Consumption, Identity, and Networks During the Age of the Slave Trade (CINDAST)

Project Director: Professor Holger Weiss (ÅA/General history)

This is an application to the Academy of Finland to start a new integrated research project which includes researchers from Finland and Ghana. The aim of the project is to study the impact, extension, intensity and depth of Atlantic networks during the age of the Atlantic slave trade as an expression of increased interconnectedness between individuals and communities. The research project uses an actor-oriented framework to study how various kinds of networks and connections created conditions for new forms of flows of material and immaterial goods and ideas which led to the emergence of new types of consumption throughout the Atlantic world during the eighteenth century. An important, but hitherto little researched, aspect of the increased interconnectedness in the Atlantic world during this period is the link between consumption and constructions of identities. Little is known about how early forms of consumerism could strengthen or were used to articulate new forms of identification and how individuals constructed their identities but also manifested their social position via consumption of goods and the indigenization of ‘foreign’ ideas and values.

1. Background

The Department of History at Åbo Akademi (ÅA) University (Historieämnet vid Åbo Akademi) has since 2003 adapted global history as one of its major areas of expertise. To strengthen this approach of the Department, a research team has been formed by professor Holger Weiss to study aspects and consequences of interconnectedness in the Atlantic world during the eighteenth century. The team includes two postgraduate researchers, Ms Anna Sundelin and Mr Kalle Gustafsson, and two postdoctoral researchers, Ms Laura Hollsten and Dr Joachim Mickwitz. Weiss is an expert in African and global history. He has written widely about ecological and societal history of Nigeria and Ghana as well as global environmental history. He is currently finishing a monograph on Muslims in Ghana and an introduction to global history. Ms Hollsten is an expert in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century environmental, scientific and societal history of the Caribbean and is defending her PhD thesis in January 2006. Dr Mickwitz is an expert in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Nordic cultural and political history and is currently conducting research on eighteenth-century Nordic, especially Danish, political and cultural connections to and influences from the Atlantic world. Ms Sundelin holds a MA in general history (ÅA) and has studied consumerism and the emergence of a consumer society in eighteenth century Britain. Mr Gustafsson holds a MA in African Studies (University of Helsinki) and has conducted research on the slave trade between Northern Namibia and Northern Angola during the late nineteenth century. To further strengthen the research team, Weiss has invited colleagues from the Department of History, University of Ghana, Legon, to participate in the planned research project, namely Dr N.J.K. Brukum, a leading expert on Northern Ghanaian history and Mrs Akosua Perbi, the leading expert in Ghana on indigenous slave trade in the region. A Ghanaian postgraduate researcher will be added to the research group in 2007.
Since its formation in 2005, the Finnish research team has been able to generate private funding to start the individual case studies. The members of the Finnish research team have already written articles for a thematic number on the eighteenth century Atlantic world for the Finnish journal *Finsk tidskrift* 3-4/2006 and are at the moment engaged in producing an anthology in Swedish on religious networks in the Atlantic world during the eighteenth century.

2. Description, priority areas, main approaches and hypotheses of the proposed project

The Atlantic slave trade has been one of the greatest forced migrations before the twentieth century. It shaped the Atlantic world economy, affecting not only African but also American and European societies. Modern research states that although some 11–12 million Africans reached their destinations in the Americas and the Caribbean, the total amount of human beings who suffered, were displaced, enslaved, killed or died as a consequence of slave raiding and the trade in slaves numbered at least twice as many Africans during the era of the Atlantic slave trade, i.e., ca 1450–1850. The peak of the Atlantic slave trade was during the eighteenth century when more than six million Africans entered the ‘New World’. (Lovejoy 2000; Eltis 2002.)

