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Mahommah G. Baquaqua:

A Case Study on the Effects of Cultural Identity in Latin American Slavery

The historiography of both Latin America and Africa is firmly entrenched in slavery, and yet the voices of slaves themselves were notoriously absent from early scholarship. More recent scholarship on the Africa Diaspora, the translation of culture from Africa to the New World, brings the importance of slave identities to the forefront, delving much deeper into cultural identities and how they affected both Africa and Latin America through slavery. The individual identities of slaves enable historians to build a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness and global community created by these slaves, identities which played crucial roles in their sociocultural development in Latin America. Primary sources, such as the biography of Mahommah Baquaqua who was a former slave in Brazil during the early nineteenth century, are extremely important in helping historians flesh out individual experiences of slaves while simultaneously lending insight to the complexities associated with agency and race relations.

The biography of Mahommah Baquaqua is a valuable source of information that presents us with a detailed first-hand account of daily life in Africa, while also following a slave’s journey from the beginning of his enslavement to his eventual freedom. Though categorized as a biography, Baquaqua’s account is in actuality an autobiographical narrative in which he played an active role. His first-hand accounts of life in Africa before becoming a slave, as well as his experiences as a slave in Brazil, give us an inside perspective into the cultural history of Africa that vastly supersedes any information that can be gained from analyzing secondary sources. Published in 1854, the report of Mahommah’s journey is one of the only known accounts from a former slave of Brazil.

The account is particularly significant for the light it sheds on the daily lives of slaves in Africa before enslavement. The scramble for territory in Africa during the nineteenth century provided a relatively accurate detailing of the country in terms of physicality and basic culture; however the interior regions like Central Africa remained largely a mystery. Born near the city of Djougou, a city in Central Africa, Mahommah’s homeland lay precisely in that “undiscovered” territory. Several descriptions of African cultural practices mentioned throughout the sources, such as the widespread adoption of polygamy, the existence of witchcraft, and the popularity of the Islamic religion, confirm what has been documented in other sources on the subject of the African Diaspora. But what proves especially interesting is his outlook on slavery within Africa itself.

In both the chapter on government and on marriage ceremonies, Baquaqua implies that the practice of slavery within Africa is commonplace. While that knowledge could perhaps be gained through the analysis of other sources, we also see his own personal opinion on the institution:

The greatest source of misery to Africa is her system of slavery, which is carried on to a fearful extent, but domestic slavery in that country is nothing when compared to…the trading of slaves…Slaves are taken from the interior and hurried to the coast, where they are exchanged for rum and tobacco, or other articles of merchandize. This system of slavery causes much bloodshed and consequent misery.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Mahommah himself was enslaved early on in his life, though his brother procured enough money to pay his ransom and so they were both allowed to return home. When eventually enslaved again and shipped off to Brazil, Mahommah felt the misery and fear of slavery on a personal level, saying, “Oh, horror! I then discovered that I had been betrayed…and sold for a slave. Never shall I forget my feelings on that occasion…the loss of my liberty and honorable position with the king…”[[2]](#footnote-2) This focus on a loss of liberty would surface again later in the account.

Up to the point of his enslavement, Mahommah was ignorant to the foreign ideas of white men, having never seen a white person growing up. However, his views on freedom are continuously made known throughout the text and he appears to have a surprising amount of knowledge about the hierarchical system of power that was the driving force behind the institution of slavery. Contrary to what many sources of literature say about slaves not having the same ideas of liberty that exist today in the modern world, Mahommah states that the first word he learned in the English language after becoming a slave was the word “free.” Though this does not necessarily prove that his ideas of liberty were aligned with more contemporary Western views, it does present us with an interesting perspective of a slave who, when presented with a chance to claim his freedom upon sailing to New York with his Brazilian master, took full advantage of the opportunity.

