Kalle Gustafsson  
Åbo Akademi, General history

Identities and Networks of Western Central African Slaves in Brazil, 1700-1830

Background and Central Research Problems

The study of Atlantic history has truly flourished in the past two decades, especially in the United States, where several colleges now offer programs in Atlantic studies. The field has taken huge steps forward since the publication of Philip Curtin’s groundbreaking statistical study of the Atlantic slave trade in 1969.\(^1\) Curtin’s study led to a long debate about the number of slaves exported from Africa during the centuries of the Atlantic slave trade.\(^2\) Due to the patient efforts of some brilliant historians, researchers and students can now get detailed information about the slave trade by using a CD-ROM database, although it should be noted that this database is especially weak when studying the Portuguese participation in the Atlantic slave trade.\(^3\) Hopefully, this weakness will be corrected as new evidence about Portuguese slave trade is found in Brazilian archives.

The interactions between Europe, Africa, and the Americas shaped the ideological parameters and social history during the era of the Atlantic slave trade. Goods moved throughout the Atlantic world as slaves were imported to the Americas from Africa. The focus of my research is on the transatlantic linkages between Angola and Brazil during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The total number of enslaved Africans who went to Brazil was approximately 4.5 million between 1600 and 1850, ten times as many as went to North America and even more than the total number of Africans who went to all of the Caribbean and North America combined. Eltis, Behrendt and Richardson, who have analyzed the slave trade along its national lines, have determined that Portuguese ships – usually defined as vessels owned by Portuguese nationals living mainly in Brazil – were critically important in the carrying of slaves.\(^4\)

The great majority of enslaved Africans sent to Brazil came from Angola and other parts of West Central Africa. Yet, the interconnections between Angola and Brazil have to a large extent been neglected in research. Several essays in the collection *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora*, edited by Linda Heywood and published in 2002, dealt with the interconnections between Angola and Brazil.\(^5\) Another major step forward was the publication in 2004 of *Enslaving Connections: Changing Cultures*

---

of Africa and Brazil during the Era of Slavery, a collection of essays edited by Jose C. Curto and Paul E. Lovejoy.  

Unlike in the Anglophone Atlantic world of North America and the Caribbean, the transatlantic system in the Southern Hemisphere to a considerable extent bypassed direct European mediation in the maintenance of the system. Brazilian merchants and seamen played a central role in this Brazilian-centred world, which was ethnically and racially complex. Many of the merchants and seamen involved in the transatlantic connections were mulatto (f. mulatta) or pardo (f. parda).

An important structural feature of the slave trade was its circular nature, departing from Africa, coming to America, and then returning to Africa. However, until recently, many of the multiple connections between western Africa and Brazil during the era of slavery have been considered in a compartmentalized and isolated fashion. A notable exception is the magnificent work of Pierre Verger, who concentrated on the trade relations between the Bight of Benin and Bahia. Following Verger’s lead, other studies connecting West Africa and Brazil have been published recently.

The Africans who went to Brazil helped to shape the demographic, linguistic, cultural, economic, political and religious formation of Brazil, but Brazilians, whether of European or African background and often mixed, also affected the demographic, economic, political, religious, and cultural composition of the towns and commercial centres of Angola. The focus of my research is twofold. On the one hand, I want to shed light on the processes on the Angolan side of the Atlantic that led to the enslavement of millions of the continents inhabitants. The fundamental questions are how and why did men and women from some African nations or ethnicities and not others come in such great numbers to different regions of Brazil. On the other hand, I want to study what happened to the Angolan slaves in Brazil. Were they able to recreate their identities in slavery and if they did, what role did their background or ethnicity play in this identity formation? Thus, the networks formed by Angolan slaves in Brazil come under scrutiny. Did these networks, such as religious brotherhoods or professional guilds, include slaves with other regional origins from West Africa?

