
Mistaken Identities? Olaudah Equiano, Domingos Álvares, and the Methodological Challenges of Studying the African Diaspora

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SCHOLARS OF SLAVERY IN THE AMERICAS have debated the meanings of African identities for many years, but a recent resurgence in questions about identity seems to have coincided with the emergence of the African diaspora and Atlantic studies as discrete fields of study. Much of this recent debate centers on the meanings of “ethnic” or “national” signifiers such as Angola, Mina, Guinea, and Yoruba. In the historiography of early North America, for example, strong disagreements have emerged around the question of Igbo identity.¹ Perhaps the most famous and controversial of these disputes centers on literary scholar Vincent Carretta’s recent suggestion that Olaudah Equiano, one of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world’s most prominent historical figures, was not born in Igbo land, and thus “probably invented an African identity.”²

In his autobiography, Equiano claimed that he was born in “Essaka,” an Igbo-speaking region near the Niger River in contemporary Nigeria. At ten years old, he was kidnapped by African traders and sold to Europeans on the African coast. After enduring the Middle Passage, he labored as a slave for more than ten years in Barbados and Virginia, and on merchant ships crossing the Atlantic and Mediterranean. He purchased his freedom in 1766 and continued to work as a seaman, traveling widely to Central America, the Caribbean, the Arctic, and North America, before finally settling in England.

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¹ See, for example, Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1998); Douglas B. Chambers, “‘My Own Nation’: Igbo Exiles in the Diaspora,” *Slavery and Abolition* 18, no. 1 (1997): 72–97; David Northrup, “Igbo and Myth Igbo: Culture and Ethnicity in the Atlantic World,” *Slavery and Abolition* 21, no. 3 (2000): 1–20; Douglas B. Chambers, “The Significance of Igbo in the Bight of Biafra Slave Trade: A Rejoinder to Northrup’s ‘Myth Igbo,’” *Slavery and Abolition* 23, no. 1 (2002): 101–120; and Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2005).

² Vincent Carretta, *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (Athens, Ga., 2005), xiv–xv. Although the controversy did not fully erupt until after the publication of Carretta’s book, he had actually made similar claims in an earlier article. See Carretta, “Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa? New Light on an Eighteenth-Century Question of Identity,” *Slavery and Abolition* 20, no. 3 (1999): 96–105.

In 1789, Equiano published his autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano; or, Gustavus Vassa the African: Written by Himself*. Equiano's detailed account of his life, imbued with a sharp critique of slavery, created an immediate sensation. The book's unique firsthand accounts of Africa, the Middle Passage, slavery, and seaborne exploration were a revelation to European readers. Yet the narrative still followed a widely recognized genre of autobiography in which the protagonist overcomes extreme hardships before realizing temporal and spiritual redemption. In this way, the book represented an important new contribution to English literature—a fusion of unfamiliar African and Atlantic histories with familiar genres of autobiographical politics and spirituality. By the time of Equiano's death in 1797, nine English editions of the book were in print, and there were American, Dutch, German, Russian, and French editions as well. As Henry Louis Gates has noted, Equiano's account "became the prototype of the nineteenth-century slave narrative."³

Equiano's richly textured autobiography faded in importance after American slavery was abolished in the nineteenth century, but it reemerged in the twentieth century as the most influential slave narrative in the literary and historical canons. Given its breadth of coverage across the eighteenth-century Atlantic world, it has become a standard text in courses on early Atlantic and African diaspora histories. As the exemplar of the eighteenth-century African Atlantic experience, Equiano has no match. Hence, when Carretta questioned Equiano's African provenance, he set off a vigorous, and sometimes acrimonious, debate.⁴

Carretta's claims are based on two newly discovered documentary sources—a baptismal record and a ship's muster roll—that show Equiano's birthplace as South Carolina. According to Carretta, it was Equiano himself who provided that information to the Anglican priest and the ship's purser, each of whom duly recorded the data in the documents. Because these documents were produced years apart and long before Equiano penned his autobiography, they seem to call into question his later claims about his Igbo identity, his enslavement, and his experience in the Middle Passage. Carretta suggests that Equiano "invented" his African past to heighten the drama of his autobiography, bolstering its authenticity in the service of the abolitionist cause.

At first blush, this seems to be a simple conflict over how to interpret contradictory sources. Documentary self-claims to both Igbo and Carolina identity appear irreconcilable; one of them must have been invented. Implicit in this approach, however, is the adoption of taxonomies that bound enslaved peoples to fixed categories

³ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., *The Classic Slave Narratives* (New York, 2002), 8.

⁴ On Carretta's findings and his challengers, see Paul E. Lovejoy, "Autobiography and Memory: Gustavus Vassa, Alias Olaudah Equiano, the African," *Slavery and Abolition* 27, no. 3 (2006): 317–347; Vincent Carretta, Paul E. Lovejoy, Trevor Burnard, and Jon Sensbach, "Olaudah Equiano, the South Carolinian? A Forum," *Historically Speaking: The Bulletin of the Historical Society* 7, no. 3 (2006): 2–16; Vincent Carretta, "Response to Paul Lovejoy's 'Autobiography and Memory: Gustavus Vassa, Alias Olaudah Equiano, the African,'" *Slavery and Abolition* 28, no. 1 (2007): 115–119; Paul E. Lovejoy, "Issues of Motivation: Vassa/Equiano and Carretta's Critique of the Evidence," *Slavery and Abolition* 28, no. 1 (2007): 121–125. The debates surrounding Equiano's identity also received widespread coverage in the academic and mainstream news media. See, for instance, Jennifer Howard, "Unraveling the Narrative," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 52, no. 3 (September 9, 2005): A11; Gary Younge, "Author Casts Shadow over Slave Hero," *The Guardian*, September 14, 2005, <http://books.guardian.co.uk/news/articles/0,,1569407,00.html> (accessed February 4, 2009).

