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PROYECTOS DE REPATRIACIÓN ENTRE LAS COMUNIDADES AFRICANAS LIBRES EN EL CARIBE EN EL SIGLO XIX

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Résumé

Cet essai prétend étudier l'émigration depuis la Caraïbe vers l'Afrique. En particulier, la façon dont les Africains libérés réagissent aux projets de rapatriement et comment leur comportement peut affecter notre compréhension des projets de ce genre. Notre recherche compare un projet concernant des Africains rapatriés des Bahamas avec celui d'un groupe d'esclaves musulmans libérés, de Trinidad. L'étude met en relief le fait que ces projets de rapatriement ont été promus par des sujets nés en Afrique, et contrastent avec la plupart des projets conçus par des sujets d'ascendance africaine mais nés en Amérique. Ces derniers étalent à la fois Africains et non —Africains, et leur manière de gérer cette dynamique culturelle est délicatement nuancée, loin de se limiter à un dualisme qui opposerait l'oppression culturelle et l'impérialisme, d'un côte, et une résistance africaine, de l'autre.

Samenvatting

Het artikel onderzoekt de emigratie van het Caraïbisch gebied naar Afrika, speciaal het antwoord van de bevrijde afrikanen op de projecten van terugkeer naar Afrika, met name hoe hun gedrag ons verstaan van die projecten beinvloedt. Het onderzoek vergelijkt een project van teruggekeerde afrikanen uit de Bahamas met dat van een gr oep van islamietische ex-slaven uit Trinidad. Het artikel beweert dat dit sort projecten werd gestimuleerd door personen die in Afrika waren geboren en dat er een groot verschil bestaat vergeleken met dat van de Afroamerikanen die niet in Afrika waren geboren. Tot de immigranten behoorden afrikanen en niet-afrikanen en men kan dit cultureel process niet verstaan vanuit de dualistische logica van onderdrukking en imperialisme enerzijds en afrikaans verzet anderzijds.

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REPATRIATION PROJECTS AMONG FREE AFRICAN COMMUNITIES IN THE 19TH-CENTURY CARIBBEAN

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Abstract

The present essay explores the question of return emigration to Africa, considering how liberated Africans responded to this issue and how their behavior may prompt new understandings of the nature of back-to-Africa projects in general. The paper compares a liberated African repatriation project from the Bahamas with a similar project proposed by a Muslim group of former slaves from Trinidad. Emphasis is placed on the fact that these were back-to-Africa schemes launched by African-born people in contrast with other "repatriation" projects developed by people of African descent born in the Americas. These African immigrants and would-be re-emigrants were both African and "un African" in their repatriation projects and their negotiation of this paradoxical cultural dynamic was far more nuanced than any simple questions of cultural oppression or imperialism on the one hand and "African" resistance on the other.

Resumen

Este ensayo explora la emigración del Caribe hacia África. Particularmente cómo los africanos liberados responden a los proyectos de repatriación y cómo su comportamiento afectaría nuestra comprensión de los proyectos de este tipo. La investigación compara un proyecto de africanos repatriados de Bahamas, con la repatriación de un grupo musulmán de esclavos liberados, de Trinidad. La investigación hace resaltar que estos proyectos de repatriación fueron promovidos por personas nacidas en África, y contrastan con la gran mayoría de proyectos concebidos por personas de ascendencia africana pero nacidas en América. Los inmigrantes fueron a la vez africanos y no-africanos, y su manera de articular esta dinámica cultural se encuentra finamente matizada, lejos de circunscribirse a un asunto dualista de opresión cultural e imperialismo por un lado, y resistencia africana por el otro.

This paper is drawn from a larger work which explorers the experience of Africans rescued by the British navy from illegally operating slave ships and settled in the Bahamas and Trinidad. Great Britain settled approximately 40 000 such people in British Caribbean territories during the nineteenth century. The British most often referred to these slave trade refugees as "liberated Africans." Their experience of course, added a unique new dimension to African-Caribbean history in the age of emancipation. Their experience also potentially sheds light on the ways in which historians can understand the development of African descended cultures and communities over the long term. The present essay explores the question of return emigration to Africa, considering how liberated Africans responded to this issue and how their behavior may prompt new understandings of the nature of back-to-Africa projects in general. The paper compares a liberated African repatriation project from the Bahamas with a similar project proposed by a Muslim group of former slaves from Trinidad. Emphasis is placed on the fact that these were back-to-Africa schemes launched by African-born people in contrast with other "repatriation" projects developed by people of African descent born in the Americas. (This essay concentrates on parts of the British Caribbean with some comparative references to the United States. However, it is acknowledged that the greatest relevance of some of the issues raised may be in the cases of Cuba and Brazil, which of all New World territories, saw the largest numbers of African-born people who attempted to return to Africa, many following late nineteenth-century slave emancipation in these two countries.)*

In August of 1888 the leadership of Congo Number 1 Society, Nassau Bahamas drafted a letter to "His Majesty Leopold II. King of the Belgians and King of the Congo Free State." President John O'Brien, his Chairman William Higgs and member Samuel Ranch described themselves as "Natives of the Congo" and explained that they wrote on behalf of a larger community of such natives then resident in the Bahamas. They further explained that they had arrived in the Bahamas from a Spanish slave-trading vessel captured by the British who became the liberators of the

* The present version of this paper prepared for the 32nd Annual Meeting of the Association of Caribbean Historians in April 2000 was written with knowledge of the existence of Rodolfo Sarracino's work on Cuba in *Los que volvieron a Africa* (1988), which is the most significant recent monograph on this topic. However, since I did not have a copy readily available at the time of preparing this paper for presentation, Sarracino is not directly referenced here. See also endnote 22 on this subject.

