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The Survival of African Religions in the Americas

Jon Butler has recently argued that the transatlantic slave trade shattered African systems of religion, describing it as "a holocaust that destroyed collective religious practice in colonial America." It would not have been altogether surprising had those who experienced the trauma of separation and sale in West and West Central Africa, who were herded like cattle on to the slave ships, completely lost their faith in gods who seemed to have abandoned them and in deities who appeared unwilling or unable to protect them. Some, believing perhaps that their gods had indeed forsaken them or that the superior "magic"

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of their European oppressors had prevailed, might have lost their faith, either permanently or temporarily; the majority did not.

Enslaved Africans turned to their gods and deployed their religious convictions in ways that gave structure and meaning to the present and challenged the total authority over their persons being claimed by Europeans. By remembering and recreating the past, they produced hope for the future, whatever that future might hold. That those taken on board the slave ships had been torn from the institutional frameworks of their traditional religious cultures is patently obvious. However, those who survived the Middle Passage showed enormous courage, resilience, and ingenuity in devising new religious structures to cope with the demands that enslavement in the British plantation colonies made on them.

Millions of Africans were forcibly removed from cultural, social, economic, and political contexts that were not precisely identical and fed into the international slave trade. Indeed, the trade thrived on often violent antagonisms among different ethnic groups and African nations, which sometimes resurfaced in the New World. But there were also some highly significant similarities in the religious cultures and languages of many of those shipped to British America. Profits dictated that slave ships be filled and dispatched as quickly as possible, and this usually involved loading at a single port rather than "coasting." That did not necessarily mean that all those taken on board a particular vessel came from the immediate vicinity of the port, but they had probably been obtained "from a restricted and culturally quite homogeneous zone." The "comparative cohesiveness" of the religious and linguistic traditions that crossed the Atlantic would be critically important in the reformulation of traditional West and West Central African religious cultures in the New World. Those cultures would retain some "explicitly West African . . . forms."

Most Africans transported from their homeland before the closing of the slave trade in the early nineteenth century subscribed to traditional religious cultures, and they would encounter Christianity for the first time in the Americas. However, the slave ships also included a smattering of people who adhered to their own versions of Islam and Christianity. These religious convictions would also survive the Middle Passage and take their place alongside traditional beliefs and practices in the very different contexts of the New World.

Capture and sale of slaves in Africa usually destroyed the ties of family and kinship that were of such significance to African peoples, and the personal and communal cost of that destruction to those who remained as well as to those who were taken should be neither forgotten nor underestimated. But the physical, psychological, and emotional brutality of the Middle Passage did not destroy memory, beliefs, experience, and expertise. Although stripped of much of their material culture, every African who survived the Middle Passage retained cultural attributes that could be put to creative use in the Americas.

The captains and crews of British slave ships felt no burning sense of mission to proselytize, but they were neither ignorant of nor indifferent to the often religiously inspired behavior of their human cargoes. Most were acutely conscious of the fact that those on board their vessels were not totally demoralized but at any moment might seek what was their common objective: their return to Africa. The arrangements on the slave ships made organized resistance difficult but not totally impossible once the vessels had left African waters. There is no record of the number of uprisings that occurred on the Middle Passage, but during the eighteenth century they averaged two a year on British slavers. Many involved women as well as men, and some depended upon traditional religious beliefs and practices for their inspiration and execution. . . .

For captive Africans, in one sense the arrival of a slave ship in the New World marked the end of one stage in their journey and the beginning of another. On another level, however, surviving the Middle Passage proved to be but one point, albeit a critically significant one, in a continuum of religious beliefs and practices. Once they were in the New World, the convictions that had so fortified these men and women while they were en route to the Americas were neither casually forgotten nor discarded as unnecessary or irrelevant. The ritualistic expressions of these convictions would be broadly similar to West and West Central African ones, but the local circumstances in which enslaved Africans found themselves dictated that they could never be identical. Nowhere in the Americas would Africans be able to duplicate their traditional religious systems. What they were able to do, and often very successfully, was to piece together new systems from the remnants of the old.

There were significant variations in the plantation economies that evolved in British America through the middle years of the eighteenth

century. Thousands upon thousands of Africans entered against their wills public worlds that increasingly they helped to shape and define and private worlds that they struggled to create for themselves. The precise ethnic mix on particular estates and in particular neighborhoods was of obvious importance, as was the size and proximity of those estates. Sex ratios and age structures played a critical role in the formation of sexual partnerships, in the definition of family and kinship networks, and in the reconstitution of spiritual community. Mortality rates, together with the attitude of slave owners toward the disposal of their human property, profoundly influenced the duration of partnerships, the integrity of family and kinship networks, and the precise composition of spiritual communities. All of these factors interacted in an infinitely complex, ever-changing fashion with traditional African beliefs and practices to shape the domestic and communal lives of bondpeople. The private worlds that evolved in the slave quarters of the British Caribbean and Southern mainland between the mid-seventeenth and mid-eighteenth centuries differed not so much in kind as in the degree to which it proved possible for enslaved people to draw upon their African pasts to deal with present realities and future possibilities. . . .

Just as significant in the definition of slave culture as the total number of Africans imported and the ebb and flow of imports over time were the ethnic origins of those taken to the plantation colonies. Africans, wrote Richard Ligon in the mid-seventeenth century, were "fetched [to Barbados] from . . . Guinny and Binny, some from Cutchew, some from Angola, and some from the River of Gambia." They spoke "several languages, and by that means, one of them understands not another." Toward the end of the century an anonymous British author explained that "the safety of the Plantations depends upon having Negroes from all parts of Guiny, who not understanding each others languages and Customs, do not, and cannot agree to Rebel, as they would do . . . when there are too many Negroes from one Country." These two commentators were right about the diverse backgrounds of the Africans being shipped to Barbados, but they failed to record the often highly significant similarities between their "languages and Customs." These similarities reflected a combination of factors operating in West and West Central Africa together with evolving planter preferences for Africans from particular regions and ethnic groups.

