Introduction

In 1492, the Early Modern Atlantic was born. After that date, sailing ships connected distant parts of the Atlantic in new and dynamic ways. As people, trade goods, and ideas flowed across the ocean, African, American, and European cultures and economies were radically reshaped. For several hundred years, American Indians would die in tremendous numbers from diseases that white explorers and settlers introduced and wars they waged; Europeans would colonize much of the Americas and establish plantations that produced exports for Old World metropoles; and blacks would labor on those plantations as Europe shipped what ultimately was about 12.5 million enslaved Africans from coastal ports in the largest forced migration in human history. To illustrate the magnitude of this migration, before 1820 about three-quarters of all people arriving in the Americas hailed from Africa.¹

It is only over the past several decades that studies using the Early Modern Atlantic as a unit of analysis have become popular. Many scholars who examine Atlantic history see Europeans as dominating Atlantic interactions and shaping transformations. They equate the Atlantic basin with European civilization. These scholars marginalize Africa and reduce Africans’ contributions to the construction of an Atlantic World to merely labor alone.² However, historians who reject Eurocentric approaches to

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the past see considerable African and Afro-American agency. That is, they view Africans and their descendants in the Americas as controlling some of the processes that led to the creation and metamorphosis of an Atlantic economic and cultural system. Following John Thornton, “Africans were active participants in the Atlantic world, both in African trade with Europe … and as slaves in the New World.”

This book focuses squarely on people from Africa. In simplest terms, it traces the flow of enslaved Africans from identifiable points in Upper Guinea (what the Portuguese came to call Guiné) to plantations in Amazonia, Brazil. It is concerned with the period from about Portugal’s establishment of a colony in Amazonia in 1621 to the legal abolition of the oceanic slave trade into the region in 1830. I am particularly interested in how Upper Guineans effected change in the Atlantic economic and cultural network that connected the Upper Guinea ports of Bissau and Cacheu – cities in the present-day country of Guinea-Bissau – to the ports of São Luís and Belém in the captaincies of Maranhão and Pará, which together comprised Amazonia. In the period covered by this book, captains of sailing ships embarked slaves at Bissau and Cacheu and disembarked iron, cloth, beads, guns, gunpowder, rum, tobacco, and other trade items. The vessels were mostly Portuguese-owned. The enslaved were shipped, for the most part, to Amazonia.

The slave trade from Upper Guinea to Amazonia reached its zenith in the second half of the eighteenth century. Before then, Amazonia was an underdeveloped backwater of the Portuguese empire. Few whites were settled there, and over a period of about 150 years, fewer than 3,500 African slaves (mostly Upper Guineans) had been shipped there. In 1755, Portugal sought to stimulate Amazonia’s economy by encouraging increased levels of African slave imports. For this, the crown granted a monopoly on shipments from Bissau and Cacheu and into São Luís and Belém to a joint stock company called the Company of Grão Pará and Maranhão (Companhia Geral do Grão Pará e Maranhão, or CGPM). High volumes of trade from Bissau and Cacheu to São Luís resulted in an Upper Guinean majority emerging in colonial-controlled rural areas of Maranhão. Parts of Pará, too, saw the emergence of an Upper Guinean majority. However, fewer slaves went to Pará than went to Maranhão (and many who went to Pará were traded elsewhere), so the bulk of my analysis focuses on Maranhão. Trade from Bissau and Cacheu declined

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sharply after 1815 when Portugal, under pressure from Britain, forbade its nationals from engaging in the transoceanic shipment of slaves north of the equator. From 1755 to 1815, about 70,000 Upper Guineans entered Amazonia, and most of those entered before 1800.

With those 70,000 and the hundreds of thousands more in the communities from which they were taken as its subject, this study makes several historiographical contributions. First, this is one of a handful of accounts of Upper Guineans in diaspora and is the only book-length examination of African slavery in Maranhão before the early nineteenth century. Second, this is one of few studies to identify with precision from where members of a large diaspora in the Americas hailed in Africa. Finally, this book proposes new directions for scholarship focused on how immigrant groups who crossed the Atlantic in the Early Modern period created new or re-created old cultures in the Americas. I will expand on each of those points.

AN UNDERSTUDIED DIASPORA IN AN UNDERSTUDIED PART OF BRAZIL

This book fills large voids in scholarship about slavery and the Atlantic slave trade. It is one of few works to examine the cultural linkages between Upper Guinea and its diaspora in the Americas. Considerable research has traced flows of captives from West Central Africa (especially the Kongo and Angola areas) and the Bights of Benin and Biafra (what the Portuguese called Mina). Scholars have been especially concerned with the degree to which slaves from West Central Africa and Mina re-created in the Americas aspects of the cultures from which they came. However,

only a handful of studies focused on the transfer of rice-growing techniques and one looking at the transfer of an Architectural aesthetic have considered Upper Guinean cultural contributions anywhere in the New World. Several notable studies explore the economic links between Upper Guinea and Amazonia in the era of the CGPM. But beyond speculating about the ethnic groups to which slaves arriving in Amazonia belonged, no single work pays attention to the cultural implications of the trade.


