Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora

Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora sets out a new paradigm that increases our understanding of African culture and the forces that led to its transformation during the period of the Atlantic slave trade and beyond, putting long-due emphasis on the importance of Central African culture to the cultures of the United States, Brazil, and the Caribbean. Focusing on the Kongo–Angola culture zone, the book illustrates how African peoples reshaped their cultural institutions, beliefs, and practices as they interacted with Portuguese slave traders up to the year 1800; it then follows Central Africans through all the regions where they were taken as slaves and recaptives. Here, for the first time in one volume, leading scholars of Africa, Brazil, Latin America, and the Caribbean have collaborated to analyze the culture history of Africa and its diaspora. This interdisciplinary approach across geographic areas is sure to set a precedent for other scholars of Africa and its diaspora.

Linda M. Heywood is an Associate Professor of African History and the History of the African Diaspora at Howard University in Washington, DC. Previous publications include Contested Power in Angola, 1840s to the Present (2000), and Black Diaspora: Africans and the Descendants in the Wider World, Parts One and Two (1988), which she coedited.
Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora

Edited by
Linda M. Heywood
Howard University
Contents

List of Contributors vii
Foreword Jan Vansina xi
Acknowledgments xv
Introduction Linda M. Heywood 1

PART ONE CENTRAL AFRICA: SOCIETY, CULTURE, AND THE SLAVE TRADE

1 Central Africa During the Era of the Slave Trade, c. 1490s–1850s Joseph C. Miller 21
2 Religious and Ceremonial Life in the Kongo and Mbundu Areas, 1500–1700 John K. Thornton 71
3 Portuguese into African: The Eighteenth-Century Central African Background to Atlantic Creole Cultures Linda M. Heywood 91

PART TWO CENTRAL AFRICANS IN BRAZIL

4 Central Africans in Central Brazil, 1780–1835 Mary C. Karasch 117
5 Who Is the King of Congo? A New Look at African and Afro-Brazilian Kings in Brazil Elizabeth W. Kiddy 153
### Contents

**PART THREE CENTRAL AFRICANS IN HAITI AND SPANISH AMERICA**

7 Twins, Simbi Spirits, and Lwas in Kongo and Haiti  
*Wyatt MacGaffey*  
211

8 The Central African Presence in Spanish Maroon Communities  
*Jane Landers*  
227

9 Central African Popular Christianity and the Making of Haitian Vodou Religion  
*Hein Vanhee*  
243

10 Kongolese Catholic Influences on Haitian Popular Catholicism: A Sociohistorical Exploration  
*Terry Rey*  
265

**PART FOUR CENTRAL AFRICANS IN NORTH AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN**

11 “Walk in the Feenda”: West-Central Africans and the Forest in the South Carolina–Georgia Lowcountry  
*Ras Michael Brown*  
289

12 Liberated Central Africans in Nineteenth-Century Guyana  
*Monica Schuler*  
319

13 Combat and the Crossing of the *Kalunga*  
*T. J. Desch-Obi*  
353

Index  
371
List of Contributors

Ras Michael Brown is an Assistant Professor of History at Dillard University in New Orleans, Louisiana. His teaching interests include African diaspora studies, African history, and world history. Professor Brown’s research interests focus on the interaction between people and the natural environment in the shaping of culture, as well as on language and music in the diaspora. Outside of academia, he is a poet and musician.

T. J. Desch-Obi holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of California Los Angeles. He currently teaches African history at Baruch College in New York City.

Linda M. Heywood holds a Ph.D. in African history from Columbia University. She began her career at Cleveland State University (1982–84) and has been in the History Department at Howard University since 1984. She has published a book, Contested Power in Angola, 1840s to the Present (University of Rochester Press, 2000), and several articles on the modern history of the Ovimbundu of Central Angola. She has also published on the African diaspora and on Afro-Brazilian culture. Professor Heywood has worked on several museum exhibits, including African Voices at the Smithsonian Institution. She is currently coauthoring a book on the first generation of Central Africans in the Dutch- and English-speaking Americas.

Mary C. Karasch is a Professor of History at Oakland University, Rochester, Michigan. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin. Her principal book is Slave Life in Rio de Janeiro, 1808–1850 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), translated as A vida dos escravos no Rio de Janeiro, 1808–1850, by Pedro Maia Soares and published with a new preface (São Paulo: Companhia das letras, 2000). She also served as the associate
List of Contributors

editor for Brazil for the five volume *Encyclopedia of Latin American History*, ed. Barbara A. Tenenbaum (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1996). Her current research and writing focus on Central Brazil in the late colonial period.

Elizabeth W. Kiddy is an Assistant Professor of History and the Director of the Latin American Studies Program at Albright College in Reading, Pennsylvania. She received her doctorate from the University of New Mexico in 1998. She is currently working on her first book on lay religious brotherhoods of Afro-Brazilians in Minas Gerais. In addition to her academic work, she has been a practitioner of the Afro-Brazilian art form capoeira since 1984, and she continues to teach and give workshops in capoeira.

