

Issues and Questions in African-American History.

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Generation and Ethnicity are two issues that figure prominently in the recent historical literature on Chesapeake slavery. These are issues that have also informed many of the questions that archaeologists have been asking--albeit in somewhat different ways--and are ones for which archaeological evidence is crucial. Given the paucity of direct documentary evidence, place and time are the best proxies we have for these important variables, so it is critical that the DAACS be structured in such a way as to enable users to assess material information spatially and temporally, not just in predetermined categories like tidewater/piedmont or whole centuries, but also by additional analytical groupings that each user can construct for him or herself.

Historians have approached the issue of generation in a variety of ways. My approach in *From Calabar to Carter's Grove* was to attempt to trace the nativity and duration in the colonies of a particular group of slaves living on adjacent tidewater plantations owned by members of the Burwell family. Late 17th- and early 18th-century enslaved work forces were assembled through a combination of purchasing both new Africans and creoles and of acquisition through marriage and inheritance. In the formative state of Chesapeake plantation slavery, many tidewater plantations included a mix of Africans and creoles who often lived and worked with European indentured servants. This circumstance precludes a simple linear story of a transition from African to Creole with a clean cut beginning such as is possible at sites such as Somerset Place in North Carolina where almost all residents were initially newly arrived Africans. The later transition to a predominantly native born enslaved population is much easier to pinpoint. A native born majority in the whole population seems to have appeared everywhere in the older tidewater by about 1750, a transition to a native born majority among adults falling between the mid-1760s and the mid-1770s.

Ira Berlin in *Many Thousands Gone* employs a different approach, speaking of generations of experience rather than genealogical ones. Here the beginning is somewhat fuzzy. Slaves who arrived in the first three quarters of the seventeenth century, when racial lines were not yet rigidly drawn, and Africans' status as slaves yet undefined in law, comprise Berlin's "charter generation." They arrived with some knowledge of the languages of the Atlantic and were familiar with Christianity and other European commercial practices, conventions, and institutions. A more cosmopolitan background and, for some, a partial European ancestry enabled them to feel more at home in the new

environment and led to some measure of social integration. These same attributes also meant that Europeans saw them as not entirely foreign.

Berlin characterizes the succeeding "plantation generations" as predominantly African, linguistically and physically isolated, and inward turning rather than seeking assimilation into the larger society in language or religion. Harsher discipline, harsher working conditions, greater exploitation, and a restricted domestic economy characterized this phase of Chesapeake slavery.

Later arriving captives were drawn from places in the African interior little exposed to the wider Atlantic world, contributing to linguistic isolation and cultural estrangement. Europeans' perception of the languages, manners, and customs of these later forced migrants as totally "outlandish" helped ensure a life of unremitting regimented labor that left little scope for initiative or ambition. Berlin rightly dates this first plantation generation as arriving in the 1680s, but most of his evidence for this group dates at the earliest to the 1720s, by which time Chesapeake plantation slavery had already undergone significant alternations. My research suggests that between the 1680s and 1720s experiences ranged from some outcomes more characteristic of the "charter generation" and others more characteristic of the "plantation generations".

Children or grandchildren of Africans comprise Berlin's "mature" plantation generation. They spoke English, adopted more creolized says, traveled more widely, enjoyed more occupational diversity, and were intensely family centered. Berlin's subsequent experiential generation, the "revolutionary generation", was transformed by the political and social changes of that era. They constitute no discrete demographic group, but rather underscore the profound impact of political, social, and religious changes on everyone involved, cutting across any African/Creole divide.