of origin and rank. Ethnographic labels such as “Igbo” purportedly signified African provenance, as well as a bundle of other traits that set Igbo apart from Yoruba, Mandinga, etc. For slaveholders, knowledge of these differences was crucial in assessing and monitoring enslaved commodities.⁵ Carretta’s attempt to reconcile Equiano’s “contradictory” claims of origin only reifies the fixity of this European system of “scientific” classification. The assumption is: once an Igbo, always an Igbo, only an Igbo. But just how fixed were these ethnographic labels? Who ascribed them? Where? When? And under what circumstances? European taxonomies did not readily accommodate the complexity of African self-understandings or group imperatives. Nor did they accommodate the potential for identities to shift across space and time. Recognizing “Igbo” and “Carolina” as fluid, socially determined signifiers, rather than as fixed categories, forces a deeper critical assessment of the context in which Equiano made these documentary claims. Through Equiano’s optic, perhaps he could be both “Igbo” and “Carolina,” depending on the circumstances.

Carretta’s desire to reconcile Equiano as either “African” or “American” is not unusual. Indeed, his approach to the documents mirrors broader conceptual disputes over the relative “African-ness” of early African Americans. At the core of these interpretive disagreements are important questions about the fixity of African identity in an ever-changing and pluralistic Atlantic world. Longstanding debates over “creolization” versus African “retentions” in the Americas hinge on the question of how the *process* of African acculturation unfolded in the Atlantic world. On the one hand, there are scholars who argue that most Africans had only their enslavement in common when they arrived in the Americas; “all—or nearly all—else had to be *created by them*.”⁶ Here the emphasis is on creativity—the ways Africans forged new and vibrant African American cultures, despite the crises of their uprooting and enslavement.⁷ On the other hand, there are scholars who argue for more sustained connections between Africa and the Americas: “African culture was not surviving: It was arriving.”⁸ Here the emphasis is on continuities of language, religion, music, and aesthetics in the forging of distinct African ethnic or national communities.⁹ If the details of these debates are not familiar to some readers, the contours may be more so. Similar debates exist in the historiography of voluntary migration from

⁵ On the ways in which “categorization” operates as an assertion of power and domination, see Richard Jenkins, “Rethinking Ethnicity: Identity, Categorization and Power,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 17, no. 2 (1994): 197–223. Jenkins is careful to note that those who have these categories imposed upon them can eventually embrace them as their own.

⁶ Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston, Mass., 1992), 18; emphasis in the original.

⁷ See, for example, Mintz and Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture*; Richard Price, “The Miracle of Creolization: A Retrospective,” *New West Indian Guide* 75, nos. 1–2 (2001): 35–64; Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “Culture on the Edges: Creolization in the Plantation Context,” *Plantation Society in the Americas* 5, no. 1 (1998): 8–28; Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998); and Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1998).

⁸ John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1998), 320.

⁹ See, for example, Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World*; Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*; Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas*; Paul E. Lovejoy, ed., *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery* (London, 2000); Paul E. Lovejoy and David V. Trotman, eds., *Trans-Atlantic Dimensions of Ethnicity in the African Diaspora* (New York, 2003); and Toyin Falola and Matt D. Childs, eds., *The Yoruba Diaspora in the Atlantic World* (Bloomington, Ind., 2004).

Europe to the United States, where notions of the “uprooted” versus the “transplanted” very much mirror those of “creolization” versus “retentions.”¹⁰

Despite the divisive tone of some of these recent debates, it is not clear what is at stake here. Obviously, identity was malleable; at the same time, an individual’s past experiences informed present understandings. The cultures of Africa “survived” even as Africans embraced new ideas. This is acknowledged on both sides of these arguments. Scholars who have challenged the creolization model have done so on the grounds that it underestimates the extent to which Africans arrived in culturally coherent groups that could maintain direct ties to the African past. Using increasingly precise slave trade data, historians now link specific slave-exporting regions in Africa to distinct American destinations.¹¹ As a result of their careful attention to African historical processes and African cultural dynamics in the Americas, these scholars have added striking new detail on the African aspects of American history, aspects that were lacking in earlier studies of broad, detached “survivals.” At the same time, this new research has shown that the process of creolization was much slower in some parts of the Americas than others. Nevertheless, despite clarifying the persistence of African cultural forms, this “revisionist” scholarship of the African diaspora has not fundamentally challenged the creolization model.¹² Africa might “arrive” in the Americas in coherent social and cultural forms, but these African structures eventually give way to African American ones, just as the creolization scholars tell us.

Even in its laudable emphasis on distinct African histories in the Atlantic, this revisionist scholarship continues to operate on conceptual terrain that ultimately reduces “creolization” to the mixture of European and African forms. In this narrow vision, as with the vision of the Atlantic more generally, creolization often seems bound to the inevitability of European mixture.¹³ Thus, creolization becomes the study of a process focused on the Americas, and not a study of the peoples who

¹⁰ Oscar Handlin’s *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People* (Boston, Mass., 1951) suggests that European immigrants were alienated from their pasts, forced to assimilate into a new America. Since the 1950s, scholars have challenged this formulation, arguing for continuities in ethnic traditions. This work is perhaps best exemplified in John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington, Ind., 1985).