Africans on board. O’Brien and his comrades went on to describe the difficulties of their experience as small cultivators in the Bahamas having exhausted the soil, both of lands they had received by grant, and other tracts which they had purchased. They expressed their belief that they and their children would fare better were they allowed to return to the land of their birth then under the sovereignty of His Majesty King Leopold.[1] In the context of both Caribbean and wider African-American history, such a petition represents an exceptional though not unique moment. Both the terms and the circumstances of the appeal offer peculiar insight into the nature of the community from which it originated.

Congo Society Number 1 belonged to the Bahamian community of friendly societies discussed in Chapter Three. As also discussed, these friendly societies often jointly attended Christian services at the churches of their members. Furthermore, on symbolic colonial occasions such as Her Majesty’s birthday, the societies would join other local organizations in presenting written “memorials” of loyalty and good wishes to the governor. They used these latter gestures both to assert their faith in the goodness of British government and to remind the governor of their desire for support in matters such as land acquisition or equal ecclesiastical rights between the Anglican church and their own Methodist or Baptist congregations.[2] In these activities the friendly societies —including Congo Number 1— constituted almost prototypes of African-American acculturation. On the one hand, scholars have speculated that such bodies had at least some ideological and structural roots in the secret society traditions of West and Central Africa. On the other hand, British authorities and apparently some missionaries encouraged such formations, and the groups also shared similarities of structure and function with freemasonry. (Interestingly, during the first half of the twentieth century most of these groups in the Bahamas would transform themselves into chapters of international Masonic bodies.) The societies professed Christianity and in some instances even discouraged African-derived

[1] Baptist Missionary Society Archives (hereafter referred to as BMS). Missionary Journals and Correspondence 1792-1914, West Indies, Daniel Wilshere, 1878-1892, uncatalogued and unclassifield. The details of this intriguing case have previously been published in a textbook aimed at secondary schools and the junior college in the Bahamas: Cash, Gordon and Saunders, 1991.

[2] For a discussion of the formation and function of friendly societies in the Bahamas see: Johnson, 1991, 183-199.

religious practices. At the same time, their members almost invariably belonged to protestant congregations whose doctrine and practice exemplified the meeting of African and Christian elements. Thus, from many appearances, these "Natives of the Congo" had become citizens of the diaspora and people possessed of a culture and identity that reflected that experience.

In fact, John O'Brien and his associates selected their British Baptist minister as the means by which they would transmit their petition to the Belgian government. The Reverend Daniel Wilshere arrived in the Bahamas during the 1870s under the auspices of the London based Baptist Missionary Society (BMS). Like most dissenting missionaries of this era, he served as a kind of itinerant, supervising several Baptist congregations founded by his BMS predecessors in the island of New Providence. Like his predecessors, Wilshere also attempted to work with the several churches of non BMS or 'native"' Baptists founded by African-American preachers who arrived from the United States as a part of the Loyalist migration of the late eighteenth century. From Wilshere's papers it seems most likely that the Congo Society membership belonged to the BMS Baptist community in the village of Fox Hill in eastern New Providence. This community formed Mount Carey Baptist Church founded in the 1840s and continuing to the present day.[3] On more than once occasion prior to the letter of 1888, Wilshere describes his interaction with Africans from the Congo who belonged to his congregation "in the east." Furthermore, the presence of grave stones for both Wilshere and his wife Charlotte in the current Mount Carey church yard suggests that the missionary may have had a particularly close relationship with this congregation.[4]

Additional evidence on this question also arises from an obituary published in the *Nassau Guardian* for one Guilliam Rahming, resident of Fox Hill, who died leaving five sons. The brief citation describes Rahming

[3] The details of the establishment of the various groups of Baptists in the Bahamas are presented in Antonina Cazoneri's monograph "A History of the Baptist Denomination in the Bahamas" (1972). Bahamas Department of Archives.

[4] The present head stones are new ones erected during the 1980s with an elaborated memorial to Wilshere. I am uncertain whether either or both of the bodies actually lie in the churchyard. But this fact is perhaps unimportant, given that although Wilshere worked with numerous congregations in the Bahamas, and indeed founded the Bahamas Baptist Union in 1892, to my knowledge. Mount Carey is the only church with such a prominent marker in his memory.

as "a native of Africa ...[who] was deeply attached to his native country and [had] made two attempts to return..."[5] Nothing in the newspaper links this man specifically to Mount Carey. However, people who share his surname and claim ties of kinship with one another have served as prominent members of both the Fox Hill and Mount Carey communities for the past hundred years. A Moses Rahming, possibly one of the five sons, served as the first non-European pastor of Mount Carey from 1877 until his death in 1900. Some residents of Fox Hill today claim in jest that only a known member of the Rahming family can ever hold the pastorate of the church.[6] None of this serves as conclusive proof of the relationship between the Mount Carey congregation and the would-be Congo emigrants, but the Rahming genealogy does serve to strengthen the assumption derived from Wilshere's notes. In any case, the petitioners certainly belonged to an Afro-Baptist congregation and demonstrated sufficient commitment to earn them not simply the approval of their missionary leader, but his special attention and assistance in a matter only tangentially related to the church. Indeed, one might argue that Wilshere must have held particular confidence in the strength of their Christianity, to not only sanction, but in fact to promote the idea of their return to their still largely heathen homeland.

