Reading 3


Abstract: Scholarship on the formative period of the African presence in the Americas is still in its infancy. Historians know little about the ways in which Africans sought to recreate the cultural worlds from which they came, even as they responded to new challenges. This essay explores the role of ethnicity in the construction of the lives of African-born slaves in Mexico City during the years when slaves were present in relatively large numbers. An analysis of the surviving marriage licenses shows that ethnicity was the most important factor in spousal choices; this finding has large implications for our understanding of the nature and evolution of black life in the Americas.

With its waters connecting the continents of Europe, Africa, North America, and South America, the Atlantic Ocean has facilitated a sustained movement and interaction among the peoples of these disparate lands. The appellation “Atlantic world” is not only a geographic expression but also a metaphor for the organic and human linkages that characterize it. This majestic ocean has been traversed by intrepid explorers, voluntary and involuntary immigrants, persons in quest of fortunes, and people in chains. Its history is fraught with examples of human daring, conquest of new horizons, and realization of dreams. But it is also a chronicle of violence, suffering, and death.

My main concern here is not the many faces, voices, and roles of the Atlantic, but rather the human and cultural contacts between Africa and the Americas that its waters facilitated in the century and a half that followed Christopher Columbus’s voyages to the Americas. The crucial role of the Atlantic in the shaping of the Americas is often taken for granted; we seldom recognize that it was a significant agency in the peopling of the societies and in the cross-fertilization of the cultures and ideas in the lands that it bathes.

The history of the African slave trade is increasingly well known and hardly bears any repeating here. The “middle passage,” as the terrifying voyage across the Atlantic to the Americas came to be called, remains the most horrible and enduring symbol of the human traffic. In time, the Atlantic Ocean came to be identified with black captivity, debasement, and suffering. Contemporaries and historians have recounted the confinement of the Africans, the ravages of disease, the toll in lives, and the inevitable crises of spirit. Some have chronicled the Africans’ resistance to their condition and their often angry refusal to be defined as property. No chronicler of the black
past has celebrated the Africans’ journey across the Atlantic; the circumstances of the voyage still offend our moral sensibilities.

Recent research suggests that probably as many as 12 million Africans survived the middle passage. Although mortality rates declined over time, about one-third of those who left the African ports succumbed during the voyage.\textsuperscript{1} Countless others arrived sick in the Americas and died shortly thereafter. Clearly, the Africans’ odyssey on the Atlantic tested their physical and mental fortitude. But there is no persuasive evidence that the trauma they undoubtedly experienced destroyed their humanity and completely stripped them of their culture.

The old claim that African slaves arrived in the Americas culturally \textit{tabula rasa} reflected scholarly ignorance of African societies as well as of those that the slaves created in the Americas. Western scholars who wrote about Africa and Africans were the products of an intellectual zeitgeist that was permeated by a virulent racism as well as an acute ethnocentrism. Not surprisingly, most early scholars showed little appreciation for or understanding of African cosmologies, cultural institutions, and arrangements. If Africans were not generally perceived as having been culturally \textit{tabula rasa}, it was believed that what they initially possessed either was destroyed during the Atlantic passage or survived in remnants that did not last long in the Americas.\textsuperscript{2}

Any analysis of African cultural continuities in the Americas confronts certain methodological minefields. In the first place, our understanding of the cultural moorings and assumptions of the societies from which the Africans came is still grossly incomplete. Some modern scholars have used anthropological data derived from studies undertaken in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to interpret the cultures of the Africans at earlier times. This approach is questionable since it presents an image of African cultural stasis. The methodological problem is compounded by the paucity of information on the specific ethnic origins of a high proportion of the human cargoes. The ports from which they embarked are not usually reliable indicators of the ethnicity of the captives, who often came from the interior and comprised many different peoples.