As well as being one of few studies about Upper Guineans in diaspora, this is the only book-length examination of African slavery in Maranhão before the early nineteenth century. Despite the fact that the slave trade to the region is relatively well documented and that archival sources about African slave life are plentiful in Maranhão’s well-organized state archive, Anglophone scholars have paid little attention to black slavery in the region.7 Beyond articles mostly published by a handful of dedicated scholars living in Amazonia, little, too, has been published in Portuguese.8 This might be because the region’s historical trajectory was very different from the rest of Brazil. Maranhão and Pará were largely cut off from regions to the south by contrary currents and winds. Indeed, it was faster to sail from São Luís to Lisbon than from São Luís to Rio de Janeiro.9 Further, whereas much of the rest of Brazil had vibrant export economies in the seventeenth century, Amazonia’s economy, as noted above, floundered until after the mid-eighteenth century. Added to this is the fact that ocean currents and winds linked Amazonia to a very different part of

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the Atlantic World. The region looked to Guiné for slaves. This can be contrasted with the southern reaches of Brazil, which drew slaves mostly from Angola, and with Bahia and Pernambuco, which drew slaves mostly from the Bight of Benin.

What this book does is explore two understudied areas on the Atlantic’s periphery that were united by a slave trade. I argue that through much of the Early Modern period the Amazonia and Upper Guinea areas were two sides of the same coin. They comprised one unit – one region that stretched across an ocean. Processes of historical change in one part of that region reverberated throughout the rest, effecting change thousands of miles away. Neither area should be seen in isolation. Both are best understood through a study that takes a broader, Atlantic perspective.

**ORIGINS AND IDENTITIES**

Within Guiné, I trace the origins of slaves exported to Amazonia after 1755 to specific and relatively small areas. Recent scholarship about African diasporas in the Americas has made use of data generated from records of slave ship voyages to detail flows of slaves across the Atlantic. Particularly important has been data generated from two sources. The first is David Eltis, Stephen Behrendt, David Richardson, and Herbert Klein’s 1999 *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM* (TSTD) – a dataset with information from the Atlantic crossings of 27,233 slave ships. The second is the same team’s *Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* (TSTD2), an Internet-based dataset that documents about 35,000 slave ship voyages. Users of the datasets
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can trace particular flows of slaves from ports in Africa to ports in the Americas and can generate information about, among other things, the volume of those flows over time. Together, the datasets show better than any other scholarship the nature of the linkages between broad regions of Africa and wide areas of the Americas. Africans in the Americas, the datasets make clear, were not any more randomly distributed than were Europeans.12

But what the datasets do not show is from where within Africa slaves embarking on Atlantic vessels hailed and to where in the Americas slaves disembarked from those vessels went.13 That is, the datasets contain information about how many slaves embarked at particular African ports and disembarked at particular American ports, but they contain no information about the birthplaces of the Africans aboard any ship or the final destinations of African slaves who reached the Americas. It should go without saying that Africa has always been a vast and varied place. Supply routes stretching from deep in the interior brought slaves to ports as did shorter routes connecting to communities tens of miles from the coast. Moreover, there was a substantial coastal trade in slaves, which involved merchants moving captives from place to place in the open ocean and through intercoastal waterways before boarding them on ships bound for the New World. It is also clear that America, too, was a vast and varied place, with supply routes stretching from coastal ports to the deep interior of many colonies in addition to the not-so-distant hinterland. Further, it was not uncommon for slaves to disembark at one American port and then embark on a new ship for another distant place—a different colony hundreds of miles away. The TSTD and TSTD2 contain no information about intra-African or intra-American supply routes.

Hence, studies making use of TSTD and TSTD2 generally discuss Africa using generalities. That is, they focus on the likelihood that slaves in particular plantation zones were “Angolans” and “Minas,” without pinpointing from where, exactly, those Angolans and Minas came. In the case of Upper Guinea, those arguing for and against a thesis that Upper Guineans brought with them the technologies necessary for plantation

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rice production in the Americas (the “black rice thesis”) have failed to determine the exact origins of the people they study. Were they from rice-producing parts of Upper Guinea or weren’t they? Can we know?

To the latter question, I say yes. We can know. In this study, I pinpoint the locations in Africa of Upper Guineans who were enslaved and shipped into the Atlantic by making use of postmortem inventories recorded in Maranhão between 1767 and 1832. When a property owner died in the captaincy, a representative of the state tallied his or her possessions – including slaves. Inventory takers usually made extensive notes about slaves. Typically, they recorded slaves’ ages, marriage partners, children, professions, values, and “defects” (injuries and illnesses). In addition, they asked slaves from what “nation” they hailed. To the question “What is your nation?” Upper Guineans in Maranhão most often responded with the name of an ethnic group – Balanta, Bijago, Papel, Banyun, Brám, Mandinka, Floup, and Fula, for example. Sometimes, too, slaves responded with a place such as Cacheu, Geba, and Bissau. Such responses, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall argues, can tell us who slaves thought they were – what identities they chose to emphasize. It is clear from sources she has collected in Louisiana and I have collected in Maranhão that African ethnic or national identities often survived the Middle Passage and continued to have meaning for African slaves in the Americas.