Yet, whatever the strength *of* that New World religion or their other investments in becoming African-American, the group represented in the Congo Society appeal, simultaneously maintained a relationship both primal and primary with their specific homeland. The deceptively simply opening statement of their letter immediately betrays such a relationship: "We were born in the Congo Land beside the Great River..." At first glance, this seems at best a vague statement of their origins in the vast region of central Africa known as the Congo. Furthermore, to describe the world's sixth longest river as "the Great River" hardly seems remarkable or even particular. However, anthropologists and historians of Central Africa have long explained that references to the Congo River hold more than basic geographic significance for the peoples who inhabit the river basin. Based on field work conducted during the last decade of the nineteenth century, John Weeks explains that the BaKongo word *Nzadi* which describes the Congo River "simply means 'the river' ...[Meanwhile] all other rivers and streams... have separate names to distinguish them from each

[5] *The Nassau Guardian*, Vol. LIV No. 5,928, 27 August 1898.
[6] Name Withheld. Tape-recorded interview conducted April 1994, Nassau, Bahamas.

other and [from] *the* river." (Weeks, 1969 [1964], 298). In more recent work, Wyatt McGaffey goes much beyond this to explore the cosmological significance of Nzadi in BaKongo religious belief, as well as in more worldly matters such as the framing of oral history.[7] The signatories of the 1888 letter, or those who wrote on their behalf, certainly knew the colonial name of the territory in question. Indeed, elsewhere in the text they not only refer to the "Congo Free State" but also make other explicit overtures to the new sovereignty of Belgium over the land. The reference to the "Great River" and its attendant cultural meanings therefore seems deliberate.

Such deliberateness seems all the more likely given the evidence to suggest that O'Brien, Higgs and Ranch did not themselves draft the English text. The Baptist Missionary Archives holds a hand-copied version of the letter. (The original in fact did find its way to the Brussels office of the Department of the Interior for the Congo Free State.) According to this archive copy, President O'Brien lacked even the ability to sign his name except with an 'x' or cross mark. Even if Ranch and Higgs could sign their names in English —which the copy suggests— the body of the letter describes them all as only "speaking" the British [sic] language. Meanwhile, in the very same sentence, they explain that their children had actually received English language "education." These children or perhaps the Reverend Dan iel Wilshere seem the likely authors of the actual English words, with a phrase such as "Great River" reproduced (and noticeably capitalized) at the bidding of the substantive authors —the people of the "Great River" in exile.

The notion of exile has always loomed prominently yet also awkwardly in the African-American experience. In the introduction to their collection of essays on African-American culture in the Caribbean, Franklin Knight and Margaret Crahan point out that the study of African people in the New World has focused heavily on the experience of "slaves" per se, rather than the experience of "migrants"(Knight and Crahan, 1979, 4). To be sure, the institution of chattel slavery dominated the lives of the majority of Africans who entered this hemisphere between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. However, at the same time, these people, at least conceptually, shared much with all immigrants. That is, they entered a new society in which they would craft new lives, while at the same time retaining both cultural and emotional relation-

[7] See: McGaffey, 1986.

ships with the societies they had left behind. In many ways, the system of New World slavery sought to sever such relationships, defining Africans either as chattel without culture, or as savages with no culture worthy of note. In later years, more sympathetic opinions would argue that although African people did possess cultures of their own, the trauma of the middle passage and the process of enslavement stripped them of any significant cultural memory —made them *tabula rasa* on which a New World experience would develop.

Herskovits and other scholars have long since overturned such notions, and the African contributions to African-American culture have received volumes of attention. Yet even those historians who explore such contributions rarely conceptualize New World African as immigrants. The Africans whom these historians describe, incorporated African culture into the New World as a form of self-determination in defiance of presumed European hegemony. However, scholars rarely envision a sense of deliberateness in this process. They describe so-called syncretism almost as if it were a natural phenomenon without human agency. In many, perhaps most, historical portrayals, Africans seem to make their cultural contributions to New World society as a matter of course. They do not demonstrate any forceful sense of loss or nostalgia toward their origins, no conspicuous, aggrieved consciousness of a ruptured connection with their past.

Of course, to a large extent, many cultural developments do occur as a matter of course, without specific calculation by human actors. Furthermore, the sources available for the study of slave societies —diaries, letters and other records written by slave holders or other whites, materials written by Christian missionaries, a few slave narratives, African-American folklore, 20th century oral history— provide a peculiarly complex and piecemeal basis for evaluating the desires, intentions or understandings of immigrant Africans. All the same, it seems unreasonable to presume that such Africans did not maintain a deliberate consciousness of their relationship to their homelands. The liberated African experience in both the Bahamas and Trinidad yields clear evidence of precisely such a consciousness —not only among the immigrants themselves, but also to some extent among their descendants.

Far more so than slaves, liberated Africans had the opportunity to consider and engage their status and identity as migrants. They did not arrive with the designation of chattel. Nor did they face the process of ‘seasoning’ or other strategies expressly designed to mold them as slaves.

Nonetheless, during the nineteenth century, British opinion continued to view African cultures as at best inferior, and more often as savage or barbaric. Therefore, although liberated Africans entered the Caribbean as free people, they too faced a European society bent on their de-Africanization. Indeed, the project to settle liberated Africans in the West Indies had always included the civilization or cultural 'improvement' of Africans as one of its aims. In addition, the rigors of indentured labor or other aspects of working class survival dominated their existence in much the same way that coerced labor defined the lives of slaves. Furthermore, unlike true free immigrants, these Africans had made no decision to leave one society in exchange for another. At the same time, however, much of their experience involved repeated official acknowledgment of their status as immigrants rather than as slaves.