The ethnic origins of the Africans shipped to the British plantation colonies varied regionally and over time. However, the ultimately reconcilable ethnic identities of many newly enslaved Africans are readily apparent. Before the mid-eighteenth century three regions of Africa, the Windward Coast, the Gold Coast, and the Bight of Benin, supplied roughly two-thirds of the Africans transported to the Americas by British slavers. By 1807, however, "approximately two-thirds of the African-born populations" of the British Caribbean had been drawn from the Bight of Biafra and central Africa. However, there were important variations in the African origins of the enslaved peoples of the British sugar islands. Thus, "the Bight of Biafra was the most important source of slaves [for] the southern Caribbean, but in the Leeward Islands Central Africa and Senegambia dominated." Just under half of all the Africans landed in Jamaica before 1807 were Ibos from the Bight of Biafra or BaKongo people from Central Africa.

In the Southern mainland, around 60 percent of the Africans imported into Virginia between 1718 and 1726 were from the Bight of Benin; during the 1730s roughly 85 percent came from the Bight of Biafra or Angola. Under 70 percent of the 8,045 Africans shipped to Charleston during the late 1730s had been brought from Angola, and another 6 percent are known to have originated in the Gambia region. Around 40 percent of the 2,500 Africans landed in Savannah between 1766 and 1771 came from Gambia, 16 percent came from Sierra Leone, and 10 percent came from Angola. Another 6 percent were said to be from "Gambia and Sierra Leone," while 3 percent had been brought from Senegal. Of the remainder, 14 percent were identified as having come from the "Rice Coast," 5 percent from the "Grain Coast," and the others simply from "Africa."

The African regions that predominated in the slave trade to the British plantation colonies were not ethnically monolithic, but "a single ethnic group often accounted for a large proportion of the slaves from a particular region." The extent to which particular groups were able to preserve their "cultural habits" once in the New World depended upon many factors, one of the most important of which was their concentration on any given estate or in any given neighborhood.

The precise local mix of ethnic origins in particular colonies varied, as did the size and the proximity of the estates upon which enslaved Africans found themselves. Slaveholdings in the Southern mainland were much smaller and far more dispersed than they were in the

British Caribbean. Local ratios of Europeans to Africans also varied, but everywhere in the Southern mainland they were much higher than in any of the sugar islands. In the early eighteenth century, for example, the South Carolina parish of Goose Creek contained around 500 enslaved Africans but about twice that number of Europeans; in Barbados and Jamaica, on the other hand, a single sugar plantation was likely to be worked by two or three hundred slaves under the direction of one white overseer. Colonial Georgia's largest slaveholder, Governor James Wright, held 523 bondpeople, thereby putting himself on a par with premier sugar planters. His slaves, however, were employed not on one but on eleven different plantations, indicative of the belief that the optimum number of workers per unit of rice production was between thirty and forty. Eminent rice and sugar planters may have had similar numbers of slaves, but they organized their operations very differently and in ways that were to be highly significant in the definition of the private lives constructed by their workforces.

Sex ratios and age structures were important in shaping many aspects of life in the slave quarters. As we have seen, most slave ships carried at least two men for every woman, and this imbalance persisted for varying lengths of time in the New World. For instance, during the 1730s, a decade of particularly heavy slave imports in Prince George's County, Virginia, the sex ratio was in the order of 187 men to every 100 women. On estates with more than ten slaves it soared to 249 to 100. Between 1755 and 1775 the ratio of men to women on Georgia estates was around 146 to 100, but on plantations with more than forty slaves it rose to 152 to 100. Depending upon the slaves' ethnic mix, the preservation of "cultural habits" might have been more viable on larger plantations, but it is also possible that their imbalanced sex ratios may have generated intense rivalries among men who were in search of sexual partners.

Richard Ligon and the anonymous pamphleteer of 1694 believed that varied African "language and customs" could be used by Europeans as a highly effective means of securing racial control. Their arrogant assumption was that Africans were intellectually incapable of transcending the linguistic and cultural differences that existed among them. In fact, these linguistic differences were not always as severe, or as insurmountable, as these contemporary commentators imagined them to be. Some Africans could find themselves in the unenviable position of Olaudah Equiano, who upon his arrival in Virginia discovered

that he "had no person to speak to that I could understand," but many more, and perhaps the majority of those arriving in the plantation colonies through the middle years of the eighteenth century, did not.

The practice of loading slave ships at a single West African port meant that planters were often making their choices from among Africans who, if not "culturally homogeneous," were in all probability culturally compatible. These choices, especially in the case of eminent planters, usually involved the purchase of more than one person from any given shipment. Such purchases often resulted in the separation of couples, families, and friends, but they could also mean that "on large estates . . . slaves would typically have no trouble finding members of their own nation with whom to communicate." Subsequent purchases from slave ships that had set sail from a different African port could introduce to the plantation representatives from other ethnic groups. The resulting linguistic and cultural variations may have reflected a deliberate policy of ethnic mixing, but they could also have reflected nothing more than pragmatic decisions to satisfy labor requirements as and when the opportunities to do so arose.

The manner in which the transatlantic slave trade was organized and the purchasing habits of planters meant that enslaved Africans could be both united and divided by language. The reconciliation of linguistic differences was achieved in each of Britain's plantation colonies with a speed and a facility that often astounded Europeans. The spread of Islam in West and West Central Africa was a particularly important part of this process, providing as it did the fragments of a common vocabulary, if not of a common language. Within a comparatively short time, each of the plantation colonies had developed its own *lingua franca*. . . .