¹¹ See David Eltis, Stephen D. Behrendt, David Richardson, and Herbert Klein, eds., *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM* (Cambridge, 2000), and its open-source revision that promises frequent updates of the data, David Eltis, Stephen Behrendt, David Richardson, and Manolo Florentino, *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, <http://www.slavevoyages.com>.

¹² The idea of “revisionist” interpretations of slavery studies comes from Paul E. Lovejoy, “The African Diaspora: Revisionist Interpretations of Ethnicity, Culture, and Religion under Slavery,” *Studies in the World History of Slavery, Abolition, and Emancipation* 2 (1997), http://www.yorku.ca/nhp/publications/Lovejoy_Studies%20in%20the%20World%20History%20of%20Slavery.pdf (accessed February 4, 2009).

¹³ Nowhere is this clearer than in the scholarship on “Atlantic Creoles,” where the Americanization process is now sometimes cast as having begun in Africa itself. See, for example, Ira Berlin, “From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in Mainland North America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (1996): 251–288; and more recently Linda M. Heywood and John K. Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585–1660* (Cambridge, 2007), who argue that Atlantic Creoles’ “knowledge of European material culture, religion, language, and aesthetics made it easy for them to integrate into the [American] colonial environment” (2). According to this recent scholarship, the flow of knowledge from Europeans to Africans rendered Atlantic Creoles peculiarly suited as American colonial subjects. One troubling implication of this argument is that slavery was somehow made more tolerable for those who were familiar with European lifeways. For critiques, see Peter A. Coclanis, “The Captivity of a Generation,” *William and Mary Quar-*

actually arrived there. The process of cultural exchange and the formation of new peoples was by no means unique to the Americas. The “miracle” of creolization was not so much its exceptionalism in the Americas, but rather its pervasiveness in all regions of cultural exchange, including Africa itself.¹⁴

A shift to a more thoroughly Atlantic approach can emphasize the multitude of overlapping cultural circuits and their influences on the individuals who moved through them.¹⁵ In the debate over creolization versus retentions, scholars generally tend to limit identity to either African or American outcomes. But among those Africans who traveled the breadth and scope of the Atlantic world, rarely was identity asserted as a rigid “either/or” proposition of African versus American. The teleology of “when” an enslaved African would become American hardly applied to those who moved frequently between continents, among a variety of peoples. Rather, culture was accretive and assertions of identities were situational, dependent on claims and attributions calibrated to constantly shifting sets of sociopolitical demands. Beliefs and identities from the African past were not abandoned. On the contrary, these foundational understandings operated as a filter of perception in the accumulation of new ideas and ways of being, a crucial compass in negotiating how the new might be put to use in the unfamiliar and volatile environments of Atlantic-world slave societies.

Charting these fluid identities through European documents requires a close and careful reading of the contexts in which the documents were produced. African ethnographic labels often tell us a great deal about group identity (particularly as defined by Europeans), but they tell us little about how individual Africans perceived themselves or were perceived by other non-Europeans.¹⁶ Nor do these labels shed

terly 61, no. 3 (2004): 544–556; and my review of Heywood and Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas*, forthcoming in *New West Indian Guide* 83 (2009).

¹⁴ To be sure, the contributions of African Americans in “building” America is an important topic; however, the tendency to emphasize American institutional outcomes draws attention to broader critiques of extant Atlantic histories—that many are not really Atlantic at all, and instead focus narrowly on European and American histories that are “old wine in new bottles, or in this case the old colonial history repackaged as Atlantic history.” See Alison Games, “Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities,” *American Historical Review* 111, no. 3 (June 2006): 741–757, quote from 745. See also Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra’s critique that the Atlantic paradigm “sanctions Eurocentric cultural geographies for North America”; Cañizares-Esguerra, “Some Caveats about the ‘Atlantic’ Paradigm,” *History Compass* 1, no. 1 (2003): 1. More recent attempts to define the Atlantic world in terms of “entangled” empires are no less satisfying in integrating African histories (let alone African “empires”) into the Atlantic narrative. See, for instance, Eliga H. Gould, “Entangled Histories, Entangled Worlds: The English-Speaking Atlantic as a Spanish Periphery,” *American Historical Review* 112, no. 3 (June 2007): 764–786. For a critical response in the same *AHR* Forum, see Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, “Entangled Histories: Borderland Historiographies in New Clothes?” *ibid.*, 794, where he says: “If the category of the Atlantic is to mean anything, it ought to include Africa, but there seems to be no room for this often overlooked fourth continent in most new versions of the Atlantic.”

¹⁵ Here I echo calls made by other scholars to break free from the “straitjacket” of creolization versus survivals. See, for instance, David Eltis, Philip Morgan, and David Richardson, “Agency and Diaspora in Atlantic History: Reassessing the African Contribution to Rice Cultivation in the Americas,” *American Historical Review* 112, no. 5 (December 2007): 1329–1358, esp. 1332; Vincent Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008), 7–8; J. Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton, N.J., 2005); and Luis Nicolau Parés, *A formação do candomblé: História e ritual da nação jeje na Bahia* (Campinas, Brazil, 2007).