The greatest degree of such acknowledgment occurred in those British policies which offered some liberated Africans the option of repatriation, that is, a formal, and in some cases subsidized, return to the African continent. This option affected only a small minority of the Bahamas and Trinidad immigrants. In the case of Trinidad, some of the Africans brought as indentured labor during the 1840s had the option of return to Sierra Leone included in the terms of their contracts. However, very few people took advantage of this option, at least in part because of the expense involved in such an undertaking. (Although the subsidized immigrant transport H.M.S. Growler had responsibility for such return voyages, the returnees themselves had to pay for their passage.) Also, for most of the indentured Africans the prospect of a so-called "return" to Sierra Leone had only limited meaning and no automatic attraction. Most had never lived in or even near this contrived British territory. They had merely passed through the port of Freetown as a processing station after being rescued by the British from various illegal slave ships. Sierra Leone historian Christopher Fyfe explains that most liberated Africans never even left the Freetown shipyard before transfer to the Caribbean as immigrant workers (Fyfe, 1962, 230-231). In any case, only a minority of the Trinidad contracts even offered a repatriation option. Meanwhile, the Africans who entered the Bahamas —as refugees not as planned immigrant labor— had no such choice at all.

In both, the Bahamas and Trinidad, some African soldiers also received the option of traveling to Sierra Leone or elsewhere in British West Africa, either after their own terms of service had expired or following the dissolution of various West India regiments. (Such African-born

soldiers included both liberated Africans as well was other Africans who had entered military service as slaves.) During May of 1844 the Methodist missionary John Corlett encountered one such returning soldier on a transatlantic voyage from the Bahamas: "Peter Nicols of the 3rd West India Regt and who has a Bill on the Treasurers is returning with me to England. He has got his discharge and wishes to return to Sierra Leone…" Corlett suggested that the Methodist Missionary Society might offer assistance to Nichols in arranging the completion of his voyage.[8] In a similar instance, in June of 1874, the *Trinidad Chronicle* printed a brief and somewhat cryptic notice concerning the "DISBANDING" of the "last of the Houssa [sic] men." This short news item reported the arrival these men at Lagos where, led by "Lieutenant John Jumbo of the Bonny River," they had "been received with all honours."[9] The report does not specifically indicate that these disbanded soldiers came from a West India regiment. However, it seems plausible to assume that they did, given the appearance of the notice in a Trinidad newspaper, which concerned itself largely with matters of local or West Indian relevance. Whatever the specifics of this Hausa case, such instances proved exceptional. Like the indentured laborers, few disbanded soldiers ever actually made a repatriation journey. Indeed, most never had the option.

Yet even such slim formal prospects of return, gave liberated Africans a different New World perspective than that of their slave predecessors.[10] Their status as immigrants from homelands of their own had explicit public recognition. And the idea of return lay at least within the realm of plausibility. Hence, for these communities, the notion of exile perhaps loomed even larger (or fit more comfortably) than it did for communities of slaves. Antonio Benitez-Rojo has described the slave plantation as a

[8] Correspondence, John Corlett, Nassau, New Providence, 13 May 1844. Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society Collection, School of Oriental and African Studies, London (hereafter cited as WMMS Papers). MMS. 4C. West Indies (Various) 1833-1906. Box 218, File 1844. Fiche Number 27 1315.

[9] *The Trinidad Chronicle*, (New Series) No. 503, 23 June 1874.

[10] I am indebted in my thinking here to a recent conversation with Monica Shuler. Following her study of liberated Africans in Jamaica (*Alas, Alas Kongo*, 1981) Schuler is presently pursuing research concerning ideas about returning to Africa among people of African descent in both Jamaica and Guyana during the 19th and 20th centuries. Schuler suggests that the idea of return perhaps has had greatest resonance or popularity in Jamaica, because this colony had the largest percentage of liberated Africans who received formal offers of repatriation from the British Government.

"deculturating regimen that took direct action against [African] language... religion... and customs." (Benitez-Rojo, 1992, 70). Not only did liberated Africans avert the power of such a regimen at its height, they in fact faced an alternate regimen: one, which although not embracing African culture by any means, at least conceded to Africans their condition as people both literally and culturally displaced.

The people of Congo Number One Society never succeeded in their attempt to return to Kongo lands beside the Great River in Central Africa. Although Reverend Wilshere did succeed in having their letters sent to Belgium, the proposed return seems to have fallen apart in the face of logistical questions from both Belgian authorities and the British Colonial Office.[11] In September of 1888 the *Nassau Guardian* published a brief article concerning the Kongo petition under the cynical headline "What Next?" The newspaper cited a report of the repatriation effort, which had appeared in a New York publication called the *Weekly Tribune.* The Bahamian editors commented on the extract as follows: "In the language of our American cousins, we do not see the point,' but publish it to show how far sensational reports may be carried…"[12] In considering the history of the Africans in the New World up to 1888, the adjective "sensational" does not seem entirely inappropriate in reference to the request submitted by the Kongo group. As demonstrated above, ideas about returning to Africa formed a part of the diaspora experience from its beginnings under slavery. However, as also discussed above, actual attempts to return occurred only rarely, and successful repatriation even more infrequently. Indeed, the largest numbers of Africans or African-Americans who emigrated to the African continent went to the British colony of Sierra Leone or to the similar colony of Liberia established by the United States. Furthermore, the emigrants to these territories —usually people born in the New World— were of course not returning to their own homelands or even those of their ancestors. Thus, the people of Congo Number One Society had truly proposed an exceptional project.

