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978-0-521-77922-7 - Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585-1660

Linda M. Heywood and John K. Thornton

Excerpt

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Introduction

The emergence of postcolonial, postmodern, and subaltern studies since the early 1980s has reshaped the way historians view the history of the Atlantic and the African diaspora. Although an older school focused on slavery and the attitudes of the European and Euro-American elites toward Africans, newer research has tried to recover the world of the slaves themselves, with a developing interest in culture and identity. Africans and their descendants are increasingly being considered in the same vein as working-class Europeans, indentured servants, and other migrants. Historians have also begun to reexamine the history of Native Americans as historical actors, with interesting internal social dynamic and a long engagement with European settlers. Although work has proceeded rapidly on European peasants, sailors, urban workers, and even the underclass or their American counterparts, Africa has yet to achieve similar coverage, even though a number of new works have recognized that Africans in the Americas can be subjected to the same sort of detailed research.

This work seeks to explore the specific origins of the Africans who formed part of the founding generation of English and Dutch America. Because most of them came from Central Africa, an area with a century-and-a-half-long history of intense interaction with Europe that was unique to this zone, their role as founders and creators of African American culture is enhanced.

Our approach addresses a number of shortfalls in the study of the relationship between Africa and the Americas. First, our study concentrates on a detailed examination of the history of a specific region in Africa over a limited period, including a careful examination of who was enslaved

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at what time. This helps to overcome the common assertion in American history that the exact background of Africans is either unimportant or cannot be ascertained. It is possible to know much more about the African military and the commercial, religious, cultural, and social background of slaves arriving in the Americas than just their port of embarkation or their alleged ethnic identity as revealed in ships' records or American bills of sale, inventories, or court records. Although these records provide a starting point from the American side, only a full and careful examination of a variety of sources dealing with the African side can present a complete understanding of who had been enslaved and their social and cultural background.

West Central Africa is richly documented by first-hand original eyewitness sources written both by Europeans and by Africans – in all several thousand pages of materials help to illuminate this region in the seventeenth century and allow a highly nuanced understanding of the intricacies of politics, commerce, and culture. The maps that illustrate Chapter 4 show the fruits of what close reading of these sources can do. What our investigation reveals is the degree to which Central Africans were bearers of an Atlantic Creole culture and the extent to which many of those who were actually enslaved, transported, and eventually integrated into the estates and homes of American colonists bore this culture. Their knowledge of European material culture, religion, language, and aesthetics made it easy for them to integrate into the colonial environment, especially in the fluid frontier situation that existed between the 1580s and 1660.

A second problem we addressed is to place the particular group of Africans in the larger setting of the Atlantic world. It is only through this sort of regional framework – by understanding the complexities of Spanish and Portuguese financial and colonial dealings, the struggles in the Low Countries, naval campaigns, and colonization that were a part of the war, religious dimensions of missionary work, and ideological contestations – that the status of Africans in this period can be appreciated. English and Dutch privateers carried their pirated captives to colonies from the sweltering Amazon basin to snowy New England and to a dozen islands and coastal enclaves in the Caribbean and South America. Here, too, a comparative and Atlantic approach allows us to see the wide variety of situations that African captives faced once they arrived in America.

A third problem is addressed by taking insights drawn from the larger framework and using them to explore the local situations of Africans. For the most part, the lives of the early Africans in English and Dutch colonies

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are poorly documented; the records are scattered and often uninformative. But using a wide lens and seeing a comparative focus, as well as centering the Central African background, makes possible a richer understanding of the world they lived in and helped to create. In addition, it reveals their strategic position at the moment when the developing English and Dutch slave trade brought thousands of West Africans, with very different cultural backgrounds to the same colonies. A new cultural dynamic would soon be in play.

Finally, we are able, using the knowledge gained from our focused study to reexamine the attitudes that Europeans developed in their dealings with Africans from this region. The set of circumstances that brought Central Africans to the Americas during the crucial period that slavery was emerging in the English and Dutch colonies also coincided with the publication of several detailed books about the region that revealed its Creole character. No other region of Africa was so well and so favorably described. This conjuncture had a profound influence on the origins of race relations in the American colonies of England and the Low Countries.