¹⁶ Studies of individual enslaved Africans in the North Atlantic are exceedingly rare. Where they exist, they tend to adhere to the “Atlantic Creole” perspective. See, for instance, Terry Alford, *Prince*

light on the possibilities for individuals to move in and out of group or “national” categories of identity over the course of a lifetime. The betwixt and between of the Atlantic world allowed some Africans to jump from one language and set of cultural understandings to another.¹⁷ The savviest and most well-traveled Africans took careful measure of their environments, adroitly crafting group identities that allowed them to survive, resist, and in some instances thrive in the Atlantic world. In this way, sociopolitical exigencies shaped the ways in which Africans deployed identity. In response, these same exigencies often shaped Europeans’ perceptions of Africans, informing their attempts at “ethnic” or “national” identification. It was this interplay between self-understandings and interpolated identifications that created the complex, overlapping, and sometimes shifting “identities” that unfolded over the course of a given lifetime.¹⁸

Few individual cases illustrate these processes quite like that of Domingos Álvares, an enslaved African turned freedman turned inquisitorial exile. By tracing Domingos’s movements from West Africa, to Brazil, and finally to Portugal, we can see the carefully calculated ways in which one man presented himself, and was perceived by others, in various Atlantic contexts.¹⁹ Like many peripatetic Africans, Do-

among Slaves: The True Story of an African Prince Sold into Slavery in the American South (New York, 1977); Daniel L. Schafer, *Anna Madgigine Jai Kingsley: African Princess, Florida Slave, Plantation Slaveowner* (Gainesville, Fla., 2003); and Randy J. Sparks, *The Two Princes of Calabar: An Eighteenth-Century Atlantic Odyssey* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004). Historians of the South Atlantic have produced greater numbers of biographical studies; these have been more sensitive to shifting, overlapping cultural circuits in the broader Atlantic world. For an early example, see Luiz Mott, *Rosa Egípcíaca: Uma santa africana no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro, 1993). For more recent work, see João José Reis, Flávio dos Santos Gomes, and Marcus J. M. Carvalho, “África e Brasil entre margens: Aventuras e desaventuras do africano Rufino José Maria, c. 1822–1853,” *Estudos Afro-Asiáticos* 26, no. 2 (2004): 257–302; Mariza de Carvalho Soares, “A biografia de Ignacio Monte, o escravo que virou rei,” in Ronaldo Vainfas, Georgina Silva dos Santos, and Guilherme Pereira das Neves, eds., *Retratos do Império: Trajetórias individuais no mundo português nos séculos XVI a XIX* (Niterói, 2006), 47–68; and João José Reis, *Domingos Sodré: Um sacerdote africano* (São Paulo, 2008). For the rare case of a biography that links the North and South Atlantic, see Paul E. Lovejoy and Robin Law, eds., *The Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua: His Passage from Slavery to Freedom in Africa and America* (Princeton, N.J., 2001).

¹⁷ The representativeness of these cosmopolitan, culturally fluid Africans in the Atlantic world is difficult to quantify. Most probably worked on board ships or as personal body servants, accompanying their masters back and forth between the Americas and European metropolises. Although they were a distinct minority, their numbers were not insignificant. In the 1720s, an African-born slave in the Portuguese city of Porto revealed a network of twenty-five slaves in the city who manufactured and distributed “Mandinga” charms. Of these twenty-five men, eighteen had once lived in Brazil, two were the slaves of Englishmen, and two more worked on merchant ships. Arquivo Nacional de Torre do Tombo, Inquisição de Coimbra, Processos, no. 1630 (Luís de Lima). For a further discussion, see James H. Sweet, “Slaves, Convicts, and Exiles: African Travelers in the Portuguese-Atlantic World, 1720–1750,” in Caroline A. Williams, ed., *Bridging Early Modern Atlantic Worlds: People, Products, and Practices on the Move* (London, forthcoming). For a treatment of seafaring Africans in North America, see W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997).

¹⁸ I am aware of critiques that reject the term “identity” as a meaningful category of analysis. Frederick Cooper and Rogers Brubaker, for instance, have called for scholars to disaggregate the many meanings of identity, among them “identification,” “categorization,” and “self-understanding.” Where possible, I use these terms as alternatives to a homogenized “identity.” However, as I show, archival documents often do the work of reifying “identity” in precisely the ways that Cooper and Brubaker critique. By faithfully adhering to documentary identities as “real” or “true” evidence, scholars actually reinforce these static, essentialized “identities” that ignore the vicissitudes of power and subjectivity. Frederick Cooper and Rogers Brubaker, “Beyond Identity,” *Theory and Society* 29, no. 1 (2000): 1–47.

¹⁹ Throughout this article, all references to Domingos Álvares come from his Inquisition case: Arquivo Nacional de Torre do Tombo, Inquisição de Évora, Processos, no. 7759, discussed in greater detail below.

mingos remained a subject of Western institutional power for much of his life, constantly vulnerable to social dislocation and to being cut off from community ties that defined African conceptions of “selfhood” and freedom, conceptions that stood in sharp contrast to emerging European ideas of enlightened individualism.²⁰ Chronic instability rendered group “belonging” more elusive for Africans than for other Atlantic actors. Ultimately, the imperative of collective identification as an affirmation of self, along with the realities of social instability, had a profound effect on how Africans such as Domingos forged their identities in the Atlantic world.

Domingos Álvares was born in present-day Benin around 1710.²¹ As a young man, he was initiated into the priesthood of vodun, the dominant religion of the Fon-Gbe-speaking region.²² Years later, he still bore the physical markings of his various rites of passage—piercings in each ear and in his nose, and filed teeth. During the late 1720s, Domingos witnessed firsthand the violence unleashed by the powerful empire of Dahomey, as its army conquered vast regions in the Bight of Benin. He saw friends and family perish, including his own parents. Others, among them Domingos himself, were captured and sold into slavery.