A further complication is that the surviving records that discuss blacks in the Americas frequently do not distinguish between the African-born slaves and their creole progeny. But the distinction is an important one. Unlike the Africans, the creoles were socialized into the racial slavery of the Americas from birth, with attendant cultural and psychological consequences that we have not yet fully understood. Clearly, creoles straddled worlds that were African and American, drawing their cultural thrusts and pulls from both. Thus, it is often difficult if not impossible to isolate in the cultures they created that which was African in its genesis from that which owed its
provenance to other cultural streams. In some cases the streams merged over time in such a way that a new creole culture emerged, defying attempts to identify its original tributaries.

Yet it is apparent that certain African core beliefs did not blend at all, at least not immediately. Such an argument cannot be advanced without considerable risk, given a prevailing scholarly wisdom that emphasizes culture change, the interpenetration of cultures, and syncretism.³ We can readily concede that cultures and the assumptions that give them life change to some degree over time. But the pace of change depends on variables such as the depth and tenacity of the beliefs, ideas, and behavior; their pervasive nature; the degree, frequency, and intensity of the interaction between the culture bearers; the size and stability of the population in question; and the scale and form of the contact with outsiders. In determining the degree and nature of culture change, it is also important to take into account those culturally sanctioned beliefs and practices that are so deeply held and revered and so crucial to the identity and the spiritual and corporate life of a people that they cannot be easily abandoned.

The core beliefs and practices at the heart of a people’s consciousness and identity must be distinguished from others that are secondary and can be changed without considerable consequences for their cosmologies, behavior, and self-definition. Similarly, it is important to make a distinction between core beliefs and secondary beliefs, on the one hand, and what may be characterized as cultural accretions, on the other. The latter are generally practices or ideas borrowed from other peoples that elaborate but do not alter or modify the existing core beliefs in any significant way.

We can, with some difficulty, apply these theoretical constructs by focusing on the experiences of Africans in Mexico during the first century or so of their presence in that Spanish colony. The first African slaves arrived with Cortés during the military invasion, and by 1640 perhaps as many as a hundred thousand had been enslaved in the colony. Given the high mortality and low fertility rates of the Africans in the colony of New Spain, as it was called, the Spaniards depended on new human supplies to maintain their enslaved labor force.⁴ Consequently, the arrival of Africans into the colony on a continuing basis served to nourish the slaves’ cultural heritage, particularly where their numbers were large and stable enough to facilitate regular, intimate, and sustained interaction. Ideally, a close examination of the lives and social institutions of these peoples should provide us with some clues as to what aspects of their cultures survived the Atlantic passage and remained a living and sustaining part of their realities. It should also help show what became modified, refashioned, or transformed over time, as well as the process and the pace of change.
Such a historical reconstruction is not easily accomplished, and it is bedeviled by numerous methodological problems. Still, a credible history of African peoples in the Americas compels us to trace their complex cultural evolution in much the same way as has been done for that of the European immigrants. Accordingly, the rest of this essay will address the large question of the degree to which African-born slaves were able to reestablish and maintain ethnic ties and their ethnicity in the slave societies of the Americas. Did the fact of their captivity, the circumstances of their Atlantic journey, and their dispersal and enslavement in the Americas result in a complete destruction of their heritage and in a cultural amnesia? I attempt to suggest a partial answer to this question by examining the marriage choices of African-born slaves in Mexico City between 1590 and 1640, the years when they were present in the most significant numbers. My argument is that ethnicity informed spousal choices and that ethnic distinctions remained an important and enduring part of African life in the Americas. Marriage choices provide a window through which to examine the larger issues of ethnicity, identity, and ethnic continuities.

There can be no doubt that the most important sources of support for African slaves in Mexico and elsewhere in the Americas were the kin and familial arrangements that they developed. Coming from societies where kinship ties were strong and constituted the core or foundation upon which all other relationships were based, Africans endeavored to reconstruct this world in Mexico. The obstacles that stood in their path were forbidding, and their efforts, no matter how relentless and sustained, were not always successful. Nevertheless, the slaves created a variety of domestic arrangements over time, reflecting their own traditions and the realities of their conditions.

