

African Culture as Resistance to Slavery: The Transmission and Application of African Culture in the Americas

Ronald Blanchard

There is a persistent debate among historians of slavery about the extent to which enslaved Africans transmitted their culture to the Americas via the Atlantic slave trade. Franklin Frazier argues that the trauma of being abducted into slavery disoriented and stripped Africans of their cultures, and Sidney Mintz claims that Africa was too diverse to transmit culture to the Americas. They both argue that Africans were forced to rely on Indigenous American cultures to reorient themselves during slavery. Others, such as Melville Herskovits, claim we should instead see enslaved cultures as extensions of African cultures.¹ By the 1980s, some scholars began to challenge Mintz' notion of creolization because it lacked an appreciation of the continuity of African culture in the Americas.² The publication of the *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* in 1999 allowed scholars to connect Africans more accurately to their approximate places of origin throughout the continent.³ Gwendolyn Hall argues that scholars should supplement their use of the Database with studies of transshipment and other documents created for the slave trade.⁴ Explorations of cultural transmission, however, rest on our understanding of West and Central African identity as local, fluid, and changing rather than static constructs.⁵

Synthesizing recent scholarship on slavery, resistance, and culture by Vincent Brown, James Sidbury, and Gwendolyn Hall, and others, this paper argues that enslaved Africans engaged critically with their past and present to create a system of cultural continuity and adaptation, which they applied when resisting the conditions of their enslavement. This system had less to do with the transplanting of static African culture into the Americas and more to do with Africans trying to reorient themselves after the trauma of the Middle Passage and their enslavement more broadly. In other words, enslaved Africans used their African heritage in

¹ James Sidbury, "Resistance to Slavery," in Gad J. Heuman and Trevor G. Burnard, eds., *Routledge History of Slavery* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 205.

² Matt D. Childs, "Slave Culture," in Gad J. Heuman and Trevor G. Burnard, eds., *Routledge History of Slavery* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 171,

³ Sidbury, "Resistance to Slavery," 207.

⁴ Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 26.

⁵ Sidbury, "Resistance to Slavery," 207.

various ways to navigate and resist the conditions of their enslavement while not directly copying what had come before. Through this lens, the Middle Passage is a link between Africa and the Americas rather than a means through which Africans lost their culture – as some creolizationists would suggest. This paper will first explore the shifting sociopolitical landscape of West and Central Africa during the 18th century. Next, it will examine cultural transmission in religion and daily activities to show how African culture mattered concerning the so-called “weapons of the weak” and daily resistance. African culture was furthermore influential in organized, widespread revolt. This paper will conclude with an analysis of slave rebellions influenced by African cultures, such as Tacky’s Revolt in 18th Century Jamaica, to demonstrate how African culture mattered for large-scale rebellion and war in the Americas. The fact that the enslaved were African mattered significantly for the ways in which slavery was constructed over time.

Atlantic African Cultures

Culture can be cumbersome if ill-defined. Defining a specific culture can often freeze it temporally and depict it as a static construct rather than a dynamic process of continuous adaptation, reformation, and continuation.⁶ Childs observes three main geographic regions of Atlantic African cultural groups: Upper Guinea, Lower Guinea, and Central Africa. He claims that enslaved Africans built upon these broad shared cultural and linguistic elements to form new cultures in the Americas. Hall argues that scholars should navigate these definitions carefully because they can become unclear or inconsistent if little consideration is taken for the often-sporadic use of the terms in the ship catalogues or by fellow scholars.⁷

Critical here is a general understanding of transformations in African Atlantic culture due to social, economic, and political developments initiated by the slave trade. During this period, political and military leaders sought to centralize their control using warfare and captured slaves for domestic use and exportation.⁸ Culture is similarly muddled when the Diaspora is considered because the remembering of ethnic markers – such as names, language, and religion – conveys new meaning in the new conditions of the Americas.⁹ For example, due to the slave trade, a disparate Yoruba identity more or less formed in the Americas as

⁶ Childs, “Slave Culture,” 170.

⁷ Hall, *African Ethnicities in the Americas*, 28-9.

⁸ Childs, “Slave Culture,” 174.

⁹ Hall, *African Ethnicities in the Americas*, 46.

specific differences faded in the face of enslavement; enslaved Yoruba circumvented rigid cultural distinctions that would have been more significant within Africa.¹⁰ Specifically, diverse languages spoken by Yoruba in Africa such as Oyo, Ijebu, Ekiti, Aku, among others morphed into a mutually intelligible language written in Roman script;¹¹ over time, they began to self-identify as Yoruba.¹² In this context, slavery becomes the system through which these communal bonds were crystallized.