Enslaved around 1730 and carried to Pernambuco, Brazil, Domingos worked on several large sugar plantations in the region.²³ He gained a reputation as a powerful diviner and healer, but his powers could also be used toward malevolent ends. Accused of poisoning his master, he spent time in a Recife jail before being sold to Rio de Janeiro in 1737. When Domingos arrived in Rio, his reputation had preceded him. Indeed, he was purchased by a man who specifically intended to use his new slave’s skills to heal his ailing wife. When this experiment failed, Domingos was sold to yet another master, who determined that he could earn money from Domingos’s cures. Plying his itinerant healing practice throughout the city, Domingos split his profits with his new master, eventually earning his freedom. He quickly capitalized on his status as a freedman, opening several healing centers around Rio. He also established a vibrant ritual community just south of the city, consisting primarily of his “Mina” countrymen.

In 1742, agents of the Portuguese Holy Office arrested Domingos on a charge of witchcraft and sent him to Lisbon for trial. He left behind a wife, a newborn child, and a devoted community of ritual adherents. During his trial, he insisted that his cures were “natural” remedies learned from elders in his African homeland. Despite

²⁰ On the crucial importance of group affiliations in determining individual autonomy and power in Africa and the diaspora, see Joseph C. Miller, “Retention, Reinvention, and Remembering: Restoring Identities through Enslavement in Africa and under Slavery in Brazil,” in José C. Curto and Paul E. Lovejoy, eds., *Enslaving Connections: Changing Cultures of Africa and Brazil during the Era of Slavery* (Amherst, N.Y., 2004), 81–121.

²¹ His birth date is based on his statement in March 1743 that he was “thirty four years old more or less.” Four years later, in October 1747, he claimed that he was “forty years old.”

²² The vodun belief system asserts a mutual interdependence between the temporal world and the world of the spirits. Vodun spirits are most often associated with natural forces—lightning, thunder, wind, earth, iron, and so on. Vodun priests (vodunon) are ritual experts who mediate between the living and the voduns, embodying the spirits through possession, prescribing offerings of food and drink to the spirits, etc. The ultimate goal of the religion is reciprocity, balance, calm, patience, and composure. On the etymology of “vodun,” see Suzanne Preston Blier, *African Vodun: Art, Psychology, and Power* (Chicago, 1995), 37–47. For a description of the belief system more generally, see Melville J. Herskovits, *Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom*, 2 vols. (1938; repr., Evanston, Ill., 1967).

²³ The date of his enslavement is based on the timing of warfare in his homeland (1728–1732), as well as the timing of the bankruptcy of the plantation on which he served in Goiana (1733).

his compelling testimony, the inquisitors believed that Domingos had made a “pact with the devil.” They sentenced him to exile in Castro Marim, a small frontier village in the extreme southeast corner of Portugal. From there, Domingos wandered hundreds of miles across the Portuguese Algarve, trying to cobble together a living by selling sardines, divining the location of buried treasures, and continuing to heal. In 1747, he again drew the attention of the Inquisition for allegedly burying malevolent objects under a woman’s verandah. He was arrested again and spent almost two years in jail before being found guilty of witchcraft. In 1749, inquisitors banished Domingos to Bragança, in the far north of Portugal. Unfortunately, he disappears from the record at this juncture, a forty-year-old African making at least the fifth forced migration of his lifetime.

Most of what we know about Domingos comes from the two Inquisition cases brought against him. The first emerged from accusations made in Rio de Janeiro in 1741 and 1742, the second from charges lodged in the Portuguese Algarve between 1745 and 1747. The contents of these two *processos* can be found in a single manuscript, more than six hundred pages long, housed in Portugal’s national archive.²⁴ Included among the documents are transcriptions of notarial reports, reports by agents of the Inquisition, letters of denunciation, and procedural documents. The bulk of the file, however, consists of testimonies provided by Domingos and more than three dozen others who knew him in Pernambuco, Rio de Janeiro, and the Algarve. Those who testified in the cases came from all walks of life—slave trader, blacksmith, brickmaker, soldier, barber, businessman, street hawker, priest, farmer, and slave. They included men and women, Brazilian, Portuguese, Spaniard, and African. Some voluntarily denounced Domingos for his “crimes”; others were called to testify by inquisitors. While we must be mindful of the varied contexts in which the testimonies emerged, when these documents are read across space and time, they provide fascinating insight into the complicated matrix of Domingos’s identity, demonstrating the interplay between his own self-understandings and the interpolations of those he encountered in various Atlantic settings.

Although we know that Domingos was born in West Africa sometime around 1710, the precise location of his birth is far from obvious. In his 1743 confession before the Inquisition, he declared that he was “born in Nangô on the Mina Coast.” He also stated that “his parents [we]re already dead and they were called in the language of his land, the father, Afenage, and the mother, Oconon, both born and raised in Nangon on the Mina Coast.” Although the ethnonym “Nagô” would later come to represent Yoruba identity in the Atlantic world, it was rarely used during Domingos’s lifetime.²⁵ Indeed, the first known use of the term in Africa occurred in

²⁴ Arquivo Nacional de Torre do Tombo, Inquisição de Évora, Processos, no. 7759.