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I

Privateering, Colonial Expansion, and the African Presence in Early Anglo-Dutch Settlements

In the late rainy season of 1619, a woman named Angela began a new period of her life. Enslaved in one or another of the wars that gripped West Central Africa, she was taken to Luanda, the coastal capital of the Portuguese colony of Angola.¹ There, she and thousands of other war captives were lodged in squalid conditions in the courtyard of one of the many merchants' houses that sprawled along the narrow beach that separated the bay from rocky cliffs. From the courtyard one could see the residences of the Portuguese elite on the hills to the south, the governor's palace, and the Jesuits' church. Soon she and 350 of her fellow captives were rowed across the sound that separated Luanda's beach to the "island," a long, low spit of land that protected the harbor.² She was paraded before Portuguese officials at the Casa da Mina's counting house and noted for tax purposes and then loaded aboard the waiting frigate *São João Bautista*. Captain Manuel Mendes da Cunha was to guide his ship across the Atlantic to the Mexican port of Vera Cruz and sell its human cargo to eager Spanish merchants, who would use the newly arrived Angolans as personal servants, plantation workers, or perhaps porters.

Angela's name tells us that she was baptized and thus may have been spared the otherwise meaningless ministrations of priests who were

¹ John Thornton, "The African Experience of the '20. and Odd Negroes' Arriving in Virginia in 1619," *William and Mary Quarterly* 55 (1998): 421-34.

² This description of Luanda is taken from notes and maps in the Fernão de Sousa documents, c. 1626, Beatrix Heintze (ed.), *Fontes para a história de Angola do século XVII* (2 vols., Stuttgart, 1985-1988), 1: 172-84, including "Mapa da baía de Luanda," 12 October 1626, and "Planta da fortificação de Luanda," 12 October 1626, and maps photographically reproduced and transcribed.

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required by law to baptize all slaves who were not already Christian before they boarded the waiting slave ships.³ Christianity was already old in this region of Central Africa, and Angela may well have been among the 4,000 Christian porters who had been enslaved by rampaging mercenary soldiers in Portuguese service during the war Portugal was waging against the African kingdom of Ndongo – the Bishop of Angola would lodge a vain complaint against the affair in August.⁴ Or she may have been captured in a civil war in the Christian kingdom of Kongo. The journey to America was a long one, and food supplies ran low. Water was in short supply and the number of deaths steadily mounted. Most of the miserable cargo, held below decks for long periods, were now sick. The *São João Bautista* stopped in Jamaica and sold off 24 younger children, took on supplies, and probably allowed its unwilling passengers a respite on land.⁵

A short time later, as they were passing Campeche on the coast of Yucatán, just a few days before their destination, sails were spotted. They were two English ships operating in consort, the *White Lion*, under Captain John Colyn Jope, a privateer carrying a letter of marque from Vlissingen (Flushing), Holland, and its companion, also a privateer, the *Treasurer*, under English Captain Daniel Elfrith, carrying its marque from the Duke of Savoy in Italy. Both had license to capture Spanish shipping and to take whatever they deemed valuable. The *White Lion* sent a pinnace with 25 men to board the *São João*, taking off some of its cargo of tallow and wax and 50–60 of the slaves, including Angela. They then released Captain da Cunha to deliver the remaining 122 people of his cargo at Vera Cruz.⁶

³ The Catholic Church was seriously examining the question of the validity of these baptisms at the time, testimony that describes in detail the methods of the Church in Angola; see Alonso de Sandoval, *Naturaleza, Policia, Sagrada i Profana, costumbres i ritos, disciplina i catechismo Evangelico de todos Etiopes* (Seville, 1627) mod. ed. Angel de Valtierra as *De Instauranda Aethiopum Salute: El mundo de la esclavitud negra en America* (Bogota, 1956), pp. 348–54.

