

Trends in the Study of Early American Slavery of Potential Interest to Archaeologists

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An active debate has ensued for many years, and is certainly alive and well today, concerning how much of their African heritage African-Americans maintained.

I think there is a tendency to polarize positions into a flatly "for" or "against" position. Some scholars have been dubbed "creation theorists" for allegedly paying too much attention to the cultural creativity of enslaved Africans in the New World at the expense of what Africans brought with them. On the other side are what might be termed the "continuity theorists," some of whom take a militantly Africa-centric position, stressing the continuing role of African ethnicities in the Americas.

There is surely a middle ground here, but make no mistake there is a real and continuing debate about the staying power of African ethnicities versus the processes of creolization.

To suggest some of the elements of the middle ground, one of the most exciting developments in African-American history is the attempt to trace connections between specific homelands in the Old World with specific places in the New. Linking particular places in Africa with particular places in the Americas is very much on the agenda for many scholars.

Historians of the transatlantic slave trade, for example, have emphasized its specialized, patterned character. It was no random, unsystematic business. In general, the slave trade of any African region was heavily centered at one or two places. About 80 percent of all slaves from the Bight of Biafra left from just two outlets, Bonny and Calabar. Ships leaving on a slave voyage would normally trade in only one African region, though occasionally at several locations in that region. Only about one in ten slave vessels traded at two or more ports; and only one in twenty traded across regional boundaries. One reason that most slavers headed for specified destinations is that Africans in different coastal regions had distinct preferences for merchandise. Similarly, most transatlantic ships disembarked their migrants at a single port in the Americas. Over 95 percent of slave ships landed all their slaves at one place. And usually one or perhaps two ports in an American territory garnered most arrivals. Almost nine out of ten Africans entered Jamaica through Kingston, for example. Actually, here, the Chesapeake strikes me as something of an anomaly; it had no central port and Africans were shipped, as you know, into various naval districts.

At any rate, as historians explore precisely where Africans came from--with precise regional and port information, wherever possible, and it often is possible--paying particular attention to timing, to the most discrete time periods they can manage, so the chances of exploring regionally specific African cultural traits in particular places in the Americas are enhanced.

We know, for example, that many Africans arrived in a particular New World setting alongside Africans from the same coastal region. Particularly early in the history of many slave societies, one or two African regions supplied most slaves. Thus, in the third quarter of the seventeenth century, for example, three-quarters of the Africans landed in Barbados came from just two regions: the Bight of Biafra (supplying 48 percent) and the Bight of Benin (28 percent). In the first quarter of the eighteenth century, four-fifths of the Jamaica's Africans came from just two regions: Gold Coast (46 percent) and the Bight of Benin (34 percent). Or, as Lorena Walsh has shown, in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, one region, the Bight of Biafra, supplied about 60 percent of Africans to the York Naval District in Virginia, which received more of the colony's Africans than the other four naval districts combined. Africans from the same coastal region, then, often predominated in specific American locales, particularly early in time. A basis for shared communication existed.

We know that the proportions of men and women, adults and children varied markedly in shipments from different regions of the African coast. The proportion of males sailing from Upper Guinea (Senegambia to the Windward Coast) was larger (almost 75 percent) than elsewhere and the proportion of children smaller (just 6 percent). West-central Africa, Angola, Kongo, by contrast had more children (over 20 percent) among the slaves leaving its shores than other African coastal regions. In the Bight of Biafra women were almost as numerous as men among slaves carried to the Americas. Ratios did change over time but if we can plot when people were coming from particular regions of the African coast we will have a reasonable proxy of at least some of the building blocks for family formation and demographic growth.

Connecting particular African and American locales is therefore a valuable and potentially fruitful exercise. It means of course that we all need to become expert as much as possible in the relevant regional cultures that fed into any particular American slave society. It would be great, I suppose, to do archaeology or at least to draw on archaeology on both sides of the Atlantic with as much regional specificity as possible. All this will be to the good.

It will be important too to be as regionally specific as possible on this side of the Atlantic. In the Chesapeake, we must differentiate between tobacco-growing areas and mixed farming areas, between oronoco and sweet-scented tobacco regions, between the various peninsulas, between tidewater and piedmont, and not forgetting the Valley. We will want to know more about life on small farms as well as on plantations.