²⁵ I have seen descriptions of thousands of Africans in state and church records for Rio de Janeiro up until 1770, and with the exception of this one case, I have never encountered the term “Nagô,” or anything approximating it. The earliest Brazilian references that I am aware of come from Minas Gerais, where, in a sample of 1,239 Africans taken from tax rolls in 1723, two were identified as Nago, one as Nagoa, one as Nagom, and one as Anago. Moacir Rodrigo de Castro Maia, “Quem tem padrinho não morre pagão: As relações de compadrio e apadrinhamento de escravos numa vila colonial (Mariana, 1715–1750)” (Ph.D. diss., Universidade Federal Fluminense, 2006), 44. Similarly, in a sample of 354 Africans taken from estate inventories between 1725 and 1759, Kathleen J. Higgins found three identified as Nago. Higgins, “*Licentious Liberty*” in a *Brazilian Gold-Mining Region: Slavery, Gender, and Social Control in Eighteenth-Century Sabará, Minas Gerais* (University Park, Pa., 1999), 74.

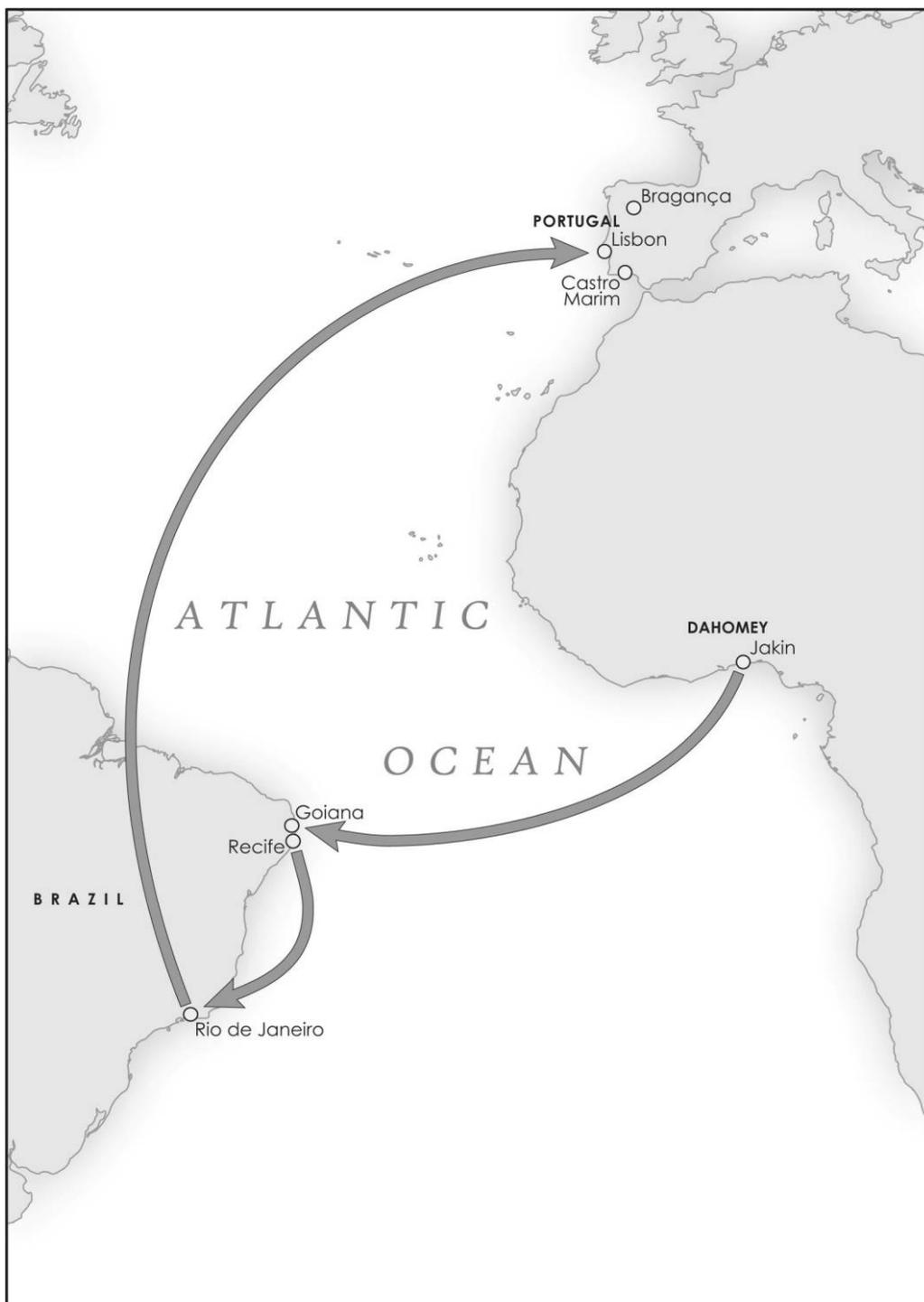


FIGURE 1: The Atlantic Travels of Domingos Álvares, 1730–1749. Map by Daniel Huffman, University of Wisconsin Cartography Lab.

1725, shortly before Domingos arrived in Brazil.²⁶ In this early period, the term most often referred to the sub-ethnic Anago group, located in present-day southwest Nigeria. Scholars generally agree that a broader Yoruba identity coalesced in Africa only during the nineteenth century, although some suggest that “Yoruba” was an even later invention of the Atlantic world, and not an identification with deep historical roots in the Bight of Benin.²⁷