Any analysis of the family life of these Africans must be approached with considerable caution. We must, for example, be careful lest we impose upon them the Christian norm of monogamy and seek to find in the formative years of their presence in the Americas only examples of Christian marriages and the nuclear family. African peoples possessed cultural traditions quite distinct from those of the Christians; consequently, the concept of monogamy would have been as difficult for them to internalize and practice as polygyny would probably have been for a devout Puritan. It involved the abandonment of old traditions and practices legitimized by their epistemology and the embracing of new ones. This is never an easy task under the best of circumstances, and it cannot be achieved through coercion, since it involves an internal change, resulting from transformations in an individual’s ideas, values, and world views. It can be argued that only those Africans who succeeded in embracing Christian theology and practices were likely to accept monogamy as the ideal. Even so, the domestic arrangements of the African-born population must not be viewed as an extension or carbon copy
of those of the Europeans or the indigenous peoples. To do so would be to seriously misunderstand the evolution of the Africans’ lives and the ideas that informed and legitimiz##ed their social relationships.

The relationships that the enslaved created, often without the sanction of the church or the state, ran the gamut of what could be characterized today as monogamy, polygyny, consensual unions, and perhaps other combinations as well. We simply do not know enough about the inner lives of blacks and their domestic arrangements before 1700 to categorize them in any absolute way and to define them by Western Christian concepts. And it may be erroneous to homogenize such diverse interpersonal and kin relationships under the general rubric of “family,” with its attendant Western connotations.

The evidence is clear, however, that African slaves developed a network of social relationships as soon as demographic factors, the sex ratio, and chance facilitated it. The emergence of these ties of kin and nonkin should not be seen primarily as acts of resistance to their condition and a reaction to the larger society’s attempts to dehumanize them. Rather, such ties represented the perfectly normal expressions of the Africans’ humanity and their conscious desire to recreate the kinship systems and social relationships that helped give meaning to their lives. The nature of the systems that they created tell us a great deal about their efforts to define themselves and to order their intimate lives essentially according to their own rules.

The nature of the slaves’ network of domestic relationships undoubtedly changed over time. Understandably, their beliefs, behavior, and social organizations were in large measure a function of their place of birth and the culture into which they had been socialized. For example, while African-born persons engaged in polygynous unions where they could, Christianized creoles were more apt to embrace monogamous relationships, at least in principle. By the early eighteenth century, the general practice among the slaves in Mexico City appears to have become the Christian ideal of one man to one woman, judging by the decline of the so-called bigamy trials conducted under the auspices of the Holy Office of the Inquisition. The majority of the enslaved were of Mexican birth by around 1700, and they were socialized in varying degrees into a Western Christian zeitgeist.

Unlike the slave systems of the English and the Dutch, that of the Spanish, at least officially, encouraged marriages among the slaves. The Siete Partidas, the body of laws that came to form the basis of Spanish jurisprudence, sanctioned such unions among the unfree in the metropolitan country. It maintained that slaves could marry even against the master’s will and that couples should not be separated. Husbands and wives had the right to share a common conjugal unit, and children inherited the mother’s status. Whether, as has been claimed, the Siete Partidas constituted a living part of the
consciousness of the Spaniards in the Americas is difficult to establish. It is noteworthy that the laws made by the local authorities in Mexico and elsewhere tended to be more restrictive of the lives of the slaves and largely nullified the liberalism of the Siete Partidas.

The Roman Catholic church and the Spanish crown certainly encouraged monogamous unions as opposed to other types of domestic arrangements. As early as 1527, the crown ordered that blacks be allowed to marry, but only among themselves. In this way racial purity would be maintained, and the crown’s desire to prevent interracial relationships in the colony would be respected. Catholic dogma stressed the fundamental role of the family in creating a stable and orderly society. Indeed, the Catholic hierarchy in Mexico City took an active interest in the domestic life of the peoples of African descent, promoting the sacrament of marriage and ferreting out those couples who lived together without its sanction or who participated in polygynous relationships.