The tone of the *Guardian* report, however, did not express surprise based upon the broad experience of most African people and their descendants in the Caribbean and the Americas. Rather, the newspaper authors implied that there was something preposterous in the very idea

[11] BMS Archives. Missionary Journals and Correspondence 1792-1914, West Indies, Daniel Wilshere, 1878-1892, uncatalogued and unclassified.
[12] *The Nassau Guardian.* Vol. XLVI No. 4,879, 05 September 1888.

that a group of Africans should wish to leave the Bahamas for such a return journey. In fact, the brief commentary even suggests that the Bahamian journalists may have disbelieved the existence or legitimacy of the petition at all. Perhaps they found it unreasonable that Africans should wish to leave the security of a British colony for such a dubious return to Africa. Or perhaps, like so many scholars of future generations, they doubted the depth of the connection that displaced Africans felt for the communities and cultures that they had left behind. Of course, the very real Kongo petition illustrated just such a connection beyond any doubt. While neither the present study nor any similar project can claim a full understanding of the consciousness of either liberated African immigrants or their offspring, it seems fair to conclude that this 1888 group negotiated at least a dual identity both as Kongo people with a past they wished to reclaim, and as significantly integrated immigrants in an African-Bahamian world; their relationship to that new world most clearly expressed in their Baptist Christianity and their relationship with their pastor, Reverend Wilshere.

This Kongo immigrant group occupied a unusual space within wider African diaspora history. As African-born people and their first generation descendants, they shared much with African-born enslaved people of previous centuries who had for example run away soon after their arrival and formed maroon communities in places such as Jamaica or Suriname; or found less radical or dramatic ways to continually claim and assert their Africanness. On the other hand, its Christian conversion and expressions of some missionary designs, this Kongo-born group also shared things with second and third generation. African diaspora people who looked upon return to Africa as a more symbolic homeland and as a place where they could spread some of the western culture and/or resources which they had acquired in the Americas.

In recent years, the westernized goals of most back-to-Africa movements have received significant and often critical examination. For example, in his provocatively titled work *UnAfrican Americans* Tunde Adeleke characterizes most back-to-Africa activity which originated in the United States in the late nineteenth century as being essentially "complicit" in the European colonization of Africa, with the African-Americans involved, wittingly and unwittingly, buttressing imperialist projects to the detriment of Africa and Africans. Adeleke's work focuses almost exclusively on would-be African-American emigrants from North America whom he describes as "rejected and alienated" people

who saw in Africa: "the basis of an identity… a sense of worthiness, and… a consciousness of a rich and significant history." (Adeleke, 1998, 3). In his study Adeleke attempts to probe in greater depth the now well-known paradoxes of the movement among small numbers of African diaspora people to "return" to Africa in the late nineteenth century. On the one hand, these would-be emigrants denounced the white domination which restricted the economic, educational and political aspirations of people of African descent in the Americas. But on the other hand, most of them embraced Christianity and also European language, education and culture —all of which they hoped to disseminate in Africa— inevitably at the expense of indigenous cultures and communities. Adeleke sympathizes with the difficulties which African-Americans faced, and he devotes a substantial portion of his book to exploring how emigrationist leaders themselves struggled with these very paradoxes. He nevertheless concludes that their analyses and interpretations put forth by these leaders came "from the experiential locus of western socialization" (Adeleke, 1998, 115) and because of this their behavior and attitudes tended to reinforce European colonization and subjugation of Africa in the name of "civilization." In Adeleke's words: "The values they cherished and the basis of their self-definition and identity, especially in relation to their African historical and cultural heritage echoed essentially the same values as... Eurocentric thought." (Adeleke, 1998, 115).

The same criticism could of course be leveled against much of the attitude expressed by the Kongo-born group from the Bahamas. Would Adeleke then characterize these African-born people also as "un African?" Would such a characterization be legitimate? Despite their rhetoric about converting fellow Africans and bringing their own western skills to Africa, as shown above this Kongo group clearly retained their own African, and even specifically Kongo "self-definition". In this way, these African immigrants and their descendants occupied an even more paradoxical position than back-to Africa emigrants born in the Americas.

One potentially more useful strategy for understanding the experience of this Kongo group might be to consider more specifically the case of African-descended people returning to Sierra Leone. Although historians often treat the cases of Liberia and Sierra Leone as parallel examples of the back-to-Africa emigration experience, Sierra Leone differed significantly in that among the tens of thousands of "returnees" who formed the colony's immigrant population, the majority of these people were in fact Africans rescued from illegal slave ships and brought

more or less directly to this British African territory. These rescued Africans had much in common with other slave trade refugees who ended up in the New World, all of them being displaced from their own African communities. And although the Sierra Leone liberated Africans were "returned" to the African continent, they found themselves in a radically new social environment rich with western religious and cultural influences. The descendants of these people (and other Sierra Leonian returnees) became known as Krio, a group whose nineteenth-century "social and cultural life" has been described by one historian as "a blend of West European values and African ways of doing things."(Alie, 1990, 79).