Despite Domingos’s specific claim that he was from Nangô/Nangon, the majority of people whom he encountered in the Atlantic world saw him in much broader terms. Nearly every person who testified before the Inquisition in Brazil claimed simply that he was from the “Mina nation.” Slaveholders generally delineated the “Costa da Mina” as a region that includes present-day Ghana, Togo, and Benin, although after 1721, the vast majority of slaves bound for Brazil passed through the Portuguese fort at Ouidah (Benin). During the first three decades of the eighteenth century, these so-called Minas easily constituted the largest group of enslaved Africans arriving in Brazil. In Pernambuco alone, nearly 35,000 Minas arrived between 1722 and 1732, representing 84 percent of slave imports during the period.²⁸ Reflecting the dominant mixture of Ewe, and especially Fon, elements in the slave population, a *lingua franca* known as the *lingua geral de Mina* emerged in Brazil. This Mina language was so prevalent that in 1741, a Portuguese settler in the interior mining regions published a Portuguese/Mina word list and conversation manual.²⁹ The emergence of a coherent Mina nation in Brazil is perhaps best exemplified in Catholic brotherhoods such as Santo Elesbão e Santa Efigênia, founded by a congregation of “black Minas” in Rio de Janeiro in the 1740s. Here, “Minas” from various areas of “provenance”—Savalus, Agonlis, Mahis, and Dahomeys—came together to form one broadly conceived sociocultural unit.³⁰

Although a certain uniformity emerged in the Mina nation of Brazil by the 1740s, it was the culmination of a complicated process of group formation that had unfolded during the late 1720s and 1730s. Between 1725 and 1727, slave traders delivered

²⁶ Renand des Marchais, *Voyage du chevalier des Marchais en Guinée, isles voisines, et à Cayenne, fait en 1725, 1726, & 1727* (Paris, 1730), 125.

²⁷ Robin Law, “Ethnicity and the Slave Trade: ‘Lucumi’ and ‘Nago’ as Ethnonyms in West Africa,” *History in Africa* 24 (1997): 205–219. For the argument that Yoruba was formed in the diaspora, see J. Lorand Matroy, “The English Professors of Brazil: On the Diasporic Roots of the Yoruba Nation,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, no. 1 (1999): 72–103; and Matroy, *Black Atlantic Religion*. Biodun Adediran has challenged the notion that Yoruba identity emerged only in the nineteenth century, instead arguing that the Yoruba subgroups of the pre-colonial period consciously shared linguistic, religious, and historical similarities. Adediran, “Yoruba Ethnic Groups or a Yoruba Ethnic Group? A Review of the Problem of Ethnic Identification,” *África: Revista do Centro de Estudos Africanos da USP* 7 (1984): 57–70; and Adediran, *The Frontier States of Western Yorubaland, 1600–1889* (Ibadan, 1994).

²⁸ Eltis et al., *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*.

²⁹ Antonio da Costa Peixoto, *Obra nova da lingua geral de Mina* (1741; repr., Lisbon, 1945). See also Olabiyi Yai, “Texts of Enslavement: Fon and Yoruba Vocabularies from Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Brazil,” in Lovejoy, *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery*, 102–112. This *lingua geral* also became prominent in West Africa itself. In his travels in the Bight of Benin in the late eighteenth century, the English trader Archibald Dalzel noted that “the language is that which the Portuguese call *lingua geral*, or general tongue, and is spoken not only in Dahomy-proper, but in Whydah, and the other dependent states; and likewise in Mahee, and several neighbouring provinces.” Dalzel, *The History of Dahomy, an Inland Kingdom of Africa*, second printing with intro by J. D. Fage (1793; repr., London, 1967), v.

³⁰ On the ethnic makeup of the Catholic brotherhoods, see Mariza de Carvalho Soares, *Devotos da cor: Identidade étnica, religiosidade e escravidão no Rio de Janeiro, século XVIII* (Rio de Janeiro, 2000), 200–201.

more than 4,800 slaves from the Mina coast to Pernambuco every year. The trade dropped precipitously over the next five years, averaging barely 2,300 per year.³¹ This rapid decline is attributable primarily to changing conditions in the Bight of Benin, where exports decreased after Dahomey conquered Ouidah in 1727. For the brief period between 1728 and 1732, Jakin replaced Ouidah as the major slave export center of the region.³² On the Brazilian side of the trade, political changes in Africa resulted in a more heterogeneous group of Mina slaves. Among those who would have gradually entered Brazil were slaves from regions north and east of Dahomey, later defined as “Mahi” and “Nagô.”

Domingos was apparently caught up in this early shift in the Mina trade. When he arrived in Brazil, his distinctiveness was not lost on those Minas who were already resident there. One of the people called to testify before the Inquisition in Rio de Janeiro was an enslaved woman named Thereza, who was from Allada, in southern Benin. Thereza had known Domingos since their days together as slaves in Pernambuco. As someone who had become acquainted with him soon after he arrived from Africa, she was well positioned to comment on his background. In one brief but revealing statement, Thereza declared that she and Domingos “supposedly were both from the same Mina Coast; however, she is from the Arda nation and he is from Cobû, which are different lands.” Her testimony, delivered in front of Rio’s chief inquisitorial officer and two Catholic priests, may have been intended to distance her from Domingos; however, the specificity of her distinction is crucial. How Thereza knew that Domingos was not from the “same” Mina coast is difficult to discern, although we can surmise that he did not easily adapt to the sociocultural milieu dominated by Minas from Weme (1716), Allada (1724), and Ouidah (1727)—all regions that had recently been conquered by Dahomey.³³ At the very least, Thereza’s distinction reminds us that Africans sometimes challenged the coherence of slaveholding categories such as “Mina.”