Archaeologists have mostly dealt with generation in terms of the transition from African to African American culture. In much of the historical archaeological and material culture literature, the concepts of "ethnicity" and "generation" have often been, in this historian's opinion, rather indiscriminately mixed. "Ethnicity" is usually applied in an entirely North American, twentieth-century perspective, to all African-Americans as a group, encompassing multiple African ethnicities that were transformed into a single (or multiple) African-American ethnicity eventually rooted almost entirely in race. Clear-cut changes in pattern have not been found in the mid 18th century when the transition from African to native born in the overall enslaved population occurred. The emergence of any pan Chesapeake African-American culture is dated to the post-Revolutionary years when the enslaved population was demonstrably and overwhelmingly native born. By focusing attention on this late period, the most interesting questions about cultural change between forced African migrants and first generation creoles is largely missed.

There are perhaps good reasons for not finding indicators of significant cultural change earlier. A linguistic shift accompanied the shift from support networks based on co-resident strangers, quasi kin, and country men and women to networks rooted primarily in biological kin ties. As the number of Africans who could communicate fluently only in

African languages declined, and the number of creoles who might well speak only English rose, English increasingly became the lingua franca. Children whose parents were of different nations were especially likely not to learn or at least to use any African language. The shift in language is indicative of other cultural changes, as more syncretic ways evolved. Long resident Africans adapted more elements of European culture, and the proportion of creoles with no direct knowledge of Africa and greater familiarity with Anglo-European culture steadily rose. The transition to a fully articulated Creole culture, however, seems to have been delayed for almost another twenty-five years, until the native born became predominant, not just in the overall population, but also among decision-making adults.

The surge of very young children who initially tipped the balance between an African and a Creole majority by somewhere between 1730 and 1750 were surely not making many important cultural choices, especially those choices most likely to be reflected in the surviving material record. Doubtless their very presence in enslaved communities led to some reorientation of individual and community activities and priorities. Still these children were seldom in a position to choose what sort of clothes they would wear (or whether they would wear any at all), to choose what foods would be raised, gathered, or caught to supplement owner-supplied rations (although they likely assisted in these endeavors), or to determine how available comestibles would be prepared. Instead, some combination of enslaved adults--the majority of them Africans--and their Anglo-Chesapeake owners made these decisions. Similarly, it was adults who were crafting items for domestic use or trade, finding and administering remedies for common ailments, or acquiring European goods as allotments or castoffs from their owners or through trade or theft. Adults also determined, subject to whatever constraints their owners or local authorities were able to impose, how the dead would be mourned and buried, how more festive community gatherings would be conducted, and how spiritual entities, old or new, were dealt with. Consequently the material record continues to reflect the outcome of exchanges and contests between forcibly transplanted Africans and Anglo-Chesapeake whites for some years after an absolute Creole majority emerged among the enslaved.

At the same time, however, these Creole children were acquiring a greater fluency in the English language than did most of their African born parents, an important cultural shift that was quickly noticed by their owners and other European observers. They were also learning about and often aspiring to more elements of the predominant European culture surrounding them, and selectively remembering and reinterpreting what African elders taught them about their ancestral heritage. Some disjuncture between the kinds of cultural changes noted in documentary and material records is thus likely. Consistent evidence for widespread cultural changes appears only in the last quarter of the century when some critical percentage of first and second generation Creole children survived to become decision-making adults. Knowing when that actually occurred is crucial to understanding the processes of cultural change. As Jon Sensbach recently put it, "We generally have very little concept of the degree of lingering or redefined African consciousness that might have animated an enslaved Virginian in 1780 whose grandparents had been brought from different parts of Africa in the 1730s. The challenge remains to

historians and cultural anthropologists to try to resolve the persistent vagueness about one of the momentous cultural shifts in American history."