**Historiography: Angolan Slave Trade**

So far, many studies have shown that strong commercial links existed between Angola and Brazil. Slaves were exchanged in Angola to banzos, i.e. bundles of trade goods. Alcohol, tobacco, textiles, firearms, and trinkets were exchanged in the market places for slaves. Luso-
Brazilian capital, shipping, and business networks linked not only slave traders but also dealers in manufactured goods and produce across the Atlantic basin. Over time, in Angola, the growth of slave exports meant more foreign goods in circulation to a wider range of people. With the Portuguese abolition of legal Brazilian slave trade in 1830, indigenous production in Angola expanded, and as a result, more people could purchase foreign goods. However, slaves still continued to arrive to the coast from the far interior, and they were illegally shipped to the Americas.

The organization of the slave trade in western central Africa has been studied extensively. Whereas the early works by David Birmingham,11 Phyllis Martin,12 and Robert Harms13 concentrated almost solely on the African side of the trade, Joseph Miller’s Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade 1730-1830 examined the connections between Africa, Brazil, and Portugal. Miller mapped the flows of commercial capital in the southern Atlantic, and demonstrated how the growing imports spread throughout western central Africa. According to Miller, a prominent and permanent aspect of the political and economic transformation in Africa during the Atlantic slave trade was the emergence of a commercial economy and society within the African use-value environment. This transformation was due to the activities of African and Luso-African traders, Brazilian slavers, and metropolitan merchants.14

Since the publication of Miller’s groundbreaking study, the perspectives on Angolan slave trade have been further broadened by the yet unpublished doctoral dissertation of Roquinaldo Amaral Ferreira. His work examined the decline of the trade in Luanda in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century and how the trade operated during the eighteenth century in Benguela. Ferreira addressed the role of imports of foreign goods to Angola. His particular concern were Indian textiles, which were widely traded for slaves and used as currency and social artefacts in African societies. According to Ferreira, taste and fashion played a pivotal role in imports of textiles. The dissertation also showed how the merchants based in Brazil came to dominate the trade in Indian textiles.15

Whereas Ferreira’s work centred on the trade of textiles at Benguela, Jose Curto’s published work concentrated on the alcohol trade in Luanda. In Enslaving Spirits: The Portuguese-Brazilian Alcohol Trade at Luanda and its Hinterland, c. 1550-1830, Curto showed how the consumption of alcohol in Africa fuelled the trade in slaves.16 Distilled alcohol in the form of sugar cane brandy, or gerebita as it came to be known in western central Africa, originated from Brazilian ports of Salvador and Recife as well as Rio de Janeiro. The gold mining industry expanded during the early eighteenth century in Minas Gerais, and it fuelled the urban economy of Rio de Janeiro and its rural sugar plantations.

---

16 Jose C. Curto, Enslaving Spirits: The Portuguese-Brazilian Alcohol Trade at Luanda and its Hinterland, c. 1550-1830 (Leiden, 2004). However, for a wider regional and chronological perspective see idem. Alcool e Escravos: O comércio luso-brasileiro do álcool em Mípinda, Luanda e Benguela durante o tráfico atlântico de escravos (c. 1480-1830) e o seu impacto nas sociedades da África Central Ocidental (Lisbon, 2002).
During the course of the eighteenth century, colonial traders in Rio de Janeiro became the leading Brazilian suppliers of the gerebita imported in Luanda, the colonial capital of Angola.

A rare case study on the Brazilian slave traders residing in Angola is Jose Curto’s unpublished paper *Movers of Slaves: The Brazilian Community in Benguela (Angola), c. 1722-1832.* Employing census data from Benguela, Curto has argued that the Brazilian community in Benguela was responsible for not only developing much of the slave trade from Benguela but, in doing so, also ensured that roughly three in four slaves exported from this port town were headed for the major Brazilian labour market they serviced, namely Rio de Janeiro. Indeed, they dominated most of the commerce carried out in and from the town. The death toll among the foreigners, however, was steep, certainly caused by the disease environment, and within this diasporic community, few became permanent residents in Benguela.