It is important to note that when enslaved Africans embarked on slave ships, they were not complete strangers, as Mintz and Price suggest, but instead had several kinship and kingship (state/community) connections with some of their shipmates.¹³ These connections are usually not obvious and require meticulous examination by historians to uncover, but there are many. The terms used for ethnic or regional designation varied depending on a variety of factors such as European buyer, intended location, and embarkation port. For example, French records contain significantly more detail about enslaved Africans' place of origin and their ethnic identity compared to English sources.¹⁴ Furthermore, the political and social organization also changed over time, as evidenced by the transformation of the Kingdom of Kongo from a highly centralized state in the 17th century to a collectively-ruled state by the 18th century.¹⁵ These limitations notwithstanding, through alternative databases and nuanced examinations of other documents generated alongside the slave trade, scholars have shown that African ethnic groups were not randomized, but were often clustered in the Americas.¹⁶ Hall cross-references the paths of individual slave trading ships as well as the distribution of new Africans after their final sale to locate some of these clusters.¹⁷ Locating these clusters is significant because they allow scholars to examine more specific examples of cultural transmission. For example, the Akan-speaking Coromantee and other groups from the Gold Coast were clustered in Jamaica,¹⁸ which was pertinent for Tacky's revolt, as we shall see.

¹⁰ Childs, "Slave Culture," 178.

¹¹ Lorand J. Matory, "The Illusion of Isolation: The Gullah/Geechees and the Political Economy of African Culture in the Americas," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50, no. 4 (2008), 950.

¹² Matory, "The Illusion of Isolation," 952.

¹³ Childs, "Slave Culture," 179.

¹⁴ Hall, *African Ethnicities in the Americas*, 33-4.

¹⁵ John K. Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800*, ACLS Humanities E-book, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 205-6.

¹⁶ Hall, *African Ethnicities in the Americas*, 34.

¹⁷ Hall, *African Ethnicities in the Americas*, 56.

¹⁸ Hall, *African Ethnicities in the Americas*, 110.

African Culture and Daily Resistance

Resistance to slavery took many forms. Resistance should not necessarily be examined in terms of anti-slavery because, before the 18th century, slavery appeared to be a permanent institution.¹⁹ Seemingly ordinary acts of resistance such as breaking tools, slowing the pace of work, or gossiping – known as the “weapons of the weak” – were prevalent and influential. These tools created informal power that the enslaved could wield to various ends. The enslaved could force planters to negotiate the terms of enslavement; these negotiations were inherently unequal, but it is crucial to showcase the power the enslaved could and did possess.²⁰ Working within Orlando Patterson’s definition of slavery as “the permanent, violent domination of socially alienated and generally dishonoured persons,”²¹ engagement with African social and cultural traditions can be seen as resistance by their very nature. As Sidbury notes, “the enslaved carved out arenas of life that remained relatively insulated from their masters” through “music, kinship, religion, economic participation, labour slowdowns, and a host of other activities or cultural achievements,” which shaped new cultural worlds and allowed the enslaved to find meaning in their lives despite the stark realities of slavery.²² These seemingly minor instances of resistance are necessary to the story of slavery and enslaved lives.

Religion was a fundamental aspect of African cultural transmission and adaptation in the Americas. As Sylvia Frey writes, the history of African Atlantic religions is “an epic story of continuous creation” that has moved through multiple transformations.²³ The first stage is their origins in Africa. The second stage of this history begins in the Americas with the establishment of the Luso-Hispanic Catholic world and transitions into the third stage with the growth in imports of enslaved Africans. Of course, religious continuity varies according to geographical and temporal location, but deep patterns still trace back to Africa.²⁴ When Africans were trafficked via the Atlantic slave trade, most retained religious beliefs and practices of their past along with certain cosmological constants and a cultural memory that facilitated coexistence between disparate religious elements.²⁵ Sometimes, as is the case among

¹⁹ Sidbury, “Resistance to Slavery,” 216-7.

²⁰ Sidbury, Resistance to Slavery,” 208.

²¹ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982), 13.

²² Sidbury, Resistance to Slavery,” 209.

²³ Sylvia R Frey, “Remembered Pasts: African Atlantic Religions,” in Gad J. Heuman and Trevor G. Burnard, eds., *Routledge History of Slavery* (New York: Routledge, 2011): 153, ProQuest Ebook Central.

²⁴ Frey, “Remembered Pasts,” 153.

²⁵ Frey, “Remembered Pasts,” 156-7.

the enslaved exported from the Bight of Benin, specific deities – such as those associated with smallpox or cholera – became more prominent in the Diaspora than in Africa due to the overwhelming presence of disease.²⁶ Religious lineage reveals a transnational history of Africa and the Americas.