Writing in 1750, Hughes, the Anglican rector of the Barbadian parish of St. Lucy, noted that the "Mirth and Diversions" of the island's enslaved population "differ according to the Customs of so many Nations intermixed." He added that "the Negroes in general are very tenaciously addicted to the Rites, Ceremonies and Superstitions of their own Countries," but he did not suggest that these strongly held religious convictions were a source of overt physical conflict. Nor did he conclude, as have some recent scholars, that the communal performance of "Rites" and "Ceremonies," which he did not describe in detail, "may well have been occasions to recall national religions." Instead, Hughes chose to emphasize a different aspect of these religious

celebrations that surely must have been as obvious to those in the ethnically commingled slave quarters of Barbados as it was to him: the essential compatibility of many of these "Rites, Ceremonies and Superstitions."

In the early 1680s Morgan Godwyn, a churchman who was instrumental in persuading the Anglican hierarchy in London of the necessity and the desirability of proselytizing enslaved Africans, had claimed that bondpeople in Barbados and Virginia clung tenaciously to their "Heathen Rites," to their "barbarous . . . behaviour and practice in Worship and Ceremonies of Religion . . . then Polygamy . . . then Idolatrous Dances, and Revels." They had "brought out of Africa," Godwyn continued, various "Recreations and Customs" that demonstrated beyond any shadow of a doubt their "Impiety" and their "Barbarity." Among the three "Recreations and Customs" specifically mentioned by Godwyn, probably because they were the best known to him, were the "Idolatrous Dances, and Revels; in which they usually spend their Sunday after the necessity of labour for their Provisions . . . has been complied with."

Godwyn acknowledged that "the Gentiles anciently did esteem and practice *Dancing*, as a part of *Divine Worship*; and no less also did the Jews," but he claimed that the dances performed by Africans in Barbados and Virginia were but one of the more obvious manifestations of their "Idolatry." He based his "Conjecture" on the fact "that they use their Dances as a means to procure Rain," presumably for their provision grounds rather than for their owners' cane and tobacco fields. Godwyn did not describe these ritual dances, but Ligon did. He emphasized that, in Barbados at any rate, there was "no mixt dancing" but that men and women performed their dances separately and "may dance a whole day [to] their Musick." As for "Their motions," Ligon recorded that "their hands [have] more of motion than their feet, and their heads more than their hands."

Writing a quarter of a century after Godwyn, Sir Hans Sloane made no mention of men and women dancing separately, but he did comment that their ritual dances entailed "great activity and strength of Body, and keeping time if it can be." The dancers had "Rattles ty'd to their Legs and Wrists, and in their Hands, with which they make a noise, keeping in time with one who makes a sound answering it on the mouth of an empty Gourd or Jar with his hands." In addition, it was "very often" the case that "they . . . tie Cow Tails to their Rumps, and

add such other things to their Bodies in several places, as to give them a very extraordinary appearance." European commentators would continue to be both fascinated and repelled by what they regarded as the eroticism of the ritual dances performed by enslaved Africans. Unfortunately, their descriptions of these dances were usually so generalized as to preclude any possibility of linking them to specific African antecedents.

Just as distasteful to Morgan Godwyn as ritual dancing was the "confidence" placed by enslaved Africans "in certain Figures and ugly Representations, of none knows what besides themselves." In the absence of "more *Magnificent Temples*," these "Deities" were "usually enshrin[ed] in some *Earthern Potsherds*." Such was the power attributed to these "Deities," continued Godwyn, that "Fugitives and Runaways" were utterly convinced that they were "able to protect them in their Flight, and from Discovery." Godwyn failed to mention who had made and supplied these "Representations," but almost certainly they had been sanctified, if not made, by sacred specialists in the slave quarters.

The third of the "Customs" that Godwyn correctly surmised had been "brought out of Africa" was what he mistakenly referred to as "*Polygamy*." The main point at issue here was not the absence of sexual morality but the absence of a particular sexual morality: that predicated upon Anglican beliefs and assumptions concerning sexuality and marriage. In Barbados, Godwyn maintained, neither planters nor Anglican churchmen took much interest in the sexual partnerships formed by slaves. Bondpeople entered into such partnerships "by mutual agreement amongst themselves" and with a "frequent *repudiating* and changing of . . . Wives, usual amongst most *Heathens*." Godwyn concluded that it was principally because of the "*Connivance* and *Toleration*" of their owners that enslaved Africans continued to practice "*Polygamie*." Most planters, he charged, "esteeming them but as Cattle, and desirous of their *Encrease*, are apter to encourage, than to restrain them from it." . . .

Most European commentators, including the clergy, had little to say about the formation of family and kinship ties by slaves, including the patterns of courtship that preceded the taking of a marriage partner, whether the widespread African convention of dowries persisted, or the circumstances that might result in the voluntary dissolution of a marriage. However, from the few clues left by contemporary Euro-

peans, it is clear that traditional African assumptions and practices were adapted to meet the requirements of the slave quarters. As John Woolman commented of the Chesapeake colonies in the 1740s, "Negroes marry after their own way."

One of the earliest descriptions of a marriage ceremony devised by slaves in the Southern mainland dates from 1731. The ritual took place in North Carolina and, in its fundamentals, would have been instantly recognizable in many parts of West and West Central Africa. According to John Brickell's account, "Their *Marriages* are generally performed amongst themselves, there being very little ceremony used upon that Head; for the Man makes the Woman a Present, such as a Brass Ring or some other Toy, which if she accepts of becomes his Wife; but if ever they part from each other, which frequently happens, upon any little Disgust, she returns his Present: These kind of Contracts no longer binding them, than the woman keeps the pledge given her."