Africa, far from being an isolated backwater, cut off from human development, has been a crossroads, mediating contact with a wide range of peoples and cultures. One result of this has been the emergence of contact societies where Africans met, absorbed and engaged with others from outside the continent. In Angola, the societies that were involved in trade developed distinctive characteristics as a result of this encounter. The debate whether this could be called creolisation or not is a lively one, with many Africanists hostile to the use of such a term. Yet ‘creole identities’ is a widely accepted term and receives much attention in the ‘new’ British imperial history as well as in the development of the concept of a ‘shadow empire’ in Portuguese historiography. For example, Linda Heywood has argued that by the beginning of the eighteenth century, a Creole culture had emerged in Portuguese Angola and was undergoing significant transformation. She has pointed out that, on the one hand, this phenomenon occurred as a result of the Africanization of Portuguese settlers and their culture, but on the other hand, Central Africans were adept at selectively integrating elements of European culture into their own cultural fabric. As a result of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, slaves brought elements of this culture with them to the plantations, mines, and urban centres of Brazil.

**Angolan Slaves in Brazil**

The organization of the slave trade in Brazil required many things, including the acquisition or lease of ships, the build-up of stocks of trade goods, the payment of wages to sailors, advances to intermediaries on the African side of the commerce, food and water to keep slaves alive during the Middle Passage, and, lastly, insurance on the captives, the items of exchange, and the equipment involved in crossing the Atlantic. As Manolo Florentino has argued, the large import volumes of Africans in Brazilian ports denote the existence of an impressive circuit of capital accumulation. The activities of the Brazilian merchants in Rio de Janeiro have been extensively studied by Florentino in his *Em Costas Negras: Uma Historia do Trafico Atlantico de Escravos entre a Africa e o Rio de Janeiro (secs. XVIII e*

---


According to Florentino, the Rio de Janeiro trading community itself guaranteed the necessary conditions for the reproduction of its business as owners of slave vessels, suppliers of stockpiled trade goods, and insurers of slaving ventures. Relations between economic agents were personal, and competition was minimal since individuals were associated with one another – marriage functioned as one of the mechanisms to concentrate resources. Florentino has shown that the basic mechanism for the subordination of Angola to Brazil lay in the consignment of trade goods. The Rio slave traders constantly forwarded goods for the acquisition of slaves, and on the African side, the slaves were forwarded to Brazil as compensation for the consigned goods. In Florentino’s words, “[t]he repetition over time of this pattern entangled merchants in Africa in a web of debt, which, by the first decade of the 1800s, attained considerable proportions.”

Although commercial links between Africa and the Americas have been extensively studied, the question of cultural continuities and identities in the southern Atlantic world is a more complex issue. John Thornton has covered this theme comprehensively in his masterpiece *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800.* Thornton’s ambitious work examined Africans both in Africa and in the New World. He specified African cultural groups that were affecting and affected by the developments in the Atlantic world. Thornton also concentrated on the transformations of African culture during the era of the slave trade, with an emphasis on African religions and Christianity. In the Portuguese-Brazilian historiography similar themes have been successfully covered by James Sweet’s study of the cultural lives of African slaves in the early colonial Portuguese world.

Although the growing popularity of diaspora studies has brought the question of identities to the foreground, our understanding of the African diaspora remains limited. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, in his recent contribution to the discussion, has been critical of the analytical tendency to privilege the Anglophone branch of the African diaspora, because the four dominant dimensions of the global African diasporas properly include the intra-Africa, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean, and Atlantic diasporas. Zeleza has noted that, for Brazil, the challenges for the African diaspora and writing its histories are quite different from those of countries where Africans were small minorities. Indeed, it would not be far-fetched to describe Brazil demographically and culturally as an African country. Indeed, as Zeleza has shown, great store has been placed on explaining the remarkable survival and transformation of the Africans and their cultures in Brazil. Paul Lovejoy’s research group has produced a number of studies on ethnicity and slave identities, and these anthologies also contain chapters on Brazil. Alongside Mary Karasch’s work on slave life in Rio, worth mentioning is also one of the best recent studies on slavery, marriage and kinship in rural Rio de Janeiro by Manolo Garcia Florentino and José Roberto de Góes.