However, the negative demographic aspect of the slave trade is only one aspect of the era of the slave trade, albeit an important one. Apart from Africans who were forcefully moved in the Atlantic world, other people as well as a long range of goods were in circulation between the various continents. Europeans moved as traders, administrators, conquistadors, scientists or settlers overseas. American (white) traders developed links with the Caribbean, Europe and Africa, whereas Brazilian (both white and non-white) traders or ‘trusted’ people developed links with Africa. Least known are the few though existing African overseas networks. Commonly classified as the ‘triangular trade’, which in most cases was not a triangular one but rather a complex web, raw material as well as processed goods were produced at one place and sold and consumed at another, including cotton, sugar, peppers, ivory, hides, silver and gold as much as Indian textiles, brassware, iron and steel goods, hats, or beads. The labour force in use ranged from plantation slavery and indentured labour in the Americas and Caribbean, to peasants, handicraft workers, serfs and ‘domestic slaves’ in Europe and Africa. On the other hand, both the upper as well as the lower strata of any society in the Atlantic world consumed both material and immaterial goods, some of them produced at the other end of the Atlantic world or even beyond. Thus, the Atlantic world emerged during – and due to – the era of the slave trade as a vibrant network if not world-system, linking four regions (Europe, Africa, the Caribbean and the Americas) together in an ever tightening web. At the same time the Atlantic network was linked to the Indian Ocean network, thereby creating a global network (McNeill & McNeill 2003; Bayly 2004).

The early views on the emergence of consumerism argued that consumption was impossible for the majority of the people, except for the wealthiest members of the society. This view, however, has been revised, and it is now held that new goods imported from the colonial world, such as coffee, tea, sugar, and tobacco became popular necessities for most people, the poor as well as the rich. As these goods started to appear in ever larger quantities in European markets, the culture was transforming into a more
commercial one. The commercialization of culture, however, was not confined merely to Europe. 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 (Inikori and Engerman 1992; Stearns 2001).

**Objectives**

The main objective of the projected CINDAST-research project is to develop an integrated framework for research in global history. Starting from the seventeenth century, various regions in the Atlantic world became connected to each other through trade and political networks. People and goods were moved from one place to another, a transfer that never was a one-way process but rather a myriad of links that connected various regions to each other. Seen from a global perspective, a Eurocentric projection of the Atlantic world is problematic: though (West) European trading and political networks dominated in the region, North American, Brazilian and African networks became important during the eighteenth century, if not earlier. Such a web of networks is evident when one includes a variety of levels of interaction. For example, at one level one can identify trade links between Western Europe, the Caribbean, the Americas and Africa, at another level various intra- and inter-regional connections affect local production, politics, culture and consumption, sometimes leading to clashes and conflicts, but at other times to a synthesis of different societal, cultural and religious ways of life. Focussing on three general components, namely networks, consumption, processes of identity formation, the research project will be able to generate studies on both the global within the local as well as the local within the global, thereby overcoming a Eurocentric approach.

**Key research objectives are thus:**

a. Different places and regions in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world are linked to each other by an increasing myriad of trade networks. People as well as material and immaterial goods are crisscrossing the ocean, and these networks and links enable political ideas, cultural habits, economic goods and human beings to be transferred from one place to another and thereby affecting and changing consumption habits and the (re)formation of identities. Focus will be on the Atlantic web, but this web was not a closed network but an open one, linking up with other networks and thereby creating a global web. Again, the task will be to dismantle the Eurocentric perception of (Western) Europe - and by extension North America - being the centre in an emerging world-system, whereas the Americas, the Caribbean and Africa are seen as peripheral. Interconnection rather than one-way flows marked the Atlantic world; all of the various points had multiple connections to other places: Europe to and from the Americas and Africa, Africa to and from the Americas and Europe, the Americas to and from Africa and Europe. However, in all of these ‘meeting-points’, the capacity to create and participate in these networks and interaction was limited to an actors position within his/her local society and his/her social rank and order. Networks and interconnections could strengthen the capacity and position of a person, either through participating in the
creation and activities of the network or linking oneself through a patron-client relationship to somebody who had access to such a network. The aim of the project is to study via a range of different case-studies the existence, extensity, intensity and impact of networks, be they commercial, social or political, in the Atlantic world.