Jane Landers is Associate Professor of History and Director of the Center for Latin American and Iberian Studies at Vanderbilt University. She is the author of *Black Society in Spanish Florida* (Urbana: 1999), editor of *Colonial Plantations and Economy of Florida* (Gainesville: 2000) and *Against the Odds: Free Blacks in the Slave Societies of the Americas* (London: 1996), and coeditor of *The African American Heritage of Florida* (Gainesville: 1995). She has published essays on the African history of the Hispanic Southeast and of the circum-Caribbean in *The American Historical Review*, *Slavery and Abolition*, *The New West Indian Guide*, *The Americas*, and *Colonial Latin American Historical Review*. Her work also appears in a variety of anthologies and edited volumes.

Wyatt MacGaffey earned his doctorate in anthropology from UCLA in 1967. He then taught at Haverford College, where he became John R. Coleman Professor of Social Sciences, retiring in 1998. He has written extensively on the history, social structures, politics, and art of Central Africa with a particular focus on the BaKongo and a special concern with theory in anthropology. In 1993 he was awarded a Fellowship by the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation.

Joseph C. Miller is the T. Cary Johnson, Jr. Professor of History at the University of Virginia. He has written *Kings and Kinsmen: Early Mbundu States in Angola* and *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730–1830*, and numerous shorter studies. *Way of Death* won the Herskovits Prize of the African Studies Association and received a Special Citation from the AHA’s Bolton Prize Committee. Miller compiled a definitive bibliography of slavery and slaving in world history and plans to write a historical interpretation of this ubiquitous strategy of human domination. He presided over the American Historical Association in 1998.
List of Contributors

Terry Rey is an Assistant Professor of African and Caribbean Religions at Florida International University in Miami and a former Professor of Sociology of Religion at Université d’Etat d’Haiti in Port-au-Prince.

Monica Schuler was born in Guyana. She has a Ph.D. in history from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She was a Research Assistant in the Caribbean History Project at the University of the West Indies, Mona, from 1965 to 1966. In 1973, she began teaching at Wayne State University, where she holds the rank of Professor. She has published on Caribbean slave resistance, Jamaican religion, and post-emancipation African laborers in the Caribbean and Guyana, including the book, “Alas, Alas, Kongo”: A Social History of Indentured Africans in Nineteenth Century Jamaica (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980). She is currently writing a biography of the Jamaican healer Alexander Bedward.

Robert W. Slenes has been a Professor in the Department of History at Uni-camp, Brazil, since 1984. He received his Ph.D. from Stanford University. His book, Na Senzala, Uma Flor, was published in 1999. His work focuses on the cultural recollections of Central Africans in Brazil.


Hein Vanhee holds an MA from the Sainsbury Research Unit at the University of East Anglia and is currently working in the Department of Modern History at Ghent University (Belgium). His current doctoral research looks at the development of early colonialism in Mayombe (Lower Congo, RDC). His main focus is on the impact of the nineteenth-century trade in slaves and palm products on local mechanisms of power and on the process whereby these mechanisms were colonized and transformed to the advantage of administrative control (indirect rule) and missionary action. He undertook two research trips to Mayombe in 1998 and 1999.
Foreword

“Forgotten ancestors” could well be the title for this book about Central Africans in the American diaspora. They are indeed the hitherto forgotten ancestors in the genealogy of the cultures in the diaspora of the New World, because the magnitude and ubiquity of their contribution have thus far been so overlooked or neglected as to become nearly invisible. Hence, this book opens new vistas and will be an eye opener to many of its readers, as they begin to realize the implications of the demographic size, the geographic ubiquity, and the common cultural background that many of those Central Africans already shared before they even arrived in the Americas. These implications force such a revision of received views concerning the formation and evolution of creolization that this book will leave its stamp on the whole field. It begins to provide answers as to how it all began and how it developed while giving rise to even more questions.

Almost half of all Africans who crossed the Atlantic came from Central Africa. They went everywhere in the Americas, from Buenos Aires to Columbia and Peru, to the wider Caribbean, including Suriname and the Guianas, to the coasts of the United States, from New Orleans to New York; eventually some even reached Nova Scotia. This contrasts to some degree with West Africans, who tended to be settled in discrete clusters, such as those of Bahia and Haiti by people from the Lower Guinea Coast or Jamaica for people from what is now Ghana. But even in such places, large numbers of Central Africans also settled. Kongo is still much remembered in Jamaica, Haiti, Brazil, Colombia, New Orleans, and the Carolina Lowlands.