21 Florentino, "Slave Trading", 59, 73.
The significance of African ethnicities in the Americas has been a contested issue. The debate between anthropologists and historians has been a lively one. While some scholars have concluded that the impact of particular regions and ethnicities on the formation of Afro-Creole culture in the Americas was insignificant, others have called for more concrete and contextualized studies of the African diaspora in the Americas.²⁸ Starting with Nina Rodriguez’s pioneering study,²⁹ ethnicity has been employed as a useful category for analysis, and in Brazil, as in most slave colonies, ethnolinguistic concentrations were the norm, not the exception. As Lovejoy has effectively demonstrated, ethnicity was a factor in the identity of the enslaved: “On the one hand, ethnicity meant something to the people themselves, evolving as it did out of language and perceptions of cultural similarities, but on the other hand the slave routes forced identifications onto people, who had to communicate to survive.”³⁰

Gwendolyn Midlo Hall has recently exposed several important gaps in the African diaspora studies. According to her, the study of African ethnicities in the Americas requires data from both sides of the Atlantic over time. Only then can we discover which Africans from which regions, ethnicities and genders found themselves where, when, and in what proportions.³¹ Although West Central Africa was a major supplier of slaves to Brazil, the study of African ethnic identity is made somewhat tricky by the use of broad identity designations in Brazil as well as by the linguistic and cultural unity of west central Africans. However, this should not be an impossible task, as studies dealing with ethnicity of African slaves in Brazil now show.³²

One important institution that unified slaves were the lay religious brotherhoods or confraternities (Irmandades), which were voluntary associations of the faithful for charitable and pious ends. Brotherhoods performed social work and organized colourful religious processions. One must also consider the lay brotherhoods as burial societies, which offered for the enslaved Africans the prospect of reuniting with their ancestors. The Irmandades, also those organized by slaves, sometimes amassed considerable wealth.³³ The formation of collectivities demonstrates that Africans sought to re-create an African world in the Americas. Elisabeth Kiddy has shown that the divergence within the membership of the Irmandades ran along four main lines. The divisions could be made according to nação (nation/ethnicity), cór (color), sexo (gender) and condição (legal status as slave or free). The

---

²⁹ Raimundo Nina Rodriguez, Os Africanos no Brasil, 2nd. ed. (São Paulo, 1935).
brotherhoods of the blacks sometimes split along ethnic lines, although the majority were ethnically inclusive. 

In the coastal region of Angola, as slaving spread further and further inland, the fundamental contrast was not between the Europeans and Africans, but between the older environmentally based communities of farmers and the new commercial identities of traders who collaborated with the Europeans. The study of the southern Atlantic world should not be approached solely through ‘the ethnic lens’, but rather, it should be kept in mind that, in Africa, as Miller has argued, people struggled to define themselves through belonging in multiple ways, through the diversity of the associations they could create. And as Miller has shown, the enslaved Africans carried these strategies with them across the Atlantic, networking in multiple ways. The slaves employed the religion of their masters, and through “godparenthood” and marriages they pursued to protect themselves and created new identities in bondage. In the commercialized urban environments, skilled males formed occupational guilds. By seizing opportunities for manumission, slaves sought to defend whatever ties of family and patronage they had been able to form. The strategies for forming networks and creating identities through associating with others were numerous and have been barely scratched by researchers.

Sources

Relevant source material for an inquiry concentrating on networks and identities comes in various forms. The parish registers and census data in the commercial centres both in Angola and Brazil give information on the formation of the Luso-Brazilian/Luso-African communities over time. Post-mortem inventories are useful in shedding light on the issue of wealth of the merchants, but testaments and property lists would also point to the clustering of slaves with similar ethnic backgrounds. The question to consider concerns the delimitation of the study. I should decide on what geographical area to concentrate in Brazil. Then, in what social area will I look for traces of identity formation of Angolan slaves, i.e. will I concentrate on religious brotherhoods (or even sisterhoods which existed in Salvador and the region around the Bahia de Todos os Santos) or occupational guilds. It would be possible to posit the research problem along gender lines and concentrate on mechanisms of identity formation among female street vendors. It would even be viable to study identity formation in different sectors of the plantation economy and compare, for example, sugar and tobacco plantations or identities in the mining regions.