Religion played a unique role for enslaved Africans; it created conscious and unconscious bonds through blood and memory. Enslaved Africans could wield magic and medicine against Europeans in symbolic and practical ways to assert their agency and heal or protect their communities.²⁷ For example, enslaved Africans in Jamaica engaged with Obeah – a complex system of shamanistic practices derived from various parts of Africa – to heal and protect their communities physically, socially, and spiritually through herbal medicine and the utilization of rituals.²⁸ The importance of Obeah elevated the social status of practitioners and allowed adherents to assert their power over life and death; it also acted to govern enslaved communities and serve justice.²⁹ More common religions, such as Islam, transcended ethnic and linguistic divisions: Yoruba Muslims in Brazil drew upon these communal bonds for labour and wage networks to use available profits to manumit fellow believers.³⁰ The retention and adaptation of religious elements in the Americas allowed many enslaved Africans to resist the conditions of their enslavement through the formation of social bonds, spiritual connections, and complex systems of belonging.

The enslaved adapted other aspects of African culture as well. In *The Reaper's Garden*, Vincent Brown discusses how death and mortality shaped the culture of the enslaved. The ways in which enslaved Africans engaged with death reveal how they used and adapted African ontologies. He notes that enslaved Africans in 19th century Jamaica used songs and music to challenge the authority of their enslavers and help them cope with the brutal conditions of slavery.³¹ Enslaved market women performed songs that taunted newly recruited white people by insisting that disease and high death rates neutralized a lot of their privilege. Burial ceremonies and death rituals created spiritual bonds among enslaved communities and the deceased. For example, the Akan icon “Nyame mw una mawu” – loosely translated to “God

²⁶ Childs, “Slave Culture,” 179.

²⁷ Frey, “Remembered Pasts,” 167.

²⁸ Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 145-6.

²⁹ Brown, *The Reaper's Garden*, 146-7.

³⁰ Frey, “Remembered Pasts,” 166.

³¹ Brown, *The Reaper's Garden*, 4-5.

does not die, so I cannot die” – symbolizes cultural continuity from Africa into the Americas.³² Suicide was common as it was sometimes seen as the ultimate resistance to slavery, but it was often viewed through a specific cultural lens. In the Akan understanding of death, the deceased are not necessarily gone but assist the enslaved in their future struggles; the living allied with the dead in their struggle against the conditions of enslavement. The religiosity associated with the deceased and mortality more broadly represents practical efforts by the enslaved to reject white authority and struggle to survive under colonial domination.³³ Enslaved Africans’ desire to assert their own power over death and mortality displays a level of agency and culture that should not be understated.³⁴ Death was imminent and inescapable in Jamaica during this time. As such, the ways in which enslaved Africans engaged with death and the dead are essential to our understanding of African culture and resistance in the Americas.³⁵

African Culture and Rebellion

Beyond daily resistance, African culture played a role in slave rebellions. Warfare was endemic in West and Central Africa due to the Atlantic slave trade. As John Thornton notes, military enslavement was commonly used to produce captives to sell to Europeans. The fact that many exported slaves were captured this way meant that they were those who had yet to be given employment elsewhere. The enslaved who were not integrated into the domestic economy were exported across the Atlantic or the Sahara.³⁶ Broadly speaking, enslaved people rather than land – as in the European context – facilitated the acquisition of wealth and power without requiring an extension of administration to new areas.³⁷ Ubiquitous warfare, primarily initiated by the quest to fill an ever-growing demand for captives during this period, meant that many captives were familiar with African warfare strategies. The presence of African soldiers in the Americas had significant implications. Enslaved rebels engaged with and adapted their African roots to resist slavery on a grand scale.³⁸

Vincent Brown’s analysis of Tacky’s Revolt and the Coromantee War in 18th century Jamaica illustrates how important African elements of slave rebellions were. Led by an

³² Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden*, 3.

³³ Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden*, 151.

³⁴ Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden*, 132-3.

³⁵ Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden*, 5.

³⁶ Thornton, *The Making of the Atlantic World*, 99-100.

³⁷ Thornton, *The Making of the Atlantic World*, 106.

