

## Hawthorne, Walter

### *From Africa to Brazil: Culture, Identity, and an Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600-1830*

Maria Helena P. T. Machado\*

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Among the coastal peoples of Upper Guinea, when someone falls ill or dies, the presence of a *jambacous* is required – a Creole word to designate diviners, healer, mediums and other social figures who participate in the world of the sacred – capable of curing the sick person or at least restoring the social equilibrium lost as a consequence of the evil action of sorcerers, causers of evil. Using potions, amulets, or *grisgris*, blowing, reciting sacred words, and carrying out other performances, the *jambacous*, many of them Mandinkas, assume an important role in the restoration of the social equilibrium of families, lineages, and communities. In the eighteenth and at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was of great importance for these coastal communities to detect the evil sorcerers to remove them from society through the death penalty or the sale of the individual to the Transatlantic slave trade.

In Pará in the 1760s, the Mandinka slave José was summoned to cure the Bijagó slave, Maria, who was seriously ill. José prepared a mixture of plants and administered them uttering some incomprehensible words, part of a complex ritual which included both his herbalist knowledge and contact with the invisible. We know nothing of José's personal history. However, the fact that the slave trade between Upper Guinea and the Amazon Region – as shown by the book *From Africa to Brazil* – transported a large number of sorcerers can shed some light on still unknown and unsuspected aspects of the rich Atlantic history which intertwined the coastal societies and the highlands of Upper Guinea and the colonial Amazon, most particularly Maranhão, in the second half of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth.

Summarized in a lean 254 pages, the book written by one of the greatest specialists in the history of Guinea, Walter Hawthorne, sheds some light on different aspects which conditioned the history of the formation of an Atlantic slave economy in the state of Grão-Pará and Maranhão.

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As the author shows, it was the dynamic of the Transatlantic slave trade which promoted the recovery of the Amazonian economy following the foundation of the Grão-Pará and Maranhão Company in 1755 and during the initial decades of the nineteenth century. Analyzing broad and varied themes, the book looks at the formation and decline of an Amazonian slave economy based on indigenous labor, the structuration of the Transatlantic slave trade – which allowed the Pombaline reformist policies related to the development of rice growing to be put into practice, principally in Maranhão in the second half of the eighteenth century – and finally the structuration of a slave economy and society in the Amazon.

The Amazonian economy was based, above all, on the labor which enslaved workers from Upper Guinea provided in the cultivation of rice, working in the sun and inclement tropical climate of the region, in a form of agriculture which demanded a gigantic volume of slave labor, from the clearing of forests to the harvesting and process of *Carolina* rice, much appreciated by the Portuguese and which found a voracious overseas consumer market. Slaves from Upper Guinea became the foundation of the Amazonian economy and society at that time. The data and analyses of this book are rich and varied, and as far as I know, the most complete study about the creation of the Transatlantic slave society in the Amazon.

Among the myriad of subjects covered by Hawthorne, two aspects stand out. First, the analysis of the slave trade in which the author corrects the data available in the Transatlantic Slave Trade Database ([www.slavevoyages.org](http://www.slavevoyages.org)). Using various documents – reports about the slave trade, letters, inventories of plantation property, and ecclesiastic documents, amongst others, from both regions linked by the Transatlantic trade – Hawthorne shows that the slave trade between Upper Guinea and the Amazonian region from the second half of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth developed principally at the cost of coastal societies, not those located in the highlands. While the actual trade did swallow up populations from both the highlands and the coast – Mandinkas, Bijagós, Papeis, Balantas etc. – circumstances linked to the social system which produced captives sucked up mostly coastal groups. The book discusses how the coastal societies of Upper Guinea found themselves to be particularly sensitive to the trade due both to the need for iron tools to maintain irrigation and water drainage systems in rice producing areas, and the dynamic of the social system of kidnapping individuals from neighboring ethnicities and the persecution of witches. The victims, sold to agents of the local slave trade, were the majority of these ‘discarded’ ones. *From Africa to Brazil*

shows that coastal societies were subjugated by their own demands and dynamics, becoming more fragile in relation to the slave trade.

Following the interpretation proposed by Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, the author argues that, rather than belonging to specific ethnic groups, the crossing of the Atlantic produced a pan-regional identity, establishing profound ties between people who used the same wider cultural universe, but in whose societies of origin had remained separated by their specific ethnic belongings.

The second especially rich aspect of this work is materialized in the discussion of the rice production system, and the role played in this by enslaved labor from Upper Guinea. Opposing the 'black rice' argument, developed by Judith Carney in the book *Black Rice*, whose central argument revolves around the continuity of the methods and techniques of the production of this cereal between Africa and the American colonies, this book documents the discontinuity between the type of rice growing practiced in the flooded lands of the coastal region of Upper Guinea, which required an important set of knowledge on the part of men, and the slash and burn agriculture – *coivara* –, dominant in the Amazonian colonial space dedicated to the growth of rice. What this book suggests is that the rice planting system developed in the Amazon was the fruit of the conjugation of knowledge from various sources, such indigenous peoples, the Portuguese, and also workers from Upper Guinea – and due to its multicultural character was better known as brown rice, which in English produces a pun with the term used to define wholegrain rice.

While the traditional knowledge of men was almost excluded from the colonial system, women were responsible for the task of maintaining and transmitting sets of practices and knowledge linked to living habits and eating customs originating in the coastal lands of Upper Guinea, allowing the maintenance of strong ties between the enslaved populations in the Amazon and the pan-regionalism of the ethnic societies of Cacheu and Bissau.

In his final chapters, Hawthorne turns to the discussion of the daily lives of slaves in Maranhense society, marked by beliefs and spiritual practices originating in Upper Guinea. Here the author is concerned with tracing the continuities and permanence of practices, rites, and beliefs which allow the tracking of the intimate connections between Upper Guinea and the Amazon region of the past and the present. Although he undoubtedly presents some instigating data and analyses, this is the most shallow part of the book. Summarized in short chapters and lacking greater dialogue with the social history of slavery in the Amazon and other regions of Brazil, this part of the book contrasts with

the wealth found in the others, although it nonetheless offers data rarely encountered in national studies of the region.

In summary, the book as a whole presents a wide-ranging and well-based analysis for crucial aspects for the creation, development, and decline of the African slavery system in the Amazon and its connections with the various peoples, especially the coastal ones, of Upper Guinea. *From Africa to Brazil* is a book which deserves to be read by all those interested in the history of Africa, the Transatlantic slave trade, the slavery system, and the people of the Amazon. In addition, the book should be translated to disseminate the history of slavery in a region where it is still little developed.

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