b. Consumption and the beginning of a consumer society. Contrary to a Eurocentric perception, which states that a modern consumer society evolved in London during the eighteenth century, it is the hypothesis of the research project that a proto-modern consumer society was emerging at various points in the Atlantic world during this era. Thus, apart from identifying such places and societies, the structural as well as cultural context of these societies has to be studied to give an answer to what kind of consumerism one can identify and which structural, gender, cultural, religious or legal barriers propelled and/or blocked consumption habits. One question is, whether the concept of an ‘industrious revolution’, i.e., that families acquired new ‘packages’ of consumer items which worked on each other to produce yet larger gains in productivity and social satisfaction, resulting in a higher calorific intake, a new time discipline and a new pattern for sociability and emulation in the household. Another, equally important question is to study the consequences of the flow of consumer goods in the Atlantic world. Our hypothesis is that consumer behaviour did not differ much in the various points in the Atlantic world, but was locally restricted by social, economic, cultural and political factors: this question has to be empirically checked.

c. Closely linked to the question of consumption is the question of identity constructions and changes in self-identifications. What changes of and in identity occurred during the era of the slave trade and how much were such changes linked to new ways of consumption and consumerism? The African Atlantic slave trade, but also the migration of Europeans to the Americas and the Caribbean, led to the transfer of cultural, religious and social habits from one place to another. The outcome was in most cases a fusion of ‘old’ ideas and habits, languages and ‘cultures’, creating sometimes new identities, at other times hybrid or syncretistic religions, cultures and languages that were used as new identity marks by uprooted or replaced individuals. Not only did consumption habits change, most notably in clothing and eating, but also gender roles underwent change. Last, but not least, the reaction against the slave trade and slavery was not only a European (British or Enlightenment) project but linked activists in all parts of the Atlantic world in a common cause that not only resulted in the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade and the emancipation of slaves but also laid the foundation of the (Western) concept of human rights and modern civilization.

Global history as framework

The three modules of the research project are tied together by a global historical framework. In such a framework, connectedness of the various parts in an entity – in this case the eighteenth century Atlantic world – is studied both on a macro level and a micro level. The macro level serves a starting point and will be established through the projection of a model based on previous research on flows and interactions in the Atlantic world. The model thereafter serves as a hypothetical/theoretical guideline: it is assumed
that various parts of the Atlantic world were not only connected but also increasingly interacted with each other. This hypothesis or model will be tested by conducting empirical research on the micro level, in our case by investigating the existence of links and flows between two or more places within the Atlantic world. The use of a global historical approach is expected to open new insights of the increased interconnectedness of the various parts in the Atlantic world already during the eighteenth century as well as the consequences of what has been labelled ‘proto-globalization’. Consequently, the research approach follows new approaches outlined by, among others, P.D. Curtin (1984), J. Thornton (1998), R.J. Barendse (2002), J. Hopkins (2002), P. Manning (2003) and R.J. Bayly (2004). Following such an approach, macro-level analysis in our case is heavily connected to sociological, anthropological, economic and ecologic theories and models but also a ‘reformed’ world-system approach, whereas the micro-level case studies aim to empirically invest the effects and consequences of “the global in the local”, perhaps even questioning (macro-level) centre-periphery dichotomies. Instead, what might be found are varieties of ‘hybridization’ in forms of local adaptations and uses of non-local material and immaterial goods and ideas. Changes in time and space are important on both the macro and the micro level, and by integrating the various case studies it will be possible to see how integrated the Atlantic world was during the age of proto-globalization.