Many archaeologists and historians as well have chosen to emphasize instead "the social and power relations that guided masters and slaves in the daily exchanges and long term dealings which continually negotiated domination and resistance." This approach in my opinion has contributed to unbalanced interpretive approaches. A focus on master/slave relationships introduces slaves into the story only episodically, juxtaposing powerful masters with a well known history with relatively powerless individual slaves whose family history is assumed to be unknowable and so not investigated. This remains true even for well documented slave groups like those owned by various members of the Carter family whose history in Virginia can almost certainly be reasonably fully constituted. All too often the power relationship is assumed to have been constant. Hence there is little incentive to investigate the historical context of particular slaves groups, to determine whether they were predominantly African, predominantly native-born, or more evenly balanced, and to ask whether or not this mattered. Also there is a tendency to ignore possible generational differences in the experience and approaches of masters. Evidence from Robert "King" Carter, Landon Carter, and Robert Carter of Nomini, for example, is often mixed together indiscriminately, with little sense that among masters as well as slaves, generation may have mattered. The first experienced childhood in a society where slaves were few and slavery not the predominant labor regime. The second was raised in the slave society his father was instrumental in creating, while the third lived through an era when the peculiar institution was first called into question. On the other side were first an African majority, second a Creole majority of at least one generation, and third a Virginia born majority resident for two or more generations. Surely differences in background and experiences affected the resources and approaches both sides brought to the power relationship.

Until recently, slaves drawn from a wide variety of geographic areas and ethnic groups throughout West Africa were presumed to have been randomly mixed across the Chesapeake landscape, with attendant obstacles to recreating significant portions of their African backgrounds and overwhelming pressures towards creolization.

New evidence on the Chesapeake slave trade does reveal greater homogeneity in the geographic origins of transported Africans than the preceding view suggests. (For documentation and further development please refer to the forthcoming January 2001 issue of the William and Mary Quarterly.) There was much less initial random mixing (at least after 1697 when naval office records become available), of African groups within the Chesapeake than has been commonly supposed. Across the eighteenth century, three quarters or more of the Africans brought to the Upper Chesapeake (Virginia Potomac basin and Maryland) whose regional origins are known came from the upper parts of the West African coast, from Senegambia on the north, to a second region extending from the Cassamance River to Cape Mount (present day Sierra Leone is in the center), and then easterly along the Windward Coast (present-day Ivory Coast and Liberia), and ending on the Gold Coast (the area of present day Ghana). In contrast, nearly three quarters of the Africans disembarked in the Lower Chesapeake (York and Upper James basins) came

from more southerly parts of Africa, from the Bight of Biafra (present day eastern Nigeria) or West Central Africa (Kongo and Angola).

These strikingly different distributions of enslaved peoples within the Chesapeake seem largely a chance result of whether London or Bristol merchants were the major suppliers. Merchants in these two ports concentrated their African trades in different places on the West African coast, as well as concentrating their slave and tobacco trading in different parts of the Chesapeake. Due to differing trade conditions in Africa, English merchants sent larger ships to the Bight of Biafra and West Central Africa than to Upper Guinea, and they then directed most of these larger ships to those Chesapeake naval districts--the York and later the Upper James--where the most buyers resided. Smaller vessels coming from Upper Guinea were usually sent to more peripheral districts. Planter buying patterns tended to further concentrate slaves from the same geographic area on individual plantations, since most large slave owners bought all the African workers they required over a span of no more than ten to fifteen years, and within this short span of time, most new Africans often came primarily from only one African region. Thereafter, in marked contrast to the West Indies, the natural increase of these Africans, combined with the increase of inherited Creole slaves, precluded any need to buy additional new workers.

Did the newly discovered patterns in the forced migration stream have any effect on local slave cultures in the Chesapeake? Much of the sketchy documentary evidence suggests the answer is no, but this may be in part a result of scholars arguing from examples drawn from throughout the Chesapeake and from across a broad span of time. A more refined assessment, assisted by recent archaeological discoveries, seems to suggest major differences between Upper and Lower Chesapeake in the potential for cultural continuities with West Africa.