The archival research, however, should start in Lisbon, Portugal. The material involving Angola and Brazil is located at the Arquivo Historico Ultramarino (AHU). Documentation produced by Portuguese authorities and bureaucrats overseas is amassed at

---

38 For more information about AHU, see: http://www.iict.pt/ahu/index.html
the AHU. It is possible to find rich information about the Portuguese population overseas, but also information on the local peoples and cultures that the Portuguese encountered – and also forcefully transported – in their colonies. Among the documents available are military letters, exploration plans and reports, commercial records, as well as hospital records, censuses, descriptions of indigenous costumes and cultural habits, and reports of conflicts between the Portuguese and the local authorities. Besides the AHU, extensive collections are to be found at the Arquivo Nacionais da Torre do Tombo (ANTT). At ANTT, researchers have located manuscripts about notices, requirements and procedures to be followed on the slave trade, as well as provisions and authorization for Brazilian merchants to join the slave trade. Collections also contain an enormous amount of information on official issues, including records of embarkation of ships loaded in Angola and commercial exchanges. It is worth noting that any research in Portugal is time consuming since there are few inventories available to facilitate researchers. Most of the time is spent on locating documents, rather than reading and transcribing them.

In Angola, the most relevant archive for research is the Arquivo Histórico Nacional de Angola (AHNA), in Luanda. Among the material is political and commercial correspondence between Portuguese authorities in Benguela and Luanda, and between Portuguese representatives along the central African coast and in the interior. The contact between the Portuguese and local African populations is vividly described in these documents. The Comarca Judicial de Benguela (CJB) holds judicial records and private wills, but as of spring 2003, the CJB had not yet inventoried or catalogued its documents. Besides AHNA, the Arquivo do Arquibispado de Luanda (AAL) is another important depository of documents in Luanda. The AAL contains church records. It is worth noting that Mariana Pinho Candido of the York University has digitized documentation in AHNA and they are repositioned at the Harriet Tubman Resource Centre on the African Diaspora. In Brazil, rich collections are located in various archives in the major cities, and it is important to establish contacts with Brazilian historians to consult which collections would be fruitful for my study. Considering that the historiography on identity formation in the southern Atlantic world is still in its infancy, it would be highly challenging to engage on research in this area and look into the processes that enabled Africans to survive in the harsh conditions of slavery.

References:


---

39 For more information about ANTT, see: http://www.iantt.pt
40 *African Diaspora Newsletter No. 12*, Harriet Tubman Resource Centre on the African Diaspora, Department of History, York University.
41 *African Diaspora Newsletter No. 10*, Harriet Tubman Resource Centre on the African Diaspora, Department of History, York University.

------ Alcool e Escravos: O comércio luso-brasileiro do álcool em Mpinda, Luanda e Benguela durante o trafico atlântico de escravos (c. 1480-1830) e o seu impacto nas sociedades da África Central Ocidental (Lisbon, 2002).

Curto, Jose C., and Paul E. Lovejoy, eds. Enslaving Connections: Changing Cultures of Africa and Brazil during the Era of Slavery (Amherst, 2004).


Eltis, David, Stephen Behrendt, David Richardson and Herbert Klein, The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM (Cambridge, 1999).


------ Em Costas Negras: Uma Historia do Trafico Atlantico de Escravos entre a Africa e o Rio de Janeiro (secs. XVIII e XIX). 2d ed. (São Paulo, 2002).

Florentino, Manolo G. and José Roberto de Góes, A Paz das Senzalas: famílias escravas e tráfico atlântico, Rio de Janeiro, c. 1790-c. 1850 (Rio de Janeiro, 1997).


Hall, Gwendolyn Midlo, Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links (Chapel Hill, 2005).


- 9 -


Nishida, Mieko, Slavery and Identity: Ethnicity, Gender, and Race in Salvador, Brazil, 1808-1888 (Bloomington, 2003).


Rodriguez, Raimundo Nina, Os Africanos no Brasil, 2nd. ed. (São Paulo, 1935).


Strickrodt, Silke, “Afro-Brazilians of the Western Slave Coast in the Nineteenth Century,” in Curto and Lovejoy, eds. Enslaving Connections: Changing Cultures of Africa and Brazil during the Era of Slavery (New York, 2004), 213-244.