If the study of African diaspora cultural history is fundamentally a study of the mixing over time of African and European inputs, one might view the Krio descendants of liberated Africans as perhaps one more heavily African end of that continuum, with liberated Africans who ended up sent to the Caribbean being located somewhere close by; that is to say somehow more "African" than other groups in the Americas, but nevertheless a people of the diaspora. This kind of approach suggests one way in which historians might attempt to understand differences in the cultural and ideological foundations of repatriation projects developed by liberated Africans in contrast to similar plans engaged in by other African diaspora groups.

Still, among liberated Africans in the Caribbean, the number of actual repatriations seems by most accounts to have been very small. Records of exact numbers of emigrants from the Bahamas and Trinidad remain unclear; although the absence of records of large groups of itself suggests small numbers. Meanwhile, in her detailed study of the approximately 8 000 liberated Africans who entered Jamaica, Monica Schuler found only 253 people known to have returned, and by her own account this number possibly included children born in Jamaica as well as perhaps other people who had not been liberated Africans.[13] Schuler also laments the paucity of written evidence concerning what those African immigrants —who never managed to return— thought about this poignant subject. In her review of public and church documents related to Jamaica between the 1840s and 1860s, she found records of almost 300 people applying for return passage, but most of these records indicated only the numbers of people involved and the administrative details of their largely unsuccessful requests. (Curiously, the Caribbean experience

[13] Shuler, *Alas, Alas Kongo*, p. 89.

contrasts sharply with that of Brazil where scholars have calculated that over four thousand free people of African descent "returned" to Nigeria from Brazil during the nineteenth century, with this large number including both Brazilian-born and African-born people.[14] Many factors may explain this difference, including for example the substantial ongoing sea traffic between Brazil and West Africa. It is also difficult to discern what portion of these Brazilian emigrants were Africans rescued from illegal slave ships, as opposed to those somehow freed from Brazilian slavery.)

As already noted above, in the case of liberated Africans, the mere existence of procedures by which these free immigrants; *might* have gained return passage under the terms of labor contracts, could have made the idea of repatriation loom larger in liberated African communities. And although the actual numbers of repatriation schemes remained small, this particular speculation does shed some light on the ideological and cultural form which repatriation efforts might take.

Specifically, in addition to the appeals to Christianity and prospects of spreading Western culture in Africa, the 1888 Kongo group also made strategic appeal to Europe's newly evolving relationship with Africa in the age of emancipation. Most obviously in their letter to King Leopold of Belgium the group proudly announced themselves as people rescued from Spanish enslavement by the British Navy: "We were brought as slaves to the West Indies by the Spaniards, [and] were freed by the Naval Power of England before we reached our destination."[15] This fact of course cast the most positive light on the British government, but it also more generally situated the Kongo authors as grateful recipients of European beneficence. Even more dramatic given what is now well known about the nature of Belgian colonialism in the Congo, the would-be Kongo returnees also offered explicit praise for and faith in the growing role of Belgium in their former homeland: " We have heard of the great good God has put it [sic] into the heart of your Majesty [King Leopold] to do for our land…"[16] Even beyond the broader question of

[14] See: "Apendice: Brasileiros em Lagos: quantos?" in Carneiro da Cunha, pp. 210-216. *On this question of numbers of returnees, the present draft of this paper is written pending consultation of Sarracinos* Los que volvieron a África *(1988) concerning return emigration from Cuba.*

[15] BMS Archives. Missionary Journals and Correspondence 1972-1914, West Indies, Daniel Wilshere, 1878-1892, uncatalogued and unclassified.

[16] *Ibid.*

the so-called "civilizing mission", this statement offered explicit endorsement of Europe's overall colonial designs in Africa. Thus, in addition to their specifically Kongo and specifically Christian positioning of themselves, this would-be emigrant group also engaged in clear political positioning appropriate to the age of emancipation and to the new colonial era. The combination of these factors tends to suggest that liberated Africans did indeed craft repatriation visions unique to their experience and to the era and circumstances of their arrival in the Caribbean.

Yet in Monica Schuler's work on Jamaica and in the present study of both, the Bahamas and Trinidad, why do there emerge no other repatriation schemes with similarly constructed ideological and cultural frameworks? Furthermore, of all stories of repatriation from these three colonies, the case most closely paralleling the Kongo-Bahamian group did not involve liberated Africans at all.

In the mid 1830s Trinidad saw an elaborate repatriation proposal from the leadership of a group of people who numbered over one hundred and identified themselves as "Mandingo Muslims."[17] Without question, the greatest interest of this community lies in the manner in which this group established an apparently strong religious and ethnic community in the midst of British colonial Port of Spain. One Quaker visitor to Trinidad in the 1840s described the recognizable African Muslim community as consisting of five hundred or more (Truman, Jackson and Longstreth, 1844, 110). Another visitor, Charles Day, remarked on the way that this particular community, or at least its leadership, stood out in the colony because of their maintenance of their own distinctive dress and way of life: "Amongst the peculiarities of Trinidad are the Mandingo priests, or African Negro Mohammedans. These fellows walk about the town in large sleeved white suplices… The lower class of Mandingo priests usually wear the common robe of light blue." (Day, 1852, 313). In 1835 a group of leaders from this community wrote to Trinidad Governor Sir George Hill and explained their situation as follows: They had arrived in Trinidad as slaves but had worked to purchase their own freedom and then as a community collectively sought to purchase their fellow "Mandingo Muslims" from amongst the Trinidad slave community. Having thus established themselves, under the leadership of a head

[17] CO 295/106 and CO 295/121. Various dispatched from Trinidad to London with enclosures. The history of this group and their repatriation effort is also narrated in detail in DeVerteuil, 1992, 248-271.