... [M]arriage was also a cause for public celebration, which affirmed and reaffirmed, at the same time it created, ties of family, kinship, and friendship that often extended beyond the boundaries of the plantation or plantations upon which the couple resided. In the 1740s, for example, Thomas Bacon wrote of the "small congregations . . . brought together" by slave marriages on Maryland's Eastern Shore. Almost forty years later, James Barclay remarked of the custom in the Carolina Low Country that if the couple to be married were "well acquainted in the place, multitudes of men, women and children, to the amount of several hundreds," would "flock together from the neighbouring plantations" to participate in the festivities. He added that marriages were usually "kept in the night," not for any specifically religious reason but "because in the day-time [slaves] must work for their masters."

By the mid-eighteenth century sacred specialists figured prominently in virtually every European account of Africans in the British Caribbean. Europeans frequently confused the activities and precise significance of different sacred specialists, more often than not employing the generic term Obeah, or Obi, abbreviated forms of the Ashanti word *Obove*. However, they were accurate on several points: It was generally held that "the Professors of *Obi* are, and always were, Natives of Africa, and none other" and that they had "brought the Science with

them." This "Science," claimed Europeans, was "universally practiced" in the British Caribbean.

In describing Obeah, Europeans wrongly applied the term to witchcraft or sorcery and often confused witches with Myalmen and women. In fact, Obeah was the result of a fusion of religious offices, several of which originally had overlapping powers and functions, and shared common beliefs and practices of different African peoples. The fusion of functions is apparent in the powers that were ascribed to them by European observers. They included diagnosing and treating diseases—in Africa usually the work of a medicine man or a herbalist and sometimes a diviner; obtaining revenge for injuries or insults, or curing the bewitched—in Africa the responsibility of the witch doctor; the discovery and punishment of theft or adultery—in Africa the work of the diviner; and the prediction of future events—in Africa the work of highly trained mediums or diviners.

The cultural traditions of the various religious specialists were preserved directly through the slave trade, the vehicle by which they were transported to the New World. Under the disintegrating effects of bondage, most of the regalia of the sacred specialists and the paraphernalia of their practices was lost. However, many, if not most, of the ancient remedies, magical potions and ornaments, rattling gourds, and feathers and animal parts used in the conduct of religious offices, survived. The sacred offices themselves also survived, but they too began to change. By the eighteenth century they reappeared in a different form known in all the plantation colonies as Obeah.

The Transatlantic Slave Trade

The Atlantic slave trade took the shape that it did in consequence of the survival of slavery in the Mediterranean world during the Middle Ages. Black slaves had been carried to all the principalities in North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean for hundreds of years, beginning in ancient Egypt. Those slaves in antiquity derived principally from Ethiopia, with the consequence that, as late as the fifteenth century, black slaves were often known as "Ethiops," whencesoever they really derived. The expansion of Muslim power in West Africa during the Middle Ages made possible an expansion of a trade in black slaves northwards across the Sahara from West Africa: the traveler Ibn Batutah recorded meeting them at almost every stage of his journey there in the fourteenth century; and he left with six hundred women slaves. Black Africans worked as servants, soldiers, and in fields in the Arab Mediterranean. Throughout modern history, blacks were especially sought after as eunuchs in the Muslim world, for use both as civil servants and in harems: the well-known picture by the painter Levni in Istanbul entitled *The Chief Black Eunuch Conducts the Young Prince to the Circumcision Ceremony* is dated c. 1720–32; but it could have represented a scene at any time between 1000 A.D. and 1900. slave has exist b4

Some black slaves reached Muslim Spain and Portugal from Africa in the late Middle Ages, and some went to the Christian territories: indeed, the religious brotherhood still known as "Los Negritos" was founded in Seville in the late fourteenth century by a benign archbishop.* Not long afterwards, the Portuguese began first to kidnap, and then to barter for, slaves as they made their way down the west coast of Africa in the second half of the fifteenth century. They were looking for

*The brotherhood seems now to be entirely white, but it was black until the eighteenth century.

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gold but, finding little of it, made do with men and women. These slaves were brought back to Lisbon and sold either there or in Spain or Italy; the Lisbon Florentine Bartolommeo Marchionni, a renaissance man in every sense of the word, became the first modern European slave merchant on the grand scale.

King Ferdinand the Catholic of Aragon and the King-Emperor Charles V did not realize that they were initiating a great change when, in the early sixteenth century, they gave permission, first for two hundred, then for four thousand, slaves to be carried to the New World. Yet they were nonetheless the pioneers of the slave trade as we know it: when the admirable North American novelist Louis Auchincloss caused his character Winthrop Ward, in the story "The Beauty of the Lilies," to ask himself, walking down to his office in Wall Street in 1857, why had "the first blithering idiot to bring a black man in irons to the New World not been hanged?" he was unwittingly referring to those monarchs.

The reason why the Atlantic slave trade lasted so long is that, in the Americas, the Africans proved to be admirable workers, strong enough to survive the heat and hard work on sugar, coffee, or cotton plantations or in mines, in building fortresses or merely acting as servants; and, at the same time, they were good-natured and usually docile. Many black slaves had experience of agriculture and cattle. Both indigenous Indians and Europeans seemed feeble compared with them. That was why European slaves, of whom there had been some in Spain, especially from Greece or the Balkans, in the fifteenth century, were never tried out in the Americas. African Muslim slaves were more difficult to control for, as the Brazilians found in the 1830s in particular, some of them were at least as cultivated as their masters, and were capable of mounting formidable rebellions.

This large labor force would not have been available to the Europeans in the Americas without the cooperation of African kings, merchants, and noblemen. Those African leaders were, as a rule, neither bullied nor threatened into making these sales (for sales they were, even if the bills were settled in textiles, guns, brandy, cowrie shells, beads, horses, and so on). When, in 1842, the sultan of Morocco told the British consul that he thought that "the traffic in slaves is a matter on which all sects and nations have agreed from the time of the sons of Adam," he could have been speaking for all African rulers; or indeed

selling
slaves
indocile

all European ones fifty years before. There were few instances of Africans' opposing the nature of the traffic desired by the Europeans.