My concern in this essay is with the spousal choices by African-born slaves who were married in the Roman Catholic church in Mexico City between 1590 and 1640. This was the period when the slave trade was at its peak, with the greatest proportion of the captives coming from west-central Africa. The conclusions are based on a sample of the surviving marriage licenses that were issued to African-born slaves during the period.

Some caveats are necessary. For example, it is impossible to provide an accurate demographic picture of Mexico City’s African population during the period. Scattered and probably inaccurate estimates suggest that there were 10,593 slaves in the Archbishopric of Mexico (roughly Mexico City) in 1570. In 1612 Vázquez de Espinosa, a traveler, reported with considerable exaggeration that Mexico City had 50,000 blacks and mulattoes and 15,000 Spaniards. More recently, the distinguished Mexican scholar, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, concluded that the Archbishopric of Mexico had a black and mulatto population of 19,441 in 1646. These estimates appear to be inflated in view of the modest volume of the slave trade to Mexico and the low fertility and high mortality rates of the Africans. In addition, they make no distinction between African-born and creole slaves. A reasonable guess, deriving from an analysis of the records of the slave trade, is that no more than 5,000–10,000 African-born slaves resided in the capital city at any one time during the period. Overall, the slave population—African and creoles—probably averaged between 10,000 and 20,000 annually during the years covered by this study.

Whatever the size of the African population, it is certain that its members established a network of relationships based narrowly on their ethnicity but ultimately also on their phenotype and shared condition of servitude. Africans in Mexico City knew one another, sometimes for long periods of time, and
sought partners largely from among themselves. Although the African-born
and the creole had much in common, much divided them as well. Africans, in
large measure, had come to Mexico as adults. Their cultural understandings
were likely to be different, although they were never immune to the
transforming influences of their new environment. Some even became
Christians, of a sort. On the other hand, creoles were the products of the
Mexican environment with all its socializing influences and power. Yet the
divide between the Africans and the creoles, like the gap between the enslaved
and the free, could be bridged. Friendships existed, and even a few marriage
alliances were struck. Overall, however, it appears that ethnicity and the place
of their birth gave greater salience to the bonds that united the African-born,
just as their Mexican origins strengthened the ties among creoles.10

In spite of overwhelming odds, African slaves sought to establish and
preserve kin and nonkin relationships over long periods of time, and
sometimes they succeeded. Some of these intimate ties had existed before the
individuals were enslaved, others had been forged during the Atlantic
passage between shipmates, and still others developed in Spain and Portugal
or in Spain’s empire. In 1633, for example, Juan, a male slave from “Angola,”
reported that he had known Angelina, who was about to be married, “ever
since he could remember since she is his sister and they travelled together to
this country about six years ago.” Although they belonged to different
masters in Mexico City, they had found each other and preserved their bond
as brother and sister.11

In a similar vein, Antón Mendoza, a slave from the Cape Verde Islands,
maintained in 1631 that he had known Pablo de la Cruz “ever since he
reached the age of reason . . . since he is his brother.” Isabel, who was born in
“Angola” and who was still enslaved at age fifty, identified Antón Sardina, a
mulatto slave, as her son and affirmed that “they came together [from Spain]
to New Spain five years ago.” And in 1629, Isabel, a female slave from the
Biafada ethnic group, could speak with assurance about Juan de Lomas, a
creole slave, because she had known him since his birth: Juan was her
nephew.12 This admission suggests that either Isabel’s brother or her sister
had been brought to Mexico City and that she had maintained or
reestablished contacts with him or her.

Slaves who traveled together to Mexico from Africa, Spain, or another part of
Spain’s empire nurtured the shipboard bonds that had been forged.
Francisco, who was a member of the Bram ethnic group, reported that he had
known his friend, similarly named Francisco, for five years and that he
“began to know and talk with him in the Cape Verde Islands where they
embarked on a ship for New Spain and they came together to the port of San
Juan de Ullua [Vera Cruz] and eventually to Mexico City.” In 1629, Felipa, a
slave from the “Congo,” noted that her friendship for Juana had been cemented during a voyage from Seville to Mexico ten years earlier. Antonio de Roma, born in Mozambique, also indicated in 1629 that he and his friend Juan had traveled to Mexico together from Seville. These and similar examples demonstrate the importance and vibrancy of the human bonds that connected the enslaved despite their difficult life situations. Although most of them belonged to different masters and lived in widely dispersed parts of the city, they managed to affirm their humanity by maintaining intimacy with their peers and drawing psychic sustenance from such relationships.