Another source of contrast to commonly read literature about slavery is Mahommah’s willing conversion to Christianity. Throughout the account we see the biases and perspectives of the editor, Samuel Moore, play a role in shaping Baquaqua’s story with a strong emphasis on religion as well. The editor clearly had vehement oppositions to slavery, and great weight was lent to the slave’s conversion to Christianity after he obtained his freedom, even going so far as to say that the former slave’s intended audience were his native people back in Africa. “[It is his desire to] instruct his own people in the ways of the gospel of Christ, and to be the means of their salvation, which it is to be hoped he will be able to accomplish ere long…”[[3]](#footnote-3)This idea of Mahommah having a desire not only to be a devoted Christian but to return to his homeland to spread the word of God is somewhat of a unique one. The widely known practice of forcing conversion upon slaves in order to “save their souls” is not applicable here, and Mahommah’s religious ideals clearly have a big part in shaping his identity, as a freed slave and as a person. He clearly expresses the desire to spread Christianity back home towards the end of his account, stating that, “I am thankful to God that I enjoy the blessings of liberty…whenever the day may come that a way may be opened to me of being useful in the regeneration of my own loved country, I shall be ready to say “I come,” and may God in his infinite wisdom hasten that day…”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Mahommah Baquaqua’s account – his secluded upbringing with no knowledge of white men in Central Africa, his own personal experiences with slavery prior to his enslavement in the New World, his religious devotion, and his pursuit of basic liberties – presents us with an amazing example of a slave working within the institution of slavery to evolve his own personal identity. Even while experiencing multiple sociocultural transformations on his journey, Baquaqua show us that his African roots greatly impacted his identity before, during, and after his life as a slave in Brazil and had a crucial role in his development of a new identity.

Annotated Bibliography

Bryant, Sherwin K., Rachel Sarah O’Toole, and Ben Vinson III. *Africans to Spanish America: Expanding the Diaspora.* Illinois: Board of Trustees of University of Illinois, 2012.

Published earlier this year, *Africans to Spanish Americas* explores the both the interconnectedness and individuality of slave identity from its origins in Africa across the ocean to the Spanish Americas. The authors admit that relatively few actual slave voices exist to answer our questions about what shaped their experiences, but that the accounts that do exist provide us with important glimpses into the pursuit of basic liberties, the crossing of boundaries, and the expanding importance of slave identity throughout sociocultural lenses.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. United Kingdom: Verso, 1993.

Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* remains an integral part of historiographical references in the study of the African Diaspora, though an increasingly controversial one. Claiming that there is a “black Atlantic culture” that is comprised of many different cultures at once, one of the main arguments is that the combination of cultural identities created a whole new culture and nation that in reality was quite modern. His thoughts on how identity transcends nationality and race challenge many of the previous assumptions of African slave cultural studies.

Hine, Darlene Clark, and Jacqueline McLeod, eds. *Crossing Boundaries: Comparative History of Black People in Diaspora.* Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999.

*Crossing Boundaries* is a collection of scholarly essays related to the study of the African Diaspora and how its interpretations have changed significantly over time. Separated into four major themes – Comparative Diaspora Historiography, Identity and Culture, Domination and Resistance, and Geo-Social History and the Atlantic World – the book reflects on the shared common set of experiences had by African-American slaves while also claiming that a blend of different experiences, culture, and identity shaped unique and individual encounters across the Diaspora. The idea of interconnected identity coupled with individual identity is present throughout the entirety of the compilation, with an emphasis on how identity is shaped through diversity.

Manning, Patrick. *The African Diaspora: A History Through Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.

Starting in the year 1400, Patrick Manning explores the interconnectedness of slave identity through the lens of the African Diaspora by looking at five major themes: connections that allowed for the creation of a global community of African identity, outlooks on race, differing economic circumstances, family dynamics, and popular culture. The book attempts to link the African Diaspora with the rise of modernity in world history and looks not only at African identity in the New World but also in Africa, which has become increasingly more important to our understanding of slave experiences.

Yelvington, Kevin A. “The Anthropology of Afro-Latin America and the Caribbean: Diasporic Dimensions.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30 (2001): 227-260.

This article stems from the debates on the paradigms of the African Diaspora, with regards to the origins of New World black cultures. Yelvington explores both the idea that Africans sustained cultural continuities and the idea that they created new cultures in the New World due to exposure to discrimination, deprivation, colonialism, etc. The article analyzes different approaches to studying cultural identity of African American slaves. A thoughtful and cross-disciplinary work, the article explores identity through power structures, behavior, racism, colonialism, etc.

1. Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua, *Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua,* ed. Samuel Moore (Detroit, Michigan: Geo. E. Pomeroy & Co., Tribune Office, 1854), 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 64-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)