"priest" Jonas Bath, they wished British assistance in conveying their group to Sierra Leone from where they hoped to be able to return over land to their own home territories. Like the Kongo case from the Bahamas, these petitioners seem to have been ultimately dissuaded by obstacles of both cost and logistics put forth by British officials over the course of three years, including a second written request for repatriation made in 1838.[18]

Like the liberated African petition from the Bahamas fifty years later, this Mande Muslim request for return also had distinct characteristics: specific and powerful claims of African identity and homeland; specific evidences of the group's creolization and participation in Caribbean society and specific appeals to the political and social aims of Europeans with respect to Africa and Africans in the mid nineteenth century. Their most obvious professions of African identity came of course, in their explanation of the ethnic and religious origins of their Trinidad community. Meanwhile, subtler but arguably more profound evidences came from such things as their persistence in signing their names in Arabic script, even for British officials who most certainly did not understand it. The 1835 and 1838 petitions were first signed using their European names (of English or French origin) presumably acquired through slave owners or other employers. They secondly wrote in the anglicized spelling of their Islamic names, and finally in a separate column their own Arabic script. Thus one sees "Mahommed Sissei, commonly called Felix Dill" followed by Arabic script or "Aboubouka Toree, commonly called Joseph Sampson" followed by Arabic script, and so on for all of the roughly one dozen people who signed the different letters. These men thus announced and affirmed that whatever else they were or had become they were first and foremost Mande Muslims, and on this basis they made their claim for repatriation, just as in the case of the Kongo petition from the Bahamas where much deliberate cultural strategy went into the writing of their memorial as people from beside the "Great River." These Muslim memorials from Trinidad were formal documents sworn before a notary public and specifically designed to make a comprehensive case to the authorities involved about *who* the petitioners were, what they wished to do and why.

[18] CO 295/106 Hill to Aberdeen 2 March 1835 with enclosures; and CO 295/121 Hill to Glenelg 12 January 1838 with enclosures and responses.

Equally striking give the Muslim faith of this group was the fact that, like the Baptist Kongo group, the Trinidad Muslims mixed their assertions of Islamic and Mande identity with clear endorsement of European cultural (if presumably not religious) colonialism in Africa. They proudly broadcast their knowledge of the "generous and praiseworthy attempts by the enlightened of Europe to introduce civilization in Africa," and they lamented the fact that such efforts had not yet experienced real success. They proposed however that: "…could they but reach the shores of the Land that gave them birth, their efforts, as heads of their tribe, would insure success in propagating civilization, the benefits of which they so deeply feel themselves, and would give them an opportunity of proclaiming to their Nation the liberality of the British Government."[19] This proposal was thus ironically even more directly the handmaiden of European imperialism than the many African-American projects so criticized by Adeleke in his book *UnAfrican Americans.* Without the cultural and religious claim of spreading Christianity, these Trinidad Muslims argued that their value to the British government would be in the spread of "civilization" and more general information about the benefits of British colonial governance. It is of course difficult to imagine a group of African Muslims as agents of British imperialism, although by the 1830s Europeans themselves were already imagining the enormous potential of Christianized Africans in such roles.

The petitioners themselves made a brief, and in some respects, extraordinary comment on this sensitive religious subject. Typical of nineteenth century correspondence, they concluded their 1838 petition with a formal statement of good wishes and loyalty to the British sovereign, the ultimate authority to whom their wishes were directed. They prayed that *"the merciful God of the Mahommedans and of the Christians* [my emphasis]" would grant Queen Victoria "a long, happy and prosperous reign."[20] Obviously they knew that their faith placed them at odds with their British government. But with this closing statement they deftly coopted the Christianity of the British, claiming to share the same god in a fashion rhetorically and indeed theologically designed to evade easy refutation.

The Trinidad Muslim group also made their own appeal to British anti-slavery spirit, even though they themselves (unlike liberated

[19] *Ibid.*
[20] *Ibid.*

Africans) had not directly benefited from it. In part this constituted a very pragmatic appeal. They explained in their petition that they wished to travel to Africa in a British armed vessel in order to avoid the possibility of being seized and re enslaved by nations such as Spain, Portugal and Brazil still engaged in the transport of slaves from Africa. In other words, even if they could raise the necessary funds to travel on their own they had a legitimate fear for their safety. Beyond pragmatism, however, the raising of this fear also gave the petitioners the opportunity to uplift the beneficence of the British nation in contrast to the "Iron hands of bondage" which might await them at the hands of other (less moral) Europeans. In fact, even when explaining in their memorial how most of their group had purchased their own freedom these petitioners went out of their way to praise Great Britain for its own slave emancipation in 1834.

They described British emancipation on August 1st of that year as a "beneficent and humane achievement" and "a day which will live in the annals of Nations, and which will ever be remembered with feeling of highest gratitude by the black man."[21] Unlike liberated Africans, these self manumitted Mande Muslims did not belong to a group that had peculiar status under British abolitionist policies. And the promise of possible repatriation formed no part of the circumstances under which they had arrived in the Caribbean. Nonetheless, they too made quite a direct attempt to capitalize on the abolitionist spirit of the age. And perhaps more significantly, their awareness of Britain's changing policies toward Africa and Africans seems to have influenced their belief in the possibility of a successful repatriation effort with British aid.