The urban environment undoubtedly facilitated social intercourse among the slave population. Slaves probably attended the churches in the barrios, shopped in the same markets, and chatted in the public plazas. There was evidently not much physical mobility in their lives as a consequence of sale, since many if not most of them had known one another for long periods of time. Francisco, an “Angolan” slave, had known Manuel, also an “Angolan,” for thirty years, and his bride Catalina for twenty years. Catalina, a slave from the Biafada ethnic group, had known Juan, who also hailed from that group, for thirty years. Catalina and Juan were both fifty years old and may even have traveled to the Americas together. Mariana, a sixty-year-old Biafada woman, had known Ines, also a Biafada woman, “since she was a little girl.” Other Africans admitted to having known their friends for periods of four, six, eight, and ten years or more.

Slaves who applied for marriage licenses usually brought other slaves to vouch for their marital status. The prospective bride and groom had to produce two witnesses who could testify that they had never been previously married, at least not in a Christian ceremony, or that they had been widowed. The witnesses had to indicate the length of their acquaintance with the individual on whose behalf they testified, the nature of the relationship between them, and whether they communicated with one another on a regular basis. In the event that the prospective bride or groom had been widowed, the witnesses had to swear that the spouse had died from natural causes and that they knew where the deceased was buried. They also had to assure the authorities that they knew how long the individual in question had been a widow or widower.

The witnesses who testified on behalf of the African couples in my sample ranged in age from sixteen to eighty. The majority were between the ages of twenty and sixty, and none of them had known the person on whose behalf they testified for less than one year. Most reported that they had known the happy couple between five and ten years, although several had an acquaintanceship of twenty or thirty years. The age of these witnesses and the length of their association with the brides and grooms raise interesting
questions about the life expectancy of Mexican slaves, but this issue is outside the scope of this essay.

My primary focus is on the marriage choices of slaves described in the records as “Angolans.” The sample upon which my conclusions are based does not include those individuals who lived as husband and wife without the sanction of the church or the state. These persons were probably more numerous than those who sought approval. Such individuals organized their private lives outside the boundaries created by the colonial authorities and presumably did so according to their own traditions.

The appellation “Angolan” is not an ethnic designation. At the time it referred to the Kimbundu-speaking peoples who lived in an imprecise area lying to the north and south of the Zaire River, from which many slaves were taken during the period. It was also home to such Kimbundu-speaking subgroups as the Libolo and the Mbundu. These slaves were frequently victims of the wars between the kingdom of Ndongo and the Portuguese, as well as of the local conflicts in the Kimbundu-speaking region.

Although the “Angolans” comprised different ethnic groups, modern research has shown that they shared broad principles, assumptions, aesthetic ideas, and cultural understandings. Since the groups were all located in the Kimbundu-speaking region, their core religious beliefs and ideas about kin arrangements were basically similar. Consequently, the “Angolan” appellation was more than just a geographic expression; it reflected a zone of cultural interaction and fundamentally similar societal arrangements, ethos, and assumptions. Thus, the appellation had a particular cultural and emotional resonance for those who were so described, much as “West Indian” has for the residents of the contemporary English-speaking Caribbean.

I selected the Angolans for special analysis because individuals with that designation constituted the majority of the African-born slave population during the period. Although no reliable claim can be made as to the composition of the Angolan population according to gender, its size probably ensured that men and women stood a reasonable chance of finding a spouse at some point. That being the case, if Angolans were found to choose partners more frequently from other groups, then this would suggest, among other things, the weakening of their ethnic identities.

