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.

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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, Mbundu, 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, Mbundu, 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 Mbundu 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 (*zumbies*), 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.

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Acknowledgments

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– Linda M. Heywood