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INSTITUTIONAL MYSTERIES

Africa and the Americas: Interconnections During the Slave Trade. JOSÉ C. CURTO & RENÉE SOULODRE-LA FRANCE (eds.). Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 2005. vii + 338 pp. (Paper US\$ 29.95)

Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas. GWENDOLYN MIDLO HALL. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. xxii + 225 pp. (Cloth US\$ 34.95)

The forced movement of enslaved Africans to the New World – before the nineteenth century, surely the largest and longest such uprooting and transfer of people in global history – resulted over time in a vast corpus of research and publication, of which these two books are a part. The first is an edited collection of twelve essays, preceded by a slightly giddy preface; the second is its author's attempt to widen her research on African ethnic groups in the Americas, so as to demonstrate their existence. The themes of both books exemplify recent thinking among scholars of the African-American experience.

Africa and the Americas contains contributions by many well-known scholars including David Eltis, João J. Reis, and Monica Schuler. The editors write that the essays divide into three sections. One is devoted to the slave trade, ethnic identity, religion, and creolization, mainly in Brazil. Another deals with the same themes in other parts of the Americas. And a third “brings us back to Africa” (p. 6). But on reading the book, what turns out to be important is that each essay stands on its own. Many bring us back to Africa; many are excellent. What follows is only a sampling.

In an informative summary paper, David Eltis, Stephen Behrendt, and David Richardson provide new data on the role of Portuguese shipping in the slave trade, and leave readers to understand that there is more to come (see also Eltis 2001). Their materials weigh differences over time in national participation in the trade, with special though not exclusive attention to the Portuguese. There is no doubt that new materials will continue to surface, just as the bases for calculating the numbers are sure to change. Since Curtin's pioneering work, however, the totals for those estimated to have been enslaved

and shipped have continued to rise for the Hemisphere. The authors aim to show more fully how Portuguese slavers figured in the trade, since the picture we have so far for the slavers of other nations has been more complete.

Edward Alpers's essay on the "Moçambiques" in Brazil raises important questions about the place of enslaved East Africans in the Atlantic trade and especially about what "ethnic identity" might mean in such cases. He follows Robert Slenes, by imputing a kind of ethnogenesis to the enslaved, arguing that they chose to be, or to become, ethnic in ways that actually defied the categories by which slave traders aimed to define them. For this to happen, he argues, the process he calls creolization began to take shape well before their arrival in the Americas. In support of this idea, Alpers records much data on languages spoken in Mozambique and, for Brazil, on words of putative Bantu origin. Such data should be usable eventually to decode further what "Moçambique" meant in the course of Brazilian history. Alpers concludes:

"Moçambiques" in Brazil were not simply people from Mozambique in Brazil. Like all Africans in the diaspora, they were *African people of different origins who shared the traumatic experience of being victims of the slave trade ... They carried different elements of their African heritage with them ... but always filtered through a constant process of compromise and reinvention, some of which was imposed upon them by others, some of which they embraced as their own*. This historical process of creolization is what marks the passage of these men, women and children, as well as their descendants, from East Africa to Brazil (p. 57, emphasis added).

This picture of individuals of varying origins enduring enslavement and transport while carrying different elements of the African heritage, then filtering their cultural knowledge through processes of constant compromise and reinvention (some of which was imposed on them, some of which was their own) seems to resonate with earlier work (Mintz & Price 1992). But Alpers dismisses (p. 59, n. 18) any similarity between his ideas and those of Mintz and Price.

Luis Nicolau Parés's essay renews interest in the persistence of African cognitive orientations in the Americas, and looks at what I would call a "pre-institutional" history of Candomblé in Brazil. In that period, he writes, there were groups that held drumming-dancing celebrations, but that these lacked a fixed locale, a religious hierarchy, or a religious calendar of events. He argues that Candomblé emerged only in the nineteenth century and that its formation was marked by the appearance of these three features. Otherwise said, slaves had to *institutionalize* their religious practices. This seems to mean that institutions did not travel easily from Africa, that not everyone was from the same place or spoke the same tongue, and that institutionalization actually facilitated the perpetuation of these reinventions. Otherwise, why would Nicolau Parés write that:

religious values and practices of African origin were instrumental in the creation of a particular religious institution, *Candomblé*, which became of critical importance in the *reinvention* [of] a new Creole culture (p. 69, emphasis added).

He does a fine job of teasing out the cognitive orientations of the slaves and reconstructing a pre-Candomblé stage in Brazil. The processes by means of which one “pantheon” (Hevioso) took on its new, modified shape are labeled “simultaneous integrative-cumulative and selective-discriminatory.” To me, the phrases suggest both the pulling of culturally disparate elements into a system or structure of action, and their taking on integrated form as they are invoked ritually – and then collectively, repeatedly, acted upon. It seemed to me as I read that these studies of cultural *bricolage* really build upon the “speculative exercises” that Richard Price and I used to imagine African-American beginnings for the first time in a paper written in 1972 and published in 1976 (Mintz & Price 1976:23-25).

In an illuminating paper on black brotherhoods in Brazil, Elizabeth Kiddy offers three contrastive cases of the structure of such brotherhoods. These groups occurred “mostly in the cities, but plenty of evidence exists to demonstrate that they also existed on the plantations” (p. 95). She makes two relevant points here. First, she pleads that we look at “*the process of community formation, rather than the existence of ‘survivals’*” (p. 95, emphasis added) in analyzing how the slaves dealt with the realities of their daily existence. Second, she stresses the importance of “deeper principles” in understanding how the African past figured in those dealings. Her data show that hierarchy and ethnic self-identification were two much-used principles of social assortment for the brotherhoods. But without knowing how a brotherhood fit into its specific social and economic context, it is not possible to see that each such principle was used adaptively to integrate its membership and to define the group’s social relations to the outside, and to other brotherhoods. “Through this strategy,” she writes, “Africans and their descendents [*sic*] could recreate African social structure in order to *become a viable community embedded in yet separate from Euro-Brazilian society, while simultaneously becoming a part of that society on their own terms*” (p. 117, emphasis added). Here Kiddy captures a characteristic aspect of New World institution building by African Americans (Mintz & Price 1992:39, but see Besson 2002 for an important critique of this formulation). These people were able to build their membership in groups, drawing upon older ideas of shared culture, but they had to do so in new settings, with a variety of materials both old and new, and by processes that have long merited study in their own right.