In comparing this Mande Muslim case from Trinidad with the Baptist Kongo case from the Bahamas, it seems that one cannot conclude that liberated Africans, by virtue of their peculiar experience of arrival in the Caribbean, necessarily developed unique responses to the idea of return migration to Africa. However, these two examples of repatriation projects by African-born people do introduce some distinctive features into the broader history of repatriation movements from the New World to Africa. That history has to a large extent been dominated by North American movements (at least in English language scholarship). The projects developed in the United States were perhaps the most elaborated of the Americas, and indeed several nineteenth-century Caribbean figures

[21] *Ibid.*

involved in back-to-Africa schemes themselves, worked closely with North American peers.[22] Furthermore, as already noted, the dominant theme of much recent scholarship on the back-to-Africa idea has concerned the very creolized American and Christian agendas that shaped various movements. One might reasonably expect that repatriation proposals developed by African-born people would display less of those qualities which Adeleke characterizes as "un African." And in targeting their specific Kongo or Mande homelands (and in other regards) these would-be from the Bahamas and Trinidad did present distinctly more "African" back-to-Africa visions. Yet they blended those visions with clear Westernized agendas. One might speculate that pragmatism alone dictated the shape of the emigration proposals, and the authors need not have been sincere in their professions about wishing to spread civilization. Indeed, in the 1840s travel account quoted above, the Quaker visitors to Trinidad explained that the "old Mahometan priest" whom they met, complained bitterly about living among Christians whose morality did not conform to his own: "…he regretted that their youth were in danger of being drawn away by the evil practices of the Christians… when he saw the Christians holding those of their own faith in slavery, engaging in wars with members of their own church, and addicted to habits of intemperance, all of which the Koran forbids, he thought it was sufficient evidence that the religion of Mohamed was superior to the religion of Anna Bissa (Jesus Christ)." (Truman, Jackson and Longstreht, 1844, 110). While this is an important commentary and does suggest that strategic exaggeration may have been used in the strong praise European society contained in the Mande Muslim letters, it is only a small piece of evidence, and after all offers mainly a religious critique from the Muslim "priest" —not a rejection of all ideas of European "civilization." It therefore does not seem a strong enough basis from which to presume complete cynicism about the culturally hybrid arguments made by these would-be emigrants.

Even more difficult is trying to sort out what factors led to the launching of these two requests for repatriation and not a flood of other ones. It is at first tempting to point to the strong immigrant consciousness of both groups based on their well-articulated African cultural identities.

[22] See for example: Blackett, 1979, 375-386, or the well known case of Edward Blyden originally of Saint Thomas who ultimately divided his life as minister, educator and political leader between both Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Yet in her study of liberated African immigration to Jamaica, Monica Schuler found extensive evidence of persistent and specific "Central African" (Kongo) consciousness among liberated African immigrants. (This was in part created by a peculiarly heavy concentration of people of this ethnic and geographic background in a single parish.)[23] But according to Schuler's research, those communities did not yield any Kongo repatriation projects as elaborated as the one that emerged from the Bahamas. In this latter colony, although ethnically based, friendly societies existed, there seems not to have existed as widespread or long lived a network of Kongo/Central African community as Schuler documents in Jamaica. Similarly, in the Trinidad case of Jonas Bath and the Mande Muslim community, one might reasonably point to the strength of their religious faith and Bath's community leadership as the principle factors which motivated their unique back-to-Africa scheme. But while scholarship of the past fifteen years has shed increasing light on the presence of African Muslims in the Americas in only one other instance —Salvador da Bahia in Brazil— is there evidence of wide community organization toward political or cultural ends.[24] It seems perhaps too easy to situate the reasons for these two unique repatriation projects solely in some unusual confluence of circumstances in each case, although this may indeed be the only satisfactory conclusion.

More importantly, both of these cases significantly disrupt the fairly linear conception which African diaspora cultural historians still have of the experience of Africans in the Americas. That is to say, nostalgia for Africa and dreams of true "return" are viewed as belonging mostly to the African-born initial immigrants. Meanwhile, actual opportunities for repatriation were more likely to develop for later creolized generations; and these people inevitably brought to their repatriation projects various "unAfrican" visions.[25] Exploring repatriation projects such as these is of course a part of the much larger attempt to better understand the processes of African diaspora creolization and the nature of ongoing

[23] Schuler, *Alas, Alas Kongo*, pp. 65-83.

[24] See for example: Austin, 1997 [1984]; Ferris, 1998, 33-39; Gomez, 1998; and Reis, 1993 [1988].

[25] The cultural and ideological underpinnings of those projects in the North American and to some extent the Anglo-Caribbean case were most often articulated in terms of "black nationalism," an idea not explored in the present study. It is however interesting to note that even the Muslim petition from Trinidad referred to British slave emancipation as an act which would be remembered gratefully by "*the black man* [my emphasis]" in general.

psychic, cultural and ideological relationships with Africa. And if there were indeed Baptist-Kongo and Mande-Muslim, westernizing-civilizing "return" missions to Africa, then those New World connections with Africa are conceptually even more complicated than the current rich state of African diaspora cultural history suggests. African birth, ethnic identity and even African religious identity were not by definition antithetical or resistant to processes of creolization. Nor was even the attempt to return to Africa itself. These African immigrants and would-be re-emigrants were both African and "un African" in their repatriation projects and their negotiation of this paradoxical cultural dynamic was far more nuanced than any simple questions of cultural oppression or imperialism on the one hand and "African" resistance on the other.

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