It is my contention that Central African emigration, more than any other, has provided the common glue, the cultural background common to African American communities everywhere, that explains their similarity. These common elements have prevented the emergence of local
or regional cultures in America derived from this or that particular cultural group in Atlantic Africa. This is so because most Central Africans already shared a single overarching culture before they arrived in the Americas, in contrast to West Africans, who divided in several major groups of different cultures. Most Central Africans left the harbors of the Loango Coast and Angola, places that pertained to only three regional cultures: those of Kongo, Mbandu, and Ovimbundu. These cultures were not only interrelated but continually interacted with each other. This is not to say that all the emigrants were from Kongo, Mbandu, or Ovimbundu—far from it. But they were all speakers of fairly closely related languages, the West Bantu languages, which meant that they could communicate somewhat with each other from the outset. What data exist show that between the time of their capture and the time of their embarkation, indeed the time of their landing, most emigrants from the interior did learn Kongo, Kimbundu, or Umbundu, and with the acquisition of the language came some degree of familiarity with coastal culture as well: a single coastal culture, for during these years Kongo and Kimbundu strongly influenced each other, as did Kimbundu and Umbundu. The result was that by the time America was reached, the emigrants shared a common language. The Portuguese in Angola were so well aware of this dynamic that by the middle of the eighteenth century they called Kimbundu the "lengoa geral": the general language of the country. This commonality of language again included many common cultural attitudes, including a repertory of common knowledge about Europe and Europeans.

In addition, many slaves who originated in the Kongo realm were Catholics from the middle of the seventeenth century onward, and the religion of many from the Mbandu realm was based on a synthesis of the umbanda healing cults and Catholicism. To say that Vodou existed in Kongo and Angola even before it existed in Haiti is only a small exaggeration. Its Catholicism, its beliefs about zombies (zombies), and its understanding of the spirits of saints were all present in Central Africa. As to umbanda in Brazil, it developed first from umbanda in Angola, while later the Angolan and Brazilian varieties influenced each other continuously since about 1700. Much of this transcultural coastal worldview was also absorbed by other slaves from the time they began their march to the coast, but mainly while they were waiting to be shipped, especially on the coast of Angola.

Hence, Central Africans did not only go everywhere in the Americas but everywhere too they brought this rather homogenous coastal culture with them, which had already in Africa borrowed from mostly Mediterranean European practices and thoughts.
This common culture facilitated their cultural incorporation to some extent, especially in the Latin parts of America, probably more so than was the case for various groups of West Africans.

This common worldview, and its religious expression, encompassed underlying values including crucial notions about the nature of humanity and community. Communities should consist of equals – at least as far as men were concerned – and hence cooperation and association were crucial to social life. The rise of the African American church groups is an expression of this set of values, including the role attributed to women as spirit vessels and as healers. Yet hierarchy, based in part on leadership ability and in part on age, was also deemed to be essential for a community. Hence we see in Brazil attempts to re-create Central African kingdoms or Palmares, the memories and re-creation of a notional Central African kingship in Brazil's pageants as well as Haiti's fourth Vodou. Age as a quality of leadership was ubiquitous and became a striking feature of African American communities, for example, in Baptist churches. It is not surprising then to find the Patton cane as an emblem of eldership in an Arkansas church, an emblem that was carved in the purest style of the Loango coast.

This book opens the doors: Ranging over both Americas, it explores cultural legacies of Central Africa about creolization, in particular about identity, religion and spirituality, social leadership, attitudes toward natural environment similar to those in Central Africa, and even martial manhood. But it is only a first exploration, a book that sows the seeds of discovery for its readers.

Jan Vansina
Formerly of the University of Wisconsin
The articles in this collection were initially presented at the conference “Bantu into Black: Central Africans in the Atlantic Diaspora,” which I organized at Howard University and the Smithsonian Institution in 1999. The major part of the funds for the conference came from Howard University. Thanks go first to the Fund for Academic Excellence, Howard University, whose competitive grant provided the initial financial support for the conference. I acknowledge also the additional financial support that the Office of the President and the Office of the Provost at Howard University extended. The Departments of History, Fine Arts, Political Science, African American Studies, and African Studies; the Cobb Biological Anthropology Laboratory; the Graduate School of Arts and Science; and the Ralph Bunche International Center at Howard University were all important contributors as well. Thanks also go to the Anacostia Museum and Center for African-American History and Culture (the Smithsonian Institution), the National Museum of American History (the Smithsonian Institution), and the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at Yale University, whose financial and other support made the conference a success.

My deepest gratitude goes to the contributors whose faith in the project never wavered. Ibrahim Sundiata, the Chairman of the History Department at Howard University, was from the beginning a solid supporter of the conference, and his efforts are gratefully acknowledged. A special acknowledgment is due to Wendy Manuel-Scott, who helped make the conference run smoothly. Thanks also to Cambridge University Press for allowing me to make my vision of the Central African diaspora a reality.

I am deeply indebted to John K. Thornton for his collegial support.

– Linda M. Heywood