The possibilities for much cultural continuity would seem to have been limited for those groups brought to the Upper Chesapeake. The total number of transported captives was small compared to the larger numbers imported into lower Virginia, and the proportion of all blacks in the total population less. The Upper Guinea Coast upon which the Upper Chesapeake drew disproportionately was ethnically diverse. The peoples of Senegambia shared a relatively homogenous history and culture, and inhabitants spoke either related languages of the West Atlantic family, or Mande, which served as a commercial and political lingua franca. Much less is known about the peoples brought from Sierra Leone and the Windward Coast. Those living north of Cape Mount had economic and some cultural and linguistic connections with Senegambia, but practiced a rice rather than grain based agriculture; grouped themselves in smaller, more diffuse polities; and lived in an entirely rural environment. The majority of peoples taken from the Windward and Gold Coasts in the seventeenth century were likely coastal dwellers who spoke variants of a different language family, Kwa. Those from the Windward Coast were drawn from a multiplicity of small scale polities, and included multiple ethnicities and other collective groupings. Yet other peoples with different languages and cultures lived in the interior, and from the mid eighteenth century, conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims resulted in the export of captives from these inland areas. The peoples of the Gold Coast were more culturally homogeneous than those of the Windward Coast, and by the later

seventeenth century lived in larger, centralized states. The Gold Coast economy was based on both long distance trade in gold and other commodities, and on an agriculture relying on tropical root crops and recently imported New World maize.

There are ambiguities in the ways different scholars have classified the above regions that need to be resolved. But even the geographic areas employed become more standardized, considerable linguistic and cultural diversity among Africans brought to the upper Chesapeake seems apparent. There were linguistic and cultural continuities between adjoining regions, but obvious dissimilarities between the outliers. At present there is little consensus among scholars as to degree of cultural similarities and differences in "Upper Guinea" and the Gold Coast in the era of the slave trade. Assessments range from overwhelming multiplicity on the one hand, to, on the other, John Thornton's reduction, on the basis of language, of all the entire western coast slave exporting regions to just three "truly culturally distinct zones".

In contrast to the diversity of African groups arriving in the Upper Chesapeake, half of the Africans brought to lower Virginia whose geographic origins are known came from the Bight of Biafra, as did a majority of those disembarked on the Upper James prior to 1761. Another quarter was from West Central Africa. The Ibo, who predominated among captives shipped from the Bight of Biafra, spoke closely related dialects of eastern Kwa that were broadly understood among all groups, and shared common manners and customs. The innumerable self-contained villages in which they lived had similar social institutions and similar root crop agriculture centered on the culture of yams. The peoples of West Central Africa spoke closely related western Bantu languages, primarily Kikongo and Kimbundu, and possessed many common conceptions of religion and aesthetics. They practiced differing kinds of agriculture suited to widely varied local ecologies; in the era of the slave trade, small grains were being replaced by the new crops of manioc and maize. Early intense involvement in the Atlantic trades created high levels of political instability in the Angolan zone. But overall, greater linguistic and cultural homogeneity among the main groups brought to the Lower Chesapeake is likely, and with it, the possibility of greater, and different cultural continuities than emerged in other parts of that region.

Ethnic diversity among newly transported Africans increased around 1740, when Liverpool traders began sending regular shipments of Africans to the Chesapeake. Liverpool slavers bought captives in ports all along the West African coast, and unlike London and Bristol traders, those from Liverpool did not differentiate between Chesapeake destinations. This is likely because they generally sent smaller ships carrying smaller cargoes of slaves to the Chesapeake, and these small numbers could be marketed in any of the region's ports. Most of these new arrivals were sent to new plantations in the west or were bought by tidewater planters or town dwellers who owned few other slaves. Those who ended up in the newer western areas may indeed have encountered the "babel of languages" and heterogeneity of African and Creole cultures that inform the dominant view of the impact of African cultures on the Americas. In the older tidewater, their presence added diversity to local communities, but less often to the large, established plantations on which an ever increasing proportion of tidewater slaves lived.