Priority areas, international connections and outline of the individual research projects

The increase and intensification of interaction in the Atlantic world will be studies by studying connections between various parts in the region during the eighteenth century. Each member of the team will study the consequences of such interactions. Our guiding hypothesis is that although various points in the Atlantic world were connected with each other through a variety of networks, the consequences of such connections were both similar (for example as expressed in the use and consumption of similar new goods) and dissimilar (for example the local usage and appropriation of these new goods, different cultural, social and ideological values attached to these goods or different social, political or cultural restrictions in the use of these goods). To be able to study the intensity, extensity and impact of these interactions and networks, the individual researchers are concentrating of different aspects on the relation between ‘the global’ and ‘the local’ by conducting actor-centred case-studies.

The eighteenth-century Atlantic world connected from a global perspective Europe, Africa, the Caribbean and the Americas (albeit the Atlantic world was not a closed entity but also connected to other ‘world-systems’, such as the Indian Ocean basin). In all of the regions, individuals took active part in shaping and creating networks and connections, although the consequences of them were highly different on the individual and local level. To be able to study these consequences on a micro-level, different localities are studied, namely the Gold Coast (by Weiss and the Ghanaian research team), Brazil (Gustafsson), the Caribbean (Hollsten, Sundelin and Mickwitz) and North-Western Europe (Sundelin, Mickwitz). Changes in power relations and consumption will be studied by Weiss and the Ghanaian researchers, whereas the connection between consumption and processes of identity formation are studied by Gustafsson. The environmental consequences of consumption are studied by Hollsten, Sundelin is
focussing on the possibilities and restrictions of the gradual emergence of a consumer society whereas Mickwitz is focussing on the use of colonial possession as symbolic assets.

The different aspects of local action, adaptation, rejection or reformulation (glocalization, see further Appadurai 1996) will be studied by promoting an actor-perspective, i.e., focussing on actions and activities of individuals and local communities. Gustafsson’s focus is on slaves in the ‘New World’ and their strategies and possibilities of coming into terms with a new world. By concentrating on Brazil and the links between Angola and Brazil, he will be able to break new ground in a hitherto little research topic. Sundelin studies the planter and the inspector who are living in two worlds but consuming the same goods. She is therefore concentrating on the links between British ‘middle-class’ families who are based both in Britain and on Jamaica. Mickwitz’s focus is on the authorities and the trading companies who are trying to connect two worlds. He is concentrating on Danish and Swedish contacts with the Caribbean, especially on Danish activities on St. Croix. Hollsten is focussing on the settler and planter in the colonies and on the link between consumerism and environment. She is concentrating on the Caribbean, especially Jamaica. Weiss is focussing on insiders and outsiders in coastal societies on the Gold Coast, concentrating especially on the introduction, adaptation and spread of new consumer goods, whereas the Ghanaian research team is focussing on the slaver and the enslaved on the Gold Coast and its hinterland.

3. International significance of the proposed project

The CINDAST-research project is inspired by the new approaches in global history as outlined by historians in connection with Cambridge University (Hopkins 2002; Bayly 2004) as well as the new research approaches on the African diaspora in the Atlantic world.

The extent and impact of slavery and the slave trade are by every standard one of the most hotly debated topics in both academic research and non-academic publications. Research on the slavery and the (Atlantic) slave trade has so far mainly concentrated on the effects and consequences of the slave trade and its abolition for Africa (among others, Harms 1981, Jones 1983, Miller 1989, Law 1990, Hernaes 1995; Walvin 2000). Philip Curtin’s path-breaking but debated estimation on the numbers of slaves that reached the Americas (1969) resulted in decades of research in British, French, Dutch, Portuguese and Danish archives by a number of research teams. These efforts have been brought together in a database by the research group of Eltis et al (2000). Other researchers, especially Joseph Inikori, are critical about these estimations and claim that the number of African forced migration is much higher (Inikori 1982).