³⁸ Vincent Brown, *Tacky’s Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 3.

enslaved named Tacky, who was formerly Fanti royalty and a warlord, the revolt saw a group of enslaved people overthrow several plantations, killing white overseers in the process.³⁹ The 1760-1 revolt was a complex web of journeys and military campaigns that historians should examine as an episode within the broader Coromantee war to assert political control over Jamaica. Rather than a “typical” rebellion – which depicts the enslaved in a unified struggle against their enslavers – Brown places Tacky’s revolt within the nuanced context of the Coromantee war, which saw disparate groups vying to assert their dominance over the territory.⁴⁰ There were tensions among those Gold Coast Africans who had fought each other in Old World wars; among strangers connected through the misery of enslavement; between black people born in Africa and those born in America; and among Coromantees with conflicting interests and beliefs. One of the leaders, Apongo, was a military leader in West Africa during a period of imperial expansion and intensive warfare. In Jamaica, he was elected through Coromantee oathing and enthronement ceremonies⁴¹ and aimed to continue a Coromantee war in Jamaica which attempted to assert political control over the island.⁴² The rebels used African guerilla warfare techniques to defeat the British military and colonial militias.⁴³ They even referred to themselves as a nation with a common Akan language.⁴⁴ The revolt was deeply influenced by Obeah as well; many conspirators relied upon Obeah practitioners for counsel.⁴⁵ Even when the British eventually quelled the rebellion, the maroon militia⁴⁶ turned the tide, demonstrating how Africans influenced sociopolitical conditions in the colonies. Apongo’s journey from a military leader in Africa to a leader of a Coromantee war in Jamaica underscores the interconnectedness of Africa and the Americas. The slave trade linked Africa and the Americas together through war and enslavement.⁴⁷

Other rebellions were influenced heavily by African culture, beyond Tacky’s Revolt and the Coromantee war. The Stono Rebellion in South Carolina is a prominent example of how Kongo culture impacted slave resistance. These rebels were connected through their

³⁹ Brown, *Tacky’s Revolt*, 54.

⁴⁰ Brown, *Tacky’s Revolt*, 6.

⁴¹ Thornton, *The Making of the Atlantic World*, 220.

⁴² Brown, *Tacky’s Revolt*, 7.

⁴³ Brown, *Tacky’s Revolt*, 4.

⁴⁴ Thornton, *The Making of the Atlantic World*, 220.

⁴⁵ Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden*, 149.

⁴⁶ Maroons are run away slaves. By the 1760s in Jamaica, there was a substantial community of maroons. They formed militias to protect themselves and operated independently of the British and plantation armies and militias.

⁴⁷ Brown, *Tacky’s Revolt*, 2.

common origins in the Kingdom of Kongo – a Christian nation in modern Angola that used Portuguese as a secondary language in its extensive education system.⁴⁸ Christianity and creole Portuguese played essential roles in the uprising since the rebels could communicate and forge a shared sense of belonging.⁴⁹ Civil wars meant that many enslaved Kongolese were ex-soldiers, which impacted the strategy and contours of the rebellion.⁵⁰ They marched under banners similar to African unit flags and used drums; they also danced, which was unique to African militaries.⁵¹ The Stono Rebellion reveals the connections between Kongo social, cultural, and political elements and the avenues through which the enslaved resisted their enslavement. African culture mattered for slave rebellions.

Conclusion

African culture, religion, politics, and social organization mattered for the structure of slavery in the Americas. Observing the specific ways in which the enslaved engaged and adapted their African heritage to resist slavery reveals many new connections between regions of Africa and the Americas. Africans shaped slavery in the Americas in dramatic and subtle ways that were equally important. Religion was a fundamental African legacy that assisted the enslaved in daily resistance through social bonds and weaponizing spiritual authority to reject dehumanization and white power; it also allowed defiant leaders to mobilize patrons against slavery or the conditions of their enslavement. Enslaved Africans were always more than just “slaves;” they were men, women, and children who occupied various sociopolitical strata in Africa and the Americas. The trauma of the Middle Passage and slavery was significant, but it never erased Africans’ ties to their cultural, political, and ancestral origins. Of course, the specificities vary tremendously across time and space, but that only underscores the importance of viewing enslaved Africans as people who carried individual and communal motivations, who shaped the contours of slavery and culture in the Americas. In some respects, like religion and religiosity, African heritage was a driving force behind culture and resistance in the Americas. Sometimes, as is the case with the Jamaican perception of death, the new circumstances in the Americas were substantial in the formation of new cultural, social, and political spaces.

⁴⁸ John K. Thornton, “African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion,” *The American Historical Review* 96, no. 4 (1991), 1103, 1108.

⁴⁹ Thornton, “African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion,” 1106-7.

⁵⁰ Thornton, “African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion,” 1103, 1113.

⁵¹ Thornton, “African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion,” 1111-2.

Blanchard / African Culture

Africans retained elements of their “African-ness” while also remaining highly adaptable in the face of unique geography and enslavement. The agency of enslaved Africans to resist and navigate slavery connects Africa to the Americas. Therefore, the Middle Passage links Africa and the Americas in a transnational history of the search for belonging, power, and identity.

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