⁴ Bishop Manuel Bautista Soares, “Copia dos excessos que se cometem no gouerno de Angola que o bispo deu a V. Magestade pedindo remedio delles de presente, e de futuro,” 7 September 1619, in António Brásio (ed.), *Monumenta Missionaria Africana* (1st series, 15 vols., Lisbon, 1952–1988), 6: 370.

⁵ For details of the ship, and its itinerary up to its capture, Engel Sluiter, “New Light on the ‘20. and Odd Negroes’ Arriving in Virginia, August, 1619,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd series, 54 (1997): 396–8.

⁶ These two ships and the capture are described in Public Record Office (henceforward PRO), Records of the High Court of Admiralty (henceforward HCA) 1/48, Deposition of Richard Stafford of Staplehurst, Kent, 23 July 1620, summarized in Peter Coldham,

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Angela was sent to the *Treasurer*, which took her under scarcely better conditions than she enjoyed on the *São João Bautista* northward to the new English colony of Virginia. Jope and the *White Lion* sailed ahead and delivered “twenty and odd Negroes” to Virginia toward the end of August. Those on the *São João Bautista* who were taken to Captain Jope’s *White Lion* became the “twenty and odd Negroes” who are traditionally described as the founders of the African presence in English America. John Rolfe described them as being brought to Virginia by a “Dutch Man of War” (Jope’s marque from Flushing made them Dutch in his mind) that the “Governor General brought for victuals.”

When the *Treasurer* arrived at Point Comfort four days later, Captain Elfrith discovered that the Duke of Savoy had made peace with Spain, thereby canceling his privateering marque. Samuel Argall, who had arranged for Elfrith’s voyage, had been replaced as governor of Virginia by Edwin Sandys, who was at odds with Elfrith’s master, the Earl of Warwick, and who also feared that the privateer would evoke the hostility of Spain and might lead to retaliation.⁷ Concerned that he might now be charged as a pirate and hung, Elfrith quickly set sail for Bermuda, where Miles Kendall, the vice governor, was more favorable to privateers. Kendall gave Captain Elfrith grain and allowed him to land his Angolan cargo.⁸

Angela and 28 of her surviving companions were then seized by the governor, Samuel Butler, and unceremoniously lodged in the longhouse at St. Georges, a sort of jail. Some were sold off to various Bermudan colonists, whereas most of the rest were put to work on behalf of the Company.⁹ In February 1620, Angela and about half a dozen other survivors of the *São João Bautista* were back in the *Treasurer*, a leaky, tired old ship that returned her to Virginia before overturning and sinking in

English Adventurers and Emigrants, 1609–1660 (London, 1984). Our thanks to Tim Hashaw and Michael Jarvis for this reference. Note that Maruice of Nassau began giving out letters of marque in early in 1619; see Archivio General de Simancas, Estado 1090, Archduke Alberto to King, 28 February 1619.

⁷ Virginia Court Session, 31 May 1620 in Susan M. Kingsbury (ed.), *The Records of the Virginia Company of London* (4 vols., Washington, DC, 1906–1935), 1: 367.

⁸ The *Treasurer*’s case is complex and became the subject of an extended lawsuit in England; Magdalene College, Oxford, Ferrar Papers, Doc. 403 Court of 19 January 1620 and 24 July 1624 (our thanks to Thomas Davidson for this reference).

⁹ John Dutton to the Earl of Warwick 20 January 1619/1620, Vernon A. Ives, *The Rich Papers: Letters from Bermuda, 1615–46* (Toronto, Buffalo, London, 1984), pp. 141–2; PRO HCA 1/48, Testimony of Richard Stafford of Staplehurst, 3 June 1620, summarized in Coldham, p. 181. Dutton puts their number at 29, Stafford gives 25, we have favored the Dutton number as being closer in date to the events.