The concluding paper by Colleen Kriger, “The Conundrum of Culture in Atlantic History,” is one of the more ambitious and enlightening essays in this collection. It undertakes to set the study of Africa in the New World upon a

large canvas that includes Africa itself, urging historians to do the research needed to write culture histories for all of Africa, using historical methods. Though it may not seem apposite to her position here, Kriger is a student of African material culture, and has done outstanding historical work on cloth, the blacksmith's craft, and other aspects of African material life. She grasps the analytical difference between the social and the cultural, and recognizes how institutions give life and continuity to cultural materials. Particularly apt are her references to other papers in this book, such as those by Nicolau Parés and Monica Schuler, which draw the African and New World materials together without hastily reifying the groups about which they write. These scholars are more interested in those social processes by which cultural materials are given weight and continuity than they are in the names for things.

This excellent book struck me as oddly contradictory. Its editors and some contributors seem bent upon celebrating a "revisionist" view of African-American history. But the frequent references in these very essays to reinventions, cognitive orientations, African-American creativity, and above all, to the growth of institutions, make me wonder what, in fact, has been revised. The contributors are to be congratulated for helping to build a richer historical view of African-American cultural creativity – even if it sometimes looked to me like a case of beating the enemy by joining him.

Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas grew out of the Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's global lecture experiences, speaking about the slave trade and Africans and their descendants in the New World. Much of it is an historical contemplation of the saga of Atlantic enslavement and all that it brought in its wake, and it is frequently admonitory. But its stated objective is concern with the creation of a statistical database for the slaves of Louisiana and that database's potentialities for understanding the ethnic identities of the slaves. After a sweeping introduction to the Atlantic story, Chapter 2 notes problems in addressing slave ethnicity; Chapter 3 addresses the difficulty of imputing ethnic identity in some New World regions; Chapters 4-7 are concerned with Africa and the geography of ethnic peoples there, with commentary on the movements of those peoples in the trade. The concluding chapter takes up a bare eight pages, stressing anew the importance of history, how things change, and the difficulty of the task. Hall is aware of the problems she faces. She writes:

Very few scholars are familiar with a substantial number of African languages. Some seize on a word or name they know and extrapolate it broadly to prove the presence and influence of a particular African ethnicity in the Americas. But the same or similar names and words exist in several African languages and can have the same, or a similar, or a different meaning (p. 22).

Or again:

I argue that our best evidence for the distribution of Africans at their final destinations in the Americas is in documents containing “nation” descriptions of enslaved Africans, despite the fact that these ethnic designations are sometimes unclear and equivocal (p. 26).

Of newly arrived Africans sold in Louisiana, she points out, only 15.3 percent listed specific ethnic origins. (Hall is confident that these were given by the arrivants themselves.) She believes this low number resulted from difficulties of communication, because the longer people had been in Louisiana, “the more likely they could communicate and identify their ethnicities” (p. 45). Of course this may be true. But we don’t know if it is, or if it can be explained convincingly.

The complexity of the problems is real, as Hall makes plain. The term “Mina,” for example,

normally did not mean slaves coming through the fortress/port of São Jorge da Mina (Elmina) on the Gold Coast. It was a designation referring to different ethnicities over time and place, but it sometimes meant people from Little Popo, originally Akan speakers who had migrated from west of the Volta river (p. 47).

One must assume that it did sometimes mean that, and no doubt it took real work to bring us that far. But since the term referred to different peoples over time, only sometimes meaning people from Little Popo, it is unclear how far this actually takes us.

Such care to qualify sweeping judgments about origins are welcome, as is the desire to pin down origins effectively. Hall also notes the relative paucity of firm knowledge about transshipments of the enslaved, after their arrival in the Americas. Without it, little can be said about origins in many places (p. 69). So this is a book replete with qualifications, as it deserves to be.

Another point to be made about this book is linked to the other volume under review. Pinning down the ethnic identities of the enslaved is a worthy objective, and to discover in doing so just how many problems this entails is a real finding. But there remains beyond these efforts the significance of what one might dare to call “the social facts.” Human aggregates organize themselves into groups; out of their inherent need for meaning, they create rules to live by which, under some conditions, we call institutions. Sometimes the members of those aggregates which become groups all speak the same language and come from the same place, and we may be entitled to call them “ethnic groups,” each with a name. We may also, by dint of enormous effort, troll for ethnic labels so as to figure out their meaning, by sifting historical materials (some of them unreliable). That said, there is not the slightest doubt

that some ethnic groups in the New World were in fact the social precipitates of individuals descended from ancestors drawn from many ethnic groups in Africa. These individuals, over time and by processes not yet fully understood, were able to fashion the groups of which they then were members, and to endow them with solidarity, concreteness, and continuity by the forging of collective cultural activities. Such social precipitates were at least as real and as important as any others, in the building of African-American cultures.

Is it possible, once we think that we have pinned down the names we need, to reproduce the processes by which such aggregates could organize themselves into groups, and create the institutions they then came to live by? Well, we can try. Some of the essay writers in the first of these two books have made good starts at doing so, and have advanced respectable distances.

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