. For details, see www.slaveryimages.org, image reference “NW0153”.



Figure 5. The woman is smoking a white clay pipe, Surinam, 1770s. For details, see www.slaveryimages.org, image reference “NW0134”.

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Notes

¹ The author is a Senior Scholar at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities in Charlottesville. Thanks to Neil Norman for his comments on an earlier version of this paper.

² This is a greatly condensed section of a larger work to be published in 2009 (Handler 2009). Here, citations have been kept to a minimum and are largely confined to direct quotations.

³ Only one example of such a pipe has been reported from a New World African descendant site (Handler and Norman 2007).

⁴ Unpublished data on the Dutch trade has been generously provided by Jelmer Vos, and is derived from his on-going research into the records of the Middelburgsche [Middelburg] *Commercie Compagnie*, a Dutch firm that around 1740 became involved in the slave trade.

⁵ Since captive Africans were generally stripped of all clothing and body covering as well as other personal belongings before they even boarded the slave ships, it is highly unlikely that

they brought their own pipes on board these ships, although this may have happened on occasion (Handler 2009; Handler and Norman 2007).

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