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a creek off the James River.¹⁰ Angela appeared on the 1625 muster list as one of four “servants” laboring on the estate of Captain William Pierce at “James Cittie,” the main town of Virginia, helping to raise cattle and pigs and perhaps performing some personal services.¹¹

Angela’s experience was typical of many Central Africans arriving in the emerging Dutch and English settlements in the first decades of the seventeenth century. During the early years of the English and Dutch colonies, the Africans who formed part of the laboring class arrived largely as a result of piracy on the high seas, as the English and Dutch attempted to wrest the Atlantic commerce and territories in the Americas from Catholic Spain and Portugal. For the Protestant aggressors, successful settlement in their own colonies was achieved by taking land that Catholic Spain and Portugal had nominal and real claims to since the mid-sixteenth century and capturing Africans that merchants from these nations had acquired as slaves for their colonies.

Like Angela, the overwhelming majority of the Africans who are identified in the records, and who became the founding generation of Afro-American populations in the English- and Dutch-speaking world of the seventeenth century, came from West Central Africa. Whether they supported the privateering war against Spain or not, both English and Dutch colonists benefited from the African captives that privateers supplied.

¹⁰ HCA 13/44, Testimony of John Wood of Wappington, Middlesex, summarized in Coldham, p. 13. The *Treasurer* was noted as being scarcely seaworthy in January 1620; Nathaniel Butler, *The Historye of the Bermudaes or Summer Islands* (ed. J. Henry Lefroy, London, 1882; reprint, New York: Burt Franklin, 1892 [Lefroy wrongly attributed the authorship of this work to John Smith]), pp. 157–8, and Dutton to Warwick, *Rich Papers*, p. 142; but Richard Staplehurst, a witness, said it departed nevertheless for Virginia in February before capsizing (Coldham, p. 181). Their number must not have been too many, for Jupe delivered “twenty and odd” slaves to Virginia in August, and a census of March 1620 reveals the presence of 32 Africans in the colony, William Thorndale, “The Virginia Census of 1619,” *Virginia Genealogical Society* 33 (1995):168 (Thorndale argues that the census was conducted in 1619 but provides convincing evidence that it was made in 1620). Allowing for minimums, and no mortality, they could not have exceeded 12. In other testimony over the recovery of this cargo, one witness mentions that the number brought to Bermuda were divided by thirds, and Angela and her companions may have been among one of the thirds, thus being nine; Magdalene College, Oxford, Ferrar Papers, Doc. 403, Court of 24 June 1622.

¹¹ The census of 1625 gives details of the holdings of William Piercey in James Cittie, see PRO Colonial Office (CO) 1/3, fol. 24, published in Annie Lash Jester and Martha Woodruff Hiden (eds.), *Adventurers of Purse and Person: Virginia 1607–25* (Princeton, 1956), p. 29. It lists her name as “Angelo, a Negro Woman in the Treasurer.” We have altered the name to make it feminine (we have examined the original text and found it correctly transcribed from an unambiguous original), expecting that Angela did not pronounce the final vowel of her name, a tendency found in both Portuguese and Kimbundu, and the scribe simply heard it as “Angelo.”

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Before the English and Dutch developed a regular slave trade with Africa, privateers preying on Portuguese shipping were their sole suppliers of African labor.

Early Portuguese Activities along the Atlantic African Coast

At the time of Angela's capture and export, the Portuguese were the only European power engaged in the Atlantic slave trade. The Portuguese not only supplied their own colonies of São Tomé and Brazil with African slaves but also had a de facto monopoly to supply the Spanish Indies with African captives. The Portuguese thus had 150 years of experience in developing the Atlantic slave trade.

Africans living on the coast of Senegal first encountered Portuguese mariners who visited their coast in 1444 as ruthless marauders who captured fishermen and coastal people and took them back to Europe to sell as slaves. The Portuguese arrived in the African waters armed for war after pioneering voyages solved the navigation problems that dogged earlier attempts. But the Senegalese coastal inhabitants who used shallow draft vessels outmaneuvered the sea-going ships in the waters of the coast and its estuaries. They fought the Portuguese with lance and sword, but it was their poisoned arrows, which neutralized Portuguese armor, that won the day and left Portuguese crews decimated.¹² In the face of defeat, during the 1450s and 1460s Portugal abandoned raiding and set up commercial relations with African rulers through formal diplomatic means. African rulers, who negotiated the nonaggression treaties with the Portuguese royal envoy Diogo Gomes, agreed to sell gold, other commodities, and some of the captives they had captured and enslaved in their own wars or had purchased from other rulers and merchants in exchange for European and North African merchandise.¹³ Portugal cultivated diplomatic relations with the rulers of the whole coast, from Cukuli Mbooj of Great Jolof in Senegal to Nzinga Nkuwu in Kongo, and by the mid-sixteenth century Africans had come to expect European visitors interested in buying captives to follow local African law and customs and accept African authority.¹⁴ Although Portuguese claimed monopoly over African trade,