Some slaves were stolen by Europeans—"panyared," as the English word was—and some, as occurred often in Angola, were the victims of military campaigns mounted specifically by Portuguese proconsuls in order to capture slaves. But most slaves carried from Africa between 1440 and 1870 were procured as a result of the Africans' interest in selling their neighbors, usually distant but sometimes close, and, more rarely, their own people. "Man-stealing" accounted for the majority of slaves taken to the New World, and it was usually the responsibility of Africans. Voltaire's sharp comment that, while it was difficult to defend the conduct of Europeans in the slave trade, that of Africans in bartering each other was even more reprehensible, deserves to be better remembered. But then there was no sense of Africa: a Dahomeyan did not feel that he had anything in common even with an Oyo.

The slave trade was a disgraceful business even if considered in relation to the other brutalities of the time: the ill-treatment of workers generally in Europe (as well as of sailors and of soldiers), and the harsh way in which indentured English laborers, for example, or their French (the *engagés*) and other European equivalents were looked after. The traveler William Baikie was right when he pointed out, after a journey to Africa in the 1850s, "There is no captain who has carried slaves who has not been, either directly or indirectly, guilty of murder, [for] a certain number of deaths are always allowed for." For captains, read also merchants; for, though some of those traders were quite insulated from knowing what the slave trade was, and looked upon it as just one more business, a high proportion of them had once been captains or mates in the traffic and, in their calm houses in Liverpool or Nantes, could easily imagine the crowding, the smell, the savagery, and the fears normal on every voyage which they financed.

harsh cond.

The consequence for the Americas was remarkable. In the first three and a quarter centuries of European activity in the Americas, between 1492 and 1820, five times as many Africans went to the New World as did white Europeans; and, even in the next fifty years, until 1870, probably as many blacks were taken to Brazil and Cuba as there were white men arriving in the continent. Most of the great enterprises of the first four hundred years of colonization owed much to African slaves: sugar in Brazil and later the Caribbean; rice and indigo in

versatility
of slaves

South Carolina and Virginia; gold in Brazil and, to a lesser extent, silver in Mexico; cotton in the Guianas and later in North America; cocoa in what is now Venezuela; and, above all, in clearing of land ready for agriculture. The only great American enterprise which did not use black labor extensively was the silver mining at Potosí in Peru, and that was only because they were at too high an altitude for Africans to be able to work there with their usual energy. The servants of the Americas between Buenos Aires and Maryland were for four centuries usually black slaves.

nobility's
involvement

Henri Wallon, the moralistic French nineteenth-century historian of slavery in antiquity, argued that the discovery of the Americas was an accidental development which led to retrogression in Europe: the settlement of America offered, he said, to a small group of selfish merchants and planters the chance to upset, through the development of large-scale slavery, the course of progress. But slavery had continued throughout the Middle Ages in Europe, and it was not only merchants, but kings and noblemen who inspired much of the early slave trading. Yet there is a sense in which Wallon was right: most of northern Europe had said good-bye to slavery by the early twelfth century. Most countries there which allowed themselves to become implicated in the slave trade to the Americas had some hesitations first. Richard Jobson in England, Bredero in the Netherlands, Mercado and Alborno in Spain, Fernão de Oliveira in Portugal, not to speak of King Louis XIII in France were exponents of a different attitude at the end of the sixteenth century or at the beginning of the seventeenth. The reason why these humane doubts or even open hostility had no effect is surely to be accounted for by the memory of antiquity which dominated culture and education for the next three centuries. If Athens had slaves with which to build the Parthenon, and Rome to maintain the aqueducts, why should modern Europe hesitate to have slaves to build its new world in America? Busbecq's regret should be remembered.

slave trade's
direct
influence
on
capitalism

The effect of this traffic on Europe and on the Americas was considerable. The slave trade should not be seen as the main, much less the sole, inspiration of any particular development in industry or manufacture in Europe or North America. The memory of Dr. Eric Williams may haunt the modern study of the Atlantic slave trade, but his shocking argument that the capital which the trade made possible financed the industrial revolution now appears no more than a brilliant

jeu d'esprit. After all, the slave-trading entrepreneurs of Lisbon and Rio, or Seville and Cádiz, did not finance innovations in manufacture. Yet those who became rich as a result of trading slaves often did put their profits to interesting uses: Marchionni, for instance, invested in Portuguese journeys of discovery, as did Prince Henry the Navigator; John Ashton of Liverpool, helped to finance the Sankey Brook Canal, between his own city and Manchester; René Montaudoin was a pioneer of cotton manufacture in Nantes, and so was James de Wolf in Bristol, Rhode Island. Such investments aside, the slave trade had a great effect on shipbuilding, on marine insurance, on the rope industry, on ships' carpenters in all interested ports, as also on textile manufacture (such as linen in Rouen), the production of guns in Birmingham and Amsterdam, and iron bars in Sweden, of brandy in France and rum in Newport, not to speak of beads from Venice and Holland, and on the sugar refineries near important European and North American ports.

The effect of this emigration on Africa is extraordinarily difficult to estimate, for it is unclear what the population of Africa was at any stage before 1850. Still, most of the millions of slaves shipped from Africa were not members of an established slave population, but ordinary farmers or members of their families, suddenly deprived of their liberty by fellow Africans in response to what a modern economist might call "growing external demand." Professor W. M. Macmillan, in *Africa Emergent*, argued that Africa was, for many centuries, underpopulated. He attributed the continent's backwardness to the "lack of human resources" adequate to tame an inhospitable environment. Then Dr. Dike, most eminent of a new generation of African historians in the 1960s, insisted that, whatever might be the position in Central Africa, that could not be true of Iboland, in what is now southeastern Nigeria, where land hunger has been the most important "conditioning factor" in history.