A related issue involves the proportion of slaves brought directly from Africa and the proportion imported from the West Indies and what this may have meant. The belief that many if not most early Chesapeake slaves were a mixed lot of seasoned hands brought from the West Indies after a long period of ecological and cultural adjustment, or were perhaps even Caribbean-born creoles, remains firmly entrenched in Chesapeake historiography. Their proportion has almost certainly been greatly exaggerated, given the overall low volume of Chesapeake-West Indian trade in the seventeenth century. The few vessels regularly carrying commodities between the islands and the mainland could not have accommodated the trans-shipment of more than a fraction of the between 10,000 and 20,000 slaves who arrived across that century as unplanned, ancillary cargo. Extant seventeenth century shipping records are sparse, but reveal a pattern similar to the much better documented years after 1697, when at least nine out of ten imported slaves arrived either directly from Africa or were trans-shipped from the West Indies on smaller vessels after only a brief period of recuperation from their trans-Atlantic ordeal. Significant numbers of seasoned West Indian slaves can be identified only in two southern Maryland counties, brought in by a handful of Barbadian planters who relocated to the mainland in the 1670s.

Four reasons, recently summarized by Berlin, have been advanced to account for the marked contrast between the experiences of coerced African migrants in the first half of the seventeenth century as compared to those at its close. First, as members of the initial generation of settlers, early arriving Africans shared with their European captors an outsiders' perspective of being fellow foreigners in a strange new land. Later captives also arrived as strangers in a strange land, but they came to a place in which their captors were at home. Second, racial differentiation and labor exploitation were less fully developed in societies where slaves were a minority rather than a majority of the subordinate workforce. Third, the charter generation's background in the African littoral better prepared them to survive and make their way in a new environment than did the provincial origins of the farmers and herders from the African interior who came later. Fourth, most of those who came first, rather than arriving directly from Africa, "had already spent some time in the New World" (presumably in the Caribbean), putting the trauma of trans-Atlantic transportation behind them and gaining more familiarity with European languages and customs.

The first two explanations are widely accepted. The apparently more cosmopolitan character of the charter generation has been widely noted, although the weights assigned to differences in individuals' backgrounds or to greater fluidity in early colonial societies vary. A pronounced shift in the origins of Africans coming to the Chesapeake in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, when the transformation of the region's labor system occurred, from littoral to the more distant interior appears questionable, as does a pronounced change at this time in the former occupations of most captives. The final explanation of a period of acclimatization and acculturation in the West Indies seems especially problematic. If most forced seventeenth century migrants, like virtually all of those transported in the eighteenth century, either came directly from Africa or had only a brief stopover in the islands, then the deteriorating conditions of Chesapeake slave life

evident at the turn of the century can be less well explained by “the Africanization of slavery.” If the origins of the captives did not change substantially, then the institution of slavery perhaps changed more than we have sometimes thought.

Whether there were enough individuals from related language groups living in most Chesapeake neighborhoods who had enough freedom of movement so that some newly developed sense of "national" identity might have become a locus for the maintenance of elements of African culture is at present unknown. African languages were clearly spoken in the Chesapeake, but surviving records are silent as to which ones. In some places there probably were sufficient concentrations of slaves from either Senegambia, the Bight of Biafra, or West Central Africa who spoke related dialects so that language might have formed a basis for cross plantation collaborative groupings. Occasionally plans for organized revolt were discussed in gatherings in the slaves' "country language". Evidence that might be interpreted as suggesting meetings that could have involved national groupings is limited to the period of the 1680s to mid 1730s when most new Africans were brought into the Chesapeake tidewater. The extant documentary record, however, seems too sparse to sustain much more than speculation, and archaeology alone may not contribute much to delineating the extent of transplanted or syncretic cultural practices.

The new information coming available on the Chesapeake slave trade is assuredly too imprecise to identify the ethnicity of slaves residing on particular plantations. But knowing the place and time does permit an estimation of probable origins, and a rejection of improbable ones. The very possibility of being able to limit, with some confidence, the geographic scope of the African societies from which most migrants to a particular area were drawn will surely allow more focused comparisons between sending and receiving regions than has heretofore appeared feasible.