Nevertheless, I do want to offer a few caveats about the rage for regionalism:

1. Although many Africans arriving in the Americas, like Europeans, shared a distinctive local, perhaps ethnic identity, the conception of homogeneous peoples being swept up on one side of the ocean and set down en masse on the other is problematic. Ethnic mixing and the reconstitution of identity started well before the coerced migrants ever set foot on a ship. Because many African slaves came in tortuous and convoluted ways from the interior to the coast, whatever ethnic identity they originally had was undoubtedly in flux. Identities were reshaped as slaves moved to the coast, a process often taking months, occasionally years, and as they awaited shipment in the barracoons and in the holds of ships as loading proceeded. Africans employed pidgin and even creole languages on the coast as they tried to communicate with one another. Many slaves became identified by their port of embarkation--Calabars, Cormantees, Pawpas or Popos, and so on, but such identifications masked diversity.

2. The scale of linguistic and cultural diversity within particular African regions must also be taken into account. The Bight of Biafra region, for example, was home to at least four major languages--Yoruba, Igbo, Edo, and Ijo--and their respective dialects, together with many other minor languages, including Efik, which was spoken by many who came to the New World as slaves. To point to the predominance of the Bight of Biafra as a region of origin for a particular New World locale's slave population is therefore not to say that slaves from that region shared much of a shared identity or a mutually intelligible language. The proportion of Igbo speakers among slaves entering the Chesapeake, for example, has been recently estimated at about a quarter. Some recent archaeological investigations that suggest that certain deposits seem similar to Ibo ancestor shrines, or that certain incised spoon handles are similar to the symbols used by Ibo diviners, or that so-called root cellars, but what Fraser more objectively calls sub-floor pits, can be traced to the concealment of valuables under floors, not in cellars or pits, among Igbo groups in Nigeria seems to me to be stretching credibility.

3. Just as identities were in flux in Africa, inevitably they were extraordinarily fluid here in the Americas. Ethnogenesis did occur but in extremely complicated ways. Thus, for example, many Africans from the Bight of Biafra who had never heard the name Ibo in their own lands and identified themselves instead by their villages or districts, yet came to accept--at least to some degree--the term abroad. They may even have incorporated people and cultural traits from places far remote from the Bight of Biafra. In Cuba, for example, descendants of Yoruba-speakers generally became Lucumi but people sold by the Yoruba also became Lucumi; of Allada and the Ibo were integrated into the so-called Lucumi nation. Some Lucumi words and phrases were not Yoruba in origin, but were Ewe or Fon in derivation. In the New World, invented, reconstituted identities became more wide-ranging than had been true in the homelands.

4. One reason for this development was the continuing influx of peoples from ever more diverse places in Africa. If one or two African coastal regions often dominated the early history of a New World slave society, time more mixing occurred. By the last quarter of the eighteenth century in Barbados, for example, the two leading African regions supplied only just over a half of the island's Africans, and the dominant supplier was now West-central Africa (at 37 percent), a region that provided no slaves to the island a

century earlier. By the 1730s in York Naval District, Virginia, the Bight of Biafra, though still the primary supplier, was providing less than half of the incoming Africans; West-central Africa, Senegambia, the Windward Coast, and Gold Coast provided the rest. Moreover, most other naval districts in Virginia received Africans from a much wider range of regions than did York. Increasing heterogeneity is the dominant feature of African migration into most North American and Caribbean regions.

5. Finally, just as I would see ethnic identities as fluid and permeable, so I think social and cultural development for any group in North America and the Caribbean involved primarily borrowing, adaptation, modification, invention. Slaves were the most ruthless bricoleurs, picking and choosing from a variety of cultural strains, precisely because they were came from such diverse origins, were thrown together in the New World, and were denied the resources to recreate institutions, languages, and family structures known in their homelands. Their plasticity was of an extreme kind, because they were subjected to an extreme horror. Developing significant creole populations within their midst entailed yet further transformations. The movement of slaves from region to region—the transplantation of many black Virginians from the tidewater to the piedmont, for example--further enhanced the mix. The extent of cultural fusion, syncretism, blendings in which all newcomers engaged is perhaps best summed up in the term, creolization, and I believe it will still be the central story, even when we have depicted African and European peoples with all the ethnic and regional particularity we can muster.