The truth is that, though a drop in population may have been caused by the sustained trade in slaves, a fertile population would have added as many as, or more than, it lost in the slave trade as a result of normal reproduction. Most statistics suggest that females, after all, constituted only a third of the slaves transported, even if most of them probably were of childbearing age. A fast-growing population might even have found relief from the inevitable pressure on resources through the export of some of its members. It, as seems possible, the

miscellaneous

compensation for dem. loss = natural growth

population of West Africa in the early eighteenth century was about twenty-five million, enjoying a rate of growth of, say, seventeen per thousand, the effect of the export slave trade (say, 0.2 percent of the population a year) would merely have been to check the growth in population, since the rate of slave exports and that of natural increase would have been more or less the same. The introduction of those two wonderful crops, maize and manioc, also did something to compensate Africa for whatever loss it suffered in population by being implicated in the Atlantic slave trade.

*both seller
(kings) &
buyer
(merch)
benefited* ★ There were some obvious political effects. One was to strengthen those monarchies or other entities which collaborated with the Europeans, above all, naturally, the coastal kings; and the riches obtained from the sale of slaves enabled some rulers to extend their political, as well as their commercial, activities into the interior. The growth of the slave trade clearly helped some states, such as Dahomey, to expand and consolidate themselves. But Benin avoided the trade and also matured as a state. The slave trade must have encouraged African monarchies not just to go to war (they had always done that) but to capture more prisoners than before, and to substitute capture for killing in battle. Dispersed coastal communities often experienced, as a result of the slave trade, territorial growth, political centralization, and commercial specialization. That may have been a consequence of European traders' desire to gather an entire cargo from a single port. Thus the city of New Calabar vigorously developed its own version of monarchy. By 1750, the Efik had excluded all other Africans from contacts with the Europeans, and their political leader (Duke Ephraim, of Duke Town, in the nineteenth century) had political control over all the local slave trade, dominating his city without being formally a ruler, much as the Medici had done in Florence. But Calabar was a tiny city-state considered against the powerful internal empires, even if it was important in the coastal slave trade; and those empires, from the Songhai to the Oyo, not forgetting the Vili in Loango or the Congo and the various monarchies in what is now Angola, seem to have risen and declined without being decisively affected by the Atlantic commerce.

*currency
formulated
during trade* ★ The effects on the African economy, apart from the matter of population, were also diverse. One was to stimulate the idea of a currency: thus cowries became a general trading currency in the Niger Delta,

displacing old iron currencies there, while European-made iron bars, copper rods, and brass manillas also played a part. Yet cowries were increasing in circulation in "Guinea" before the doom-laden Portuguese caravels first drew inshore.

One effect on coastal African agriculture was to stimulate the growth of rice, yams, and later manioc and maize, and even the development of cattle, to provide the slave ships or the slave prisons—the "captiveries," as the French customarily described them—with at least a modicum of food while the captives were awaiting embarkment. The success of slaving as a commercial proposition also implied that many older businesses—such as the trade in palm oil, gum, cattle, kola nuts, even ivory—diminished. Only gold remained an effective competitor to the slave trade. But all those other things survived, especially the first, to be revived in the nineteenth century.

The entrepreneurial spirit of Africa must have been stimulated by the Atlantic slave trade. Most European captains came to realize that their negotiating partners knew as much about European practices as the Europeans knew of them. The era of the trade also saw a great expansion of fairs, and an expansion too of the overall level of trade, in which the traffic in slaves formed only a part. Africans involved in the trade, however, benefited greatly. Some of that wealth was creatively used locally. The prosperity of the entrepôts stimulated employment; and the trade necessitated large numbers of porters, canoemen, and guards at every port along the West African coast.

It is also interesting to speculate on the effects of the imports deriving from the sale of slaves. The slave-trading peoples chose carefully the goods which they exchanged for slaves, and so slave ships had often to be floating general stores, for a European trader would look foolish if he arrived off Loango, say, with a supply of brandy when a previous ship had sold all that the ruler or the merchants concerned needed at that time.

As has been repeatedly noticed, the item most commonly exchanged for slaves was cloth. The import of woolens and cottons did not inspire a tailoring industry, because most Africans liked to wear those European goods untailored, wrapping the cloths round them. But local spinning, weaving, and dyeing did not as a rule suffer. The production of African woolen cloth even appears to have expanded in many places. Despite the apparent abundance of imports, foreign cloth

African's clothing prod. grew

remained rare enough in the hinterland of, say, southeastern Nigeria not to compete with traditional local products either in price or quality.

cultural
resilience

The most interesting aspect of the slave trade is that, during the five hundred years of constant contact between the Africans and the Europeans, the former did not develop further in imitation of the latter. The reluctance of Africans to Europeanize themselves is often presented as a weakness. But it is more likely to be explained by some innate strength of the African personality which, however close the political or commercial relation with the foreigner, remains impervious to external influence. . . .

Any historian of the slave trade is conscious of a large gap in his information. The slave himself is a silent participant in the account. One may pick the slave out of a seventeenth-century engraving of Benin, let us say, in one of the many handsome illustrations to the famous travelogue of Jean Barbot. One learns a little of a few slaves in the reports of Eustache de Fosse in the fifteenth century or de Marees in the sixteenth; the sieur de la Courbe Barbot, or Bosman in the seventeenth, or, let us say, Alexander Falconbridge or Captain Landolphe, among innumerable memoirs, in the eighteenth. Pío Baroja, a great Spanish writer, has vividly depicted the life of nineteenth-century slave captains in fiction. In the nineteenth century, there are the splendid designs of Rugendas, some of them reproduced in the book. He may find a few direct testimonies of slaves from the late eighteenth or the nineteenth century. . . . The best of these is probably the memorable work of Equiano, several times cited. But how pitifully small is the material! Nor has the historian any means of knowing whether those few spokesmen speak for the captives whose fate he has followed as best he can over five centuries. For the slave remains an unknown warrior invoked by moralists on both sides of the Atlantic, recalled now in museums in one-time slave ports from Liverpool to Elmina, but all the same un- speaking, and therefore remote and elusive. Like slaves in antiquity, African slaves suffered but the character of their distress may be more easily conveyed by novelists such as Mérimée than chronicled by a historian. Perhaps, though, the dignity, patience, and gaiety of the African in the New World is the best of all memorials.