The sample included the choices of 521 individuals who applied for marriage licenses and who were described as “Angolan” (see table 1). Of this number, 231 couples (or 462 individuals) were both Angolans. In other words, 89% of the Angolans in the sample married other Angolans. Eighteen (3.5%) chose individuals described as “Congo,” and six married individuals belonging to
the Terra Nova ethnic group. Twenty persons chose partners from among Indians, mestizos, mulattoes, and others.\(^\text{17}\)

This sample of spousal choices lends itself to several conclusions. It may be argued that such choices represented the continuing salience of ethnicity, which not even the Atlantic passage or slavery could destroy. Whenever and wherever the demographic circumstances allowed, the African-born were likely to choose partners who shared common ideas about kinship and other cultural understandings.\(^\text{18}\) In another sample of marriage choices in Mexico City, albeit a smaller one, 50\% of the slaves described as “Congo,” another imprecise ethnic designation, selected partners with the same appellation. Similarly, 64\% of the Bram chose their spouses from their own ethnic group.\(^\text{19}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Angolans</th>
<th>Race, Ethnicity or Area of Origin of Spouse</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>462</td>
<td>Angola</td>
<td>88.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Congo</td>
<td>3.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Anchico(^a)</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>San Thomé(^b)</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Caraballi(^c)</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mozambique(^d)</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bram(^e)</td>
<td>0.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Terra Nova(^f)</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Biafada(^g)</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Other(^h)</td>
<td>3.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total: 521</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: AGN, Ramo de Matrimonios, vols. 1–126.

\(^{a}\) The Tio or Teke peoples of Congo-Brazzaville.
\(^{b}\) Entrepôt station for slaves from Dahomey and the Congo/Angola region.
\(^{c}\) The Kalabari of eastern Nigeria.
\(^{d}\) Various peoples from southeastern Africa.
\(^{e}\) Residents of Guinea Bissau.
\(^{f}\) Residents of the eastern Guinea coast.
\(^{g}\) Residents of Guinea Bissau.
\(^{h}\) This includes Indians, mestizos, creole slaves and mulattoes.

Ethnicity, of course, does not operate in the abstract. The choice of a partner from the same ethnic group (or from a group with similar cultural understandings) was a tangible expression of the intricate, enduring, and
complex set of relationships—both formal and informal—that often bind people from the same ethnic background in a foreign land. Evidence from Brazil, Venezuela, and Peru suggests that religious brotherhoods, for example, were organized along African ethnic lines. Immigrants, coerced or otherwise, have always displayed the tendency to organize social and political institutions that reflect their needs and serve to nurture and enhance social intercourse with those of a similar heritage. Many if not most of their social relations take place within these ethnic or national boundaries. Mexican slaves who shared core cultural understandings must also have organized themselves in distinct groups once the demographic situation allowed.

That African-born slaves were able to maintain a cultural memory in the Americas should not be surprising. The middle passage, as has been suggested earlier, did not destroy their sense of who they were, nor did it obliterate their cultural moorings and sensibilities. This cultural tenacity has been observed for all peoples and has been characterized by K. N. Chaudhuri as “perpetual memory.” Every society, he notes, “has a mechanism similar to the genetic DNA code which enables it to copy all the details of a living organism.” This perpetual memory replicates, among other things, “a whole range of relationships involving the family, economic practices and institutions, the state, religion, and systems of belief.”

Although it is tempting to argue that the marriage choices of the Africans in Mexico in these early years reflected the will of the couple, we are not entirely sure. There is no evidence that they were arranged by the masters, but powerful traditional imperatives may have operated. Among many, if not all, of the ethnic groups who hailed from west and west-central Africa, marriage not only constituted an alliance between the male and female but also established a deep and enduring bond between kin groups. In practice, this bond with the kinfolk was deemed to take precedence over that which united the husband and wife. Lucille Mair explains, in addition, that “any marriage is a matter of interest not only to the parents of both parties but to a wider circle of relatives, particularly the members of the lineage of each.” Furthermore, the couple had to receive the approval of an older person or the head of the lineage. In some cases, marriages could be arranged by the elders, who often used this as a means of asserting their authority in the group, creating dependence on themselves and simultaneously disbursing patronage.