Ethnic identities were, indeed, significant for Upper Guineans. From some of their first visits to the Upper Guinea coast, Europeans recorded the ethnonyms of the peoples with whom they came into contact. And they would continue to gather this information for hundreds of years.


15 I assembled those into a database – the Maranhão Inventories Slave Database (MISD). The documents are at the Arquivo Judiciário of the Tribunal de Justiça do Estado do Maranhão (TJEM).


Further, Portuguese, French, English, and Dutch observers, acting independently, drew maps noting territories in which people from particular ethnic groups lived. In their conceptualization, European observers believed ethnicity was determined by language, although they often noted differences in political structures and customs – dress, scarifications, foods, and so forth. Within ethnic groups, there is often a notion of shared descent. In Upper Guinea, oral traditions also speak of ethnolinguistic territories, which people in Guinea-Bissau refer to as *chão* (*tchon* in the singular) in a widely spoken creole language called *Kriolo*. In an exhaustive study of written sources from the years 1440 to 1700, P. E. H. Hair shows how these *chão* have been stable over time. That is, ethnic groups remained established in more or less the same locations for many centuries.\(^{18}\)

Although European colonial policies did, in the twentieth century, bring ethnic identities to the fore, hardening them and raising their importance by linking economic and political opportunities to group inclusion, there is no evidence that Europeans “invented” ethnic identities from whole cloth in Upper Guinea – in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries and certainly not before. Simply put, in Upper Guinea before the nineteenth century, Europe’s representatives were rent-paying guests of local African landlords. For the most part, they exercised little direct political influence beyond the boundaries of small coastal areas. And in the enclaves of Bissau and Cacheu, Portugal’s political and military position was tenuous indeed.\(^{19}\) Africans responded to both internal and external forces by defining and redefining identities; to describe their identities as “European inventions” would be to misunderstand the nature of power in Upper Guinea. Here and elsewhere – although perhaps not everywhere – in Africa, ethnic identities were salient from the fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries.\(^{20}\)

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\(^{20}\) My purpose here is not to compare and contrast the salience of ethnic identities in places across Africa. That said, I think people on the Upper Guinea coast may have emphasized ethnic identities more than people in many other parts of Africa. In Maranhão, slaves from West Central Africa in the eighteenth century were most often identified as Angolan in plantation inventories. Those from Upper Guinea most often identified themselves and were identified by others with more narrow ethnonyms – Balanta, Bijago, Biafada, Papel, etc.
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This is not to say that ethnic identities, as misguided European colonial administrators and intellectuals thought through much of the twentieth century, were innate and unchanging. Many people in Upper Guinea were multilingual.\(^{21}\) People from different groups sometimes married. Some changed locations, moving from one \textit{tcbon} to another. Others settled down with people from other ethnic groups, eventually becoming members of that group. As Boubacar Barry writes, “There were Toures, originally Manding, who became Tukulor or Wolof; Jallos, originally Peul, became Khaasonke; Moors turned into Naari Kajor; Mane and Sane, originally Jool, surnames were taken by the Manding royalty of Kabu.”\(^{22}\) In the northeast of Guinea-Bissau, Balanta who interacted and intermarried with Mandinka over time adopted new political structures, cultural styles, and social customs. Their language changed to integrate Mandinka words, and eventually they adopted an identity for themselves that was neither Balanta nor Mandinka. They became Bejaa.\(^{23}\)

But no Bejaa was only a Bejaa. That is, no Bejaa held one and only one identity – an ethnic identity. Indeed, members of all ethnic groups held multiple and overlapping identities – some more important at times than an ethnic identity. A Papel could identify himself as a member of a rural, village-based community and as a \textit{grumete} (canoe-hand) employed by a white merchant in Bissau. He could work as a \textit{grumete} alongside Balanta, Bijago, Mandinka, and people from other Upper Guinea ethnic groups, joining with them at times in common cause to protest treatment by an employer or to defend an employer’s interests against threats from an African landlord. A Papel could wear, like all people in Upper Guinea, protective amulets acquired from Muslim priests. Further, he could attend a multiethnic mass when Catholic priests were in Bissau, and he could visit shrines to Papel ancestral spirits. He could have many identities – identities linked to a very local religion and to Catholicism and Islam; identities linked to his profession, village, and ethnicity. Ethnic identities were not the only identities that Upper Guineans possessed, and

\(^{21}\) Almada noted in the late sixteenth century that Biafada had a word (\textit{ganagoga}) for “a man who speaks all languages.” Andre Alvares de Almada, \textit{Brief Treatise on the Rivers of Guinea}, trans. P. E. H. Hair (Liverpool: University of Liverpool, 1984), 1: 23.