Felipe Fernández-Armesto

Africans, the Involuntary Colonists

The first man to farm wheat in Mexico was Juan Garrido. This conquistador-companion of Cortés had seen Tenochtitlán submit, made an expedition to California, and was custodian for his fellow-citizens of the aqueduct of Chapultepec which supplied Mexico City with water. He was also Black.

He was not unique among people of his colour in establishing a position of responsibility in colonial society in Spanish America; he was, however, to say the least, highly exceptional in making his life there of his own accord. However strong the pioneer spirit in the metropolitan bases of early-modern empires, the home countries — except perhaps for China — were insufficiently well populated to supply the labour needs of their colonies themselves. In some areas because of the emptiness of the colonial lands; in others because of the intensive labour demands of successful cultigens; in others, because of demographic catastrophe, slaves became essential to the sustaining of colonial enterprise in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The only source which could supply them in adequate quantities was Africa. As a consequence — though Black slave labour remained important in parts of India and, in some contexts, in Europe and China, while a significant new market was created in the seventeenth century by Dutch spice-planting enterprises in the East Indies — the biggest single transference of population in the course of early-modern colonization was from Africa to the Americas.

The slaves came — in varying degrees at different times — from Atlantic-side Africa, especially the west African bulge, the Congo, and Angola. Overwhelmingly, they were obtained by their Black vendors by war and raiding, which reached many hundreds of miles into the interior. Despite the breadth of the catchment area, it is hard to believe

that the export of manpower on the scale demanded cannot seriously have affected the victim-societies. Most slave communities in America did not reproduce naturally, for reasons which are still little understood. Constant new imports were therefore required just to maintain labour levels. To augment economic activity substantial inputs were needed. Over 1.5 million Black slaves reached the New World by the end of the seventeenth century, and nearly 6 million more in the eighteenth. The numbers shipped out of Africa were somewhat larger, for the passage across the Atlantic was fatal to many. From the best available figures, something approaching 400,000 of those exported from Africa during the eighteenth century never reached America. The demographic and economic impact is hard to assess. For a time the Angola region seems to have developed a marked excess of females over males; on the fringe of Black slave-trading societies, some areas may have been depopulated. The political effects are glaring in some instances, however, and can be followed, for example, in the history of the rise of the kingdom of Dahomey.

Two images of Dahomey were projected to eighteenth-century Europe. In one engraving which illustrated a contemporary history, King Agaja (reigned 1708-40) affects the posture of a society huntsman's portrait, as he leans on one of the long muskets that constituted the basis of Dahomey's military might. He wears a white tricorn, a richly embroidered Turkish silk shirt, and a long robe with gathered sleeves like a western university doctor's gown. With his fine-bridged nose, butterfly lips, and Mediterranean complexion, he is as far removed as may be from a White stereotype of the Black; the naked savage peeps out of his attire only below the knee, where bare legs are shod in the sandals which were a privilege of royalty. This is the Agaja who was said by a French visitor to resemble Molière and who asked European traders to bring him a suit of armour. In a rival depiction of "the king of Dahomey's Levée," published by a slave-trader in 1793, a Stepin Fetchit in a feathered straw hat lolls drunkenly among his simpering, bare-breasted women, sucking at a long pipe while he receives the comic salutations of grovelling subjects. To an extraordinary degree, for White visitors, this realm combined extremes of civility and savagery. Guests dined with silver-handled forks on the dishes of their homelands, prepared by cooks "instructed in Europe or, at least, in the different forts," but had to approach the king's chamber over a path of skulls and were obliged to witness the human sacrifices with which the

Dahomeyans celebrated royal funerals and annual commemorations of former kings.

Dahomey lived by war, and all other values were subordinated to a ferocious warrior-cult — the insatiable thirst after blood, the barbarous vanity of being considered the scourge of mankind, the savage pomp of dwelling in a house garnished with skulls and stained with human gore." The kingdom arose in the interior of the present state of Benin in the early seventeenth century, founded, according to tradition, by exiles from the dynastic conflicts of the rich city-state of Allada. By the 1640s, Allada was already a magnet for European slave-traders; its port, with its nearby rival at Whydah, gave the area the name of Slave Coast. Around the middle of the century, Dahomey began to accumulate European muskets for slaves, obtained by raiding further north. The eighteen tributary communities subject to King Wegbeja (c. 1650–80) had grown to 209 in Agaja's time. His greatest prize was the coastland between the rivers Ouémé and Mono, conquered — he told European traders — to give him access to the outlets for slaves.

With a productive home territory in an area with a long tradition of middle-range commerce, Dahomey cannot be said to have depended on slaving, which may have accounted for no more than a fortieth of the economy. Slaving apologists frequently pointed out that Dahomeyan aggression was inspired by a less discriminating lust for conquest and that war captives were prized more as potential sacrifices than as slaves. It was claimed that slave-traders performed a work of mercy by redeeming their victims from certain death. Yet the facts are clear: Dahomey rose and fell with the rhythms of the slave trade, and the cult of ferocity coincided with the market for captives of war. The economics of the trade obliged its suppliers to be warriors or bandits. The prices Europeans paid made it worth raiding but not worth raising slaves. They were a form of livestock profitable only when rustled.