One cannot say with certainty that these traditions continued to operate in Mexico throughout the colonial period. Yet it may be plausible to suggest that the Africans, even those who were Christianized, would not have abandoned their deeply held beliefs and traditions overnight. Copious evidence indicates that their religious beliefs survived. Given the highly integrated nature of
African epistemology, there is no reason to conclude that ideas governing kin and family relationships had any less tenacity.

One hint that the traditional patterns of marriage customs survived comes from the high incidence of polygynous relationships, despite the strictures of the colonial state and the church. Another resides in the fact that the witnesses at the weddings tended to be much older than the couples. It can be conjectured that these were likely to be the elders or the senior and more highly respected members of the recreated ethnic group. These leaders, if indeed they were such, may have arranged the marriages or, alternatively, demonstrated their endorsement of the alliance by their involvement in the ceremony. If this speculation has any merit, then the choice of a spouse with the same ethnic designation represented more than just the assertion of a common ethnic identity. In such a case, it was part of the corporate life of the ethnic group, a culturally sanctioned and structured set of relationships and behavior that at once defined them and held them together in difficult times.

Ethnic ties, identities, and loyalties began to break down once the slave communities of the Americas became dominated by creoles. This process probably did not occur as rapidly in Brazil, Haiti, and the other Caribbean islands that continued to have a majority of African-born slaves until emancipation was achieved. Sterling Stuckey has observed that slavery created a cultural “oneness” or a common identity among blacks in North America. This finding is applicable to other societies of the hemisphere as well, although the process in some cases had to await the end of the slave trade and slavery. African ethnic loyalties and attachments were nothing if not tenacious.

A careful study of marriage choices for other societies where that is possible will probably support the conclusion that ethnicity informed the most intimate choices that African slaves made. Such findings will have broad and important implications for our understanding of child-rearing practices, naming ceremonies, religious ideas, medical practices, burial patterns, and other practices of the African-born and their children. Africa, as I have maintained, also came to the Americas. Until we begin to develop a better understanding of the cultures that the Africans brought with them and how some of these sensibilities survived or were altered and modified, our interpretation of the black past will remain seriously flawed.

Footnotes

2. Melville Herskovits remains an important exception. See his pathbreaking Myth of the Negro Past (New York, 1941).

3. A frequently brilliant discussion of these questions is that of Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, The Birth of African American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective (Boston, 1992).


7. John Thornton and others have argued that slaves who were designated “Congos” were likely to have been baptized Christians before their departure for Mexico. These individuals, they maintain, hailed from societies that had been Christianized for several generations before the start of the slave trade to the Americas. I have not encountered, however, any sources in the archives in Mexico that suggest that the Africans had been converted to Christianity before their enslavement. See John Thornton, Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1680 (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 235–71.

8. The religious authorities kept a careful account of the applications for marriage licenses from all ethnic groups in society. These applications, particularly those from the residents of Mexico City, are housed in the Archivo General de la Nación, in the ramo (section) “Matrimonios.”


10. For a recent discussion of the family arrangements of Africans in the Americas during the formative years of their presence, see John Thornton, Africa and Africans, pp. 129–234. See also Michael Mullin, Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736–1831 (Urbana, 1992), pp. 159–73.


15. Some of the slaves who were called Angolans during the period may have been Congos who were shipped from Luanda.


17. Sample derived from AGN, Matrimonios, vols. 1–126.

18. Although historians and contemporary observers have generally maintained that black male slaves chose their partners primarily from the ranks of Indian women, the data in the sample do not support this conclusion. They also were not likely to choose (or be chosen by) mestizas. Interestingly, mulatto slaves preferred to marry free mulattoes, Indians, and mestizos, probably because such choices reflected an elevation in their status. The children of free women, whose fathers were slaves, inherited the mother’s status.

19. AGN, Matrimonios, vols. 1–126.


24. AGN, Ramo de Inquisición, contains numerous examples of Africans who were accused of bigamy.