Another focus of academic research has been on the social and economic consequences of the plantation slavery in the Americas, especially in the Caribbean and the US South. An important work has been Orlando Patterson’s (1982) monograph on slavery in which he argues that enslavement was a social death, transforming a human being into a tool and property. Since Herbert S. Klein’s (summarized in Klein 1986) outline on the impact of plantation slavery in the Americas and the Caribbean, detailed studies have been conducted on several topics, including microhistorical, structural or cultural research, presenting detailed accounts on plantation slavery and the lives of
slaves on the plantations (for example, Beckles 1983; Lovejoy and Rogers 1994; Palmié 1995; Frey and Wood 1999).

Closely linked with the question of plantation slavery is the question of the impact of the plantation economy in the Atlantic world (Curtin 1998). Eric Williams’ *Capitalism and slavery* (1944) raised the claim that there existed a close link between on the one hand the Atlantic slave trade, plantation slavery and the production of raw material, and, on the other hand, the rise of capitalism and the industrial revolution in England and western Europe. Since then there has been an ongoing academic debate between those who are critical of Williams’ claim about a link between plantation slavery and the industrial revolution (among others, Drescher 1977; Drescher 1999; Inikori 2002).

A new research agenda was set by John Thornton in his monograph *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World* (1998). While earlier research largely concentrated either on the African, the American or the European section of the Atlantic world, Thornton’s approach opened the agenda for a global perspective integrating all sections in the focus. Thornton’s approach has shifted the focus from a Eurocentric to a global perspective, integrating Africans as equal important actors and not merely passive victims. Further, Patterson’s claim about the social death of a slave is broadened and deepened and Thornton claims that slavery did not mean a cultural death for an enslaved individual. Drawing on earlier historical and anthropological research on plantation slavery in the Americas and the Caribbean, Thornton highlights the cultural, social and political aspects and consequences of slavery in the New World, including issues of rebellion and marronage, cultural fusions and creations of ‘new’ African languages and cultures through processes that could be labelled both as creolization and pidginization.

Another new aspect in the academic research on slavery and the slave trade in the Atlantic world has been the focus on cross-Atlantic networks and links as well as (slave) construction of identities and on ethnicity during the age of the slave trade. This approach has been most prominently applied by researchers at the Harriet Tubman Resource Centre on the Atlantic Diaspora (York University). Since the mid-1990s, Paul Lovejoy’s research group has produced a number of studies on, among others, on links between Brazil and Africa (Curto and Lovejoy 2004), ethnicity and slave identities (Lovejoy and Trotman 2003).

Consumption in historical perspective has been studied extensively during the last three decades. The emergence of consumerism in different historical settings has led to widespread debate, best exemplified by the publication of the collection titled *Consumption and the World of Goods* (Brewer and Porter 1993). The articles presented a turning point in research in the sense of introducing new viewpoints and pointing at new directions for consumption studies. Whereas the research earlier had been concentrating on production, the focus now turned more towards demand.

Studies on consumption in historical perspective have to a large extent concentrated on the Anglophone world, especially on England. England and its capital city London have been seen as the focal points in the emerging consumerism during the eighteenth century. However, it has also been attested by Simon Schama that consumerism emerged earlier, in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic (Schama 1988). Still, another way to posit the problem would be to question the notion of consumer culture as a mass phenomenon in the eighteenth century. If approached in this way, the eighteenth century might be far too early to find manifestations of mass culture.
and mass production. However, in order to understand consumer culture we need to study how this system originated in different parts of the world and how it has functioned and evolved (Stearns 2001).

The significance of the CINDAST-research project is that we will combine the macro level (global history) perspective with an actor-oriented one (micro-level case-studies). Another is our focus on the Nordic dimension in the Atlantic world, a topic which hitherto has received only little attention. Especially in terms of Nordic source material, the project is expected to be able to evaluate earlier little used or underused sources. A third point is the Ghanaian input in the project: by integrating Ghanaian historians in the project we will be able of bridging the widening gap between the Western research community and the African one.
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