From Agaja's time, Dahomey was overshadowed by an even greater kidnapper-kingdom, the Oyo state, which had its heartland around the headwaters of the Ogun, south of the now-dessicated Moshi River. Just as Dahomey relied on the slave trade for its supply of muskets, so, indirectly, Oyo sold slaves to finance its own technology of warfare, which was based on the horse. Europeans brought a few horses as gifts, but the cavalry of Oyo was mounted on purchases from the savannah lands further north, paid with the profits of slaving. Their trade was so copious — especially after they captured Porto Novo, about

100 kilometres west of Lagos, and opened a direct route to the sea—that as well as raiding slaves they imported them from Hausa country. When Oyo attacked Dahomey to safeguard its own access to European posts, the mounted lancers proved superior to Dahomeyan musketeers. This seems a curious inversion of the trend in the rest of the world but is probably accounted for by the Dahomeyans' lack of bayonets—they preferred to close with axe or cutlass—and inexperience in shooting to kill. The object of their warfare, after all, was to take prisoners for slaves or sacrifice. They could never cope with horses: on ceremonial occasions their king had to be propped up in the saddle by flanking attendants on foot.

Further west, the history of Ashanti shows that state-building on an even greater scale was possible with resources other than slaves. Gold was the basis of Ashanti's spectacular rise from the 1680s to the dimensions of a great kingdom by the mid-eighteenth century, occupying 10,000 square miles of present-day Ghana and commanding a population of 750,000. The royal chest was said to be able to hold 400,000 ounces of gold. The throne was a golden stool said to have been called down from the sky. The court sheltered under parasols as big as trees. For the annual yam ceremony, the capital at Kumasi housed 100,000 people when the king's tributaries gathered with their retinues. More adaptable than Dahomey, Ashanti was able to use firepower to defeat mounted armies from the savannah, while coping with a variety of environments and fronts. Part of the armies' success was owed to outstanding intelligence and logistics, with fast runners operating along cleared roads. Even Ashanti, however, became increasingly reliant on slaving to supplement its riches in tributary gold. To the east of the gold coast, Akwamu was another substantial slave-stealing state, of a distinct character: its ruler enslaved large numbers of subjects by arranging trumped-up denunciations for adultery—a crime punishable by servitude in many African states—and by mobilizing gangs of "smart boys" to carry out abductions.

Our traditional images of the horrors of the middle passage and the degradation of life in slave communities derive from slaves' memoirs and abolitionist tracts. Sceptics have wondered whether shippers can have been so careless of their cargo as to tolerate—and even invite—heavy losses of life en route; yet evidence such as the often-reproduced deck-plan of the slaveship *Brookes* in 1783, where the slaves were stacked "like books on a shelf," or the tell-tale case of the Liverpool

captain in 1781 who had 130 slaves thrown overboard for the insurance confirm the horror stories of the slaves who survived. Some ship-pers had more rational policies for the protection of their investments, but the extent of both inhumanity and inefficiency in the trade are enough to shock moralists and pragmatists alike.

At their destinations the slaves were usually the great majority of the colonial population: 45,000 to 8,000, for instance, in Jamaica in 1700. In 1553—when Blacks in Mexico were doing little more than domestic labour—the Viceroy was afraid that White settlers would be swamped. In much of the hemisphere, Blacks came to outnumber the indigenous population, too: in North America from Virginia southwards, in most of the West Indies, in some coastal areas of Central America and Venezuela, where plantation economies gradually grew up, and in the sugar lands of Guyana and Brazil. These disparities gave Blacks a potential power which was seldom realized; drawn from too many places and nations they were rarely able to adopt solidarity. When they did, the results could be such as were captured in a painting by Adrián Sánchez Galque of Quito in 1599. The three Black leaders of a Cimarrón community—a republic of runaway slaves in the interior of Peru—are shown richly robed and bejewelled, with extravagant ruffs at their collars and gold nose- and ear-ornaments of Indian workmanship, each dignified with the style of Don, the prefix of nobility. The canvas commemorates the treaty by which they rejoined the Spanish monarchy, retaining local power in their area for themselves. These—and there were many like them—were the spiritual forebears of Toussaint l'Ouverture and Nat Turner.

Even in tightly controlled plantations, slave communities were able to create autonomous institutions: in Jamaica, the British were never able to eliminate the secret power of the "Obeah-men" and "Myal men" whom they denounced as sorcerers, or curb the benches of elders which were the self-regulating judiciaries of the slaves. Though the issue is much debated by the specialists, the social orders of plantation life—the family structures, the regulation of relationships, the behavioural norms—seem, where the evidence has been studied in British North America, to have been evolved by the slaves themselves. Moreover, outside the reach of Spanish religious orders, most slaves were, at best, lightly evangelized until the nineteenth century. The result wherever slaves were congregated was that in the early-modern New World colonial society was more African than European.

North and west of the plantation world, Blacks were already an ethnic minority, composed of domestic servants, concubines, freed-men in unpopular occupations (especially at sea), or—if they came from the right part of Africa—technicians in the mining industry. Paradoxically, the fewer they were in relation to other colonists and natives, the easier for them to integrate or introduce offspring into the White and mixed-race élites. Under the Spanish and Portuguese crowns, at least, the descendants of free Blacks enjoyed equality with Whites before the law: spectacular cases of the exploitation of these rights include Dom Henrique Dias and Dom João Fernandes Vieira, ennobled for their services in Brazil's War of Divine Liberty against Dutch invaders from 1644 to 1654. Generally, however, administrative discrimination and knee-jerk racism kept them repressed.

Depictions of the life of Black societies in their American heyday range from the idyllic through the picturesque and the satirical to the horrific. But the crack of the cat can be heard between the lines even of William Beckford's idealized account of the Jamaica in which he was a slave-owner in 1788. In South America no area had a rosier reputation than eighteenth-century Minas Gerais for the degree of "liberty" attainable within a slave's condition; yet even here, slaves were free chiefly to obtain their gold quotas by extortion or prostitution. Whites preserved order by techniques of selective terror, exploitation of enmity between rival Black nations, and copious ministrations of rum and tobacco.