¹² John Thornton, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa, 1500–1800* (London, 1998), pp. 44–51.

¹³ Diogo Gomes, “De Inventione africae maritimae et occidentalis videlicet Genec per infantem Heinrichum Portugallie,” in Brásio, *Monumenta* (2nd series, 5 vols., Lisbon, 1958–1985), 1: 214–15.

¹⁴ John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1440–1800* (2nd edition, Cambridge, 1998), pp. 36–40; Elbl, “Cross-Cultural Trade,” pp. 165–204.

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the Africans had never accepted these claims and welcomed anyone willing to trade.

Portugal valued this trade in people and in African commodities like gold, ivory, and pepper enough to obtain a Papal Bull and even threatened to put sailors who visited the coast without a license in the sea.¹⁵ This breakthrough allowed them to begin the purveying of African captives as slaves from the whole Atlantic coast of Africa, first to western Europe and then to island colonies off the African coast, to the Spanish colonies in the Americas, and finally to their own colony in Brazil.¹⁶ As a result of commercial vigor, diplomatic tenacity, and navigational experience, the Portuguese had become the only European country to buy slaves routinely and deliver them to the Americas by the end of the sixteenth century.

English and Dutch Interlopers and Privateers on the African Coast

Portugal's claims were not unchallenged, and almost as soon as Portuguese sailors showed the way, their Iberian rivals, the Castilians, and other Europeans were visiting the African coast, though these visitors were more interested in commodities other than slaves. Castilian ships were visiting Africa as early as 1475, and it was through Castilian auspices that Dutch sailors, like Eustace de la Fosse, an Antwerp-based merchant whose ship sailing to the Gold Coast (modern Ghana) in 1479 was captured by the Portuguese while seeking gold, learned about the African trade.¹⁷ Thus North Atlantic seafarers were sailing to Africa only a few years after the first Portuguese sailors came there, well before the founding of the first permanent Portuguese base in sub-Saharan Africa at São Jorge da Mina on the Gold Coast in 1482.

English merchants started later. An attempt to promote English trade to Africa, again under Spanish auspices, stalled by 1488¹⁸ and only barely

We have identified Cukuli Mbooj as the ruler known to Alvisé da Mota as Zucholino, following Jean Boulègue, *Le Grand Jolof (XIIIe-XVIe siècle)* (Paris, 1987), pp. 148–9.

¹⁵ Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, pp. 21–42. Also see Ivana Elbl, “Cross-Cultural Trade and Diplomacy: Portuguese Relations with West Africa, 1441–1521,” *Journal of World History* 3 (1992): 165–204.

¹⁶ Maria da Graça Alves Mateus Ventura, *Negreiros Portugueses na rota das Índias de Castela (1541–1556)* (Lisbon, 1999).

¹⁷ For details, see P. E. H. Hair, *The Founding of the Castelo de São Jorge da Mina: An Analysis of the Sources* (Madison, 1994), p. 2 and 50, no. 21. A good overview of early travel can be found in the older but still useful work of John W. Blake, *European Beginnings in West Africa, 1545–1578* (London, 1937, reprinted as *West Africa: Quest for God and Gold, 1454–1578* (London, 1971) and a large collection of documents in *Europeans in West Africa, 1450–1560* (2 vols., London, 1942).

¹⁸ Kenneth R. Andrews, *Trade, Plunder and Settlement: Maritime Enterprise and the Genesis of the British Empire, 1480–1630* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 58.