Thereza’s assertion that Domingos was “Cobû” is perhaps the most intriguing and confusing aspect of his several documented identities. While references to Cobûs are exceedingly rare in Brazilian documents, they seem to have peaked in the 1720s and 1730s, during precisely the period in which the geographic boundaries of the Mina trade were beginning to expand.³⁴ The derivation of “Cobû” has been a subject of speculation and outright guesswork on the part of scholars. Since the year 2000, Brazilian researchers have come to a handful of seemingly contradictory conclusions in their assessments of its meaning. In all of these instances, scholars employ the rather haphazard method of searching for place names or ethnic groups in Africa

³¹ Eltis et al., *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*. See also Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Conselho Ultramarino, Pernambuco, Caixa 42, Doc. 3786 (January 16, 1732).

³² Viceroy of Brazil to Lisbon, April 29, 1730, quoted in Pierre Verger, *Trade Relations between the Bight of Benin and Bahia, 17th–19th Century* (Ibadan, 1976), 125–126.

³³ For the best historical account of Dahomey’s rise to power, see Robin Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa, 1550–1750: The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on an African Society* (Oxford, 1991).

³⁴ Cobûs were less than 1 percent of the African population in the samples taken by Laird Bergad, *Slavery and the Demographic and Economic History of Minas Gerais, Brazil, 1720–1888* (Cambridge, 1999), and James H. Sweet, “Manumission in Rio de Janeiro, 1749–1754: An African Perspective,” *Slavery and Abolition* 24, no. 1 (2003): 56. In a sample of 1,239 Africans in Minas Gerais in 1723, Maia found 23 Cobûs—21 men and 2 women. Maia, “Quem tem padrinho não morre pagão,” 44. Finally, Higgins found that Cobûs represented roughly 4 percent of Africans in Sabará between 1725 and 1759, decreasing to only 2 percent between 1760 and 1808. Higgins, “*Licentious Liberty*,” 74.

that approximate the ethnographic labels found in American documents. Thus, one historian suggests that Cobû may have been a corruption of “Kuvu,” the name of a river south of Luanda in present-day Angola.³⁵ Another argues that Cobûs came from the Upper Guinea coast, more specifically from the kingdom of “Kaabu.”³⁶ A third interpretation suggests that Cobû derives from a town by the same name in the northern interior of Benin (“Kobu”).³⁷

Given the contradictions in various interpretations of Cobû, we must look to other sources to determine its significance. Even though the Benin trade declined from 1728 to 1732, Mina slaves still represented 86 percent of arrivals into Pernambuco.³⁸ On numerical grounds alone, Benin seems the most likely source for Cobû. Furthermore, the linguist Yeda Pessoa de Castro has suggested that “Cobû” derives from a Fon description of the people in the Agonli-Cové region of Benin.³⁹ During the late 1720s and early 1730s, Agonli-Cové was squeezed between the militaries of two competing empires, Òyó to its northeast and Dahomey to its southwest. Beginning in 1728 and continuing for three years straight, Òyó marched on Dahomey every dry season in an attempt to overthrow the Dahomean king, Agaja. Agaja retaliated by sending his army to the region, remaining there from May 1731 until March 1732. During these raids, many villages were destroyed. Survivors were enslaved or became refugees, fleeing farther northward. Eventually these diverse groups of refugees came together to form a new kingdom known as Ìdàísà.⁴⁰

It was during these battles between 1728 and 1732 that the army of Dahomey likely enslaved Domingos Álvares. Not only does the timing align perfectly with Domingos’s arrival in Brazil, but his claim that he was from “Nangô” is lent considerable weight by the existence of a town in the Agonli-Cové region called Naogon. At first blush, one might conclude that he was claiming a proto-Yoruba identity. However, his insistence that he was “from” Nangô, “born in” Nangon, etc., makes it likely that Nangô (or Nangon) was a place name rather than a description of group identification. Thus, Domingos’s increasingly expanding Atlantic identity is probably best understood in the triplicate: he was a Mina-Cobû from the village of Naogon—Mina representing a broad “metaethnic” category, imposed by Europeans on a relatively heterogeneous group of slaves from the so-called Mina coast; Cobû representing a more narrow “ethnic” distinction, made internally among these Minas; and Naogon representing his place of birth.⁴¹

³⁵ Eduardo França Paiva, *Escravidão e universo cultural na colônia: Minas Gerais, 1716–1789* (Belo Horizonte, 2001), 71.

³⁶ Soares, *Devotos da cor*, 109.

³⁷ Mariza de Carvalho Soares, “A ‘nação’ que se tem e a ‘terra’ de onde se vem: Categorias de inserção social de africanos no Império português, século XVIII,” *Estudos Afro-Asiáticos* 26, no. 2 (2004): 323 n. 19; Soares, “Indícios para o traçado das rotas terrestres de escravos na baía do Benim, século XVIII,” in Soares, ed., *Rotas atlânticas da diáspora africana: Da Baía do Benim ao Rio de Janeiro* (Niterói, 2007), 75, 85, 94 n. 32.

³⁸ Eltis et al., *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*.

³⁹ According to Yeda Pessoa de Castro, “Cobû” is a Portuguese corruption of “Cové-nu,” meaning “born in Cové” in the Fon language. Pessoa de Castro, *A língua mina-jeje no Brasil: Um falar africano em Ouro Preto do século XVIII* (Belo Horizonte, 2002), 131–135.

⁴⁰ I. A. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and Its Neighbors, 1708–1818* (Cambridge, 1967), 83–99; Adediran, *The Frontier States of Western Yorubaland*, 102–110; Adediran, “Ìdàísà: The Making of a Frontier Yorùbá State,” *Cahiers d’études africaines* 24, no. 1 (1984): 71–85.

⁴¹ On the distinctions between “metaethnicity” and “ethnicity,” see Parés, *A formação do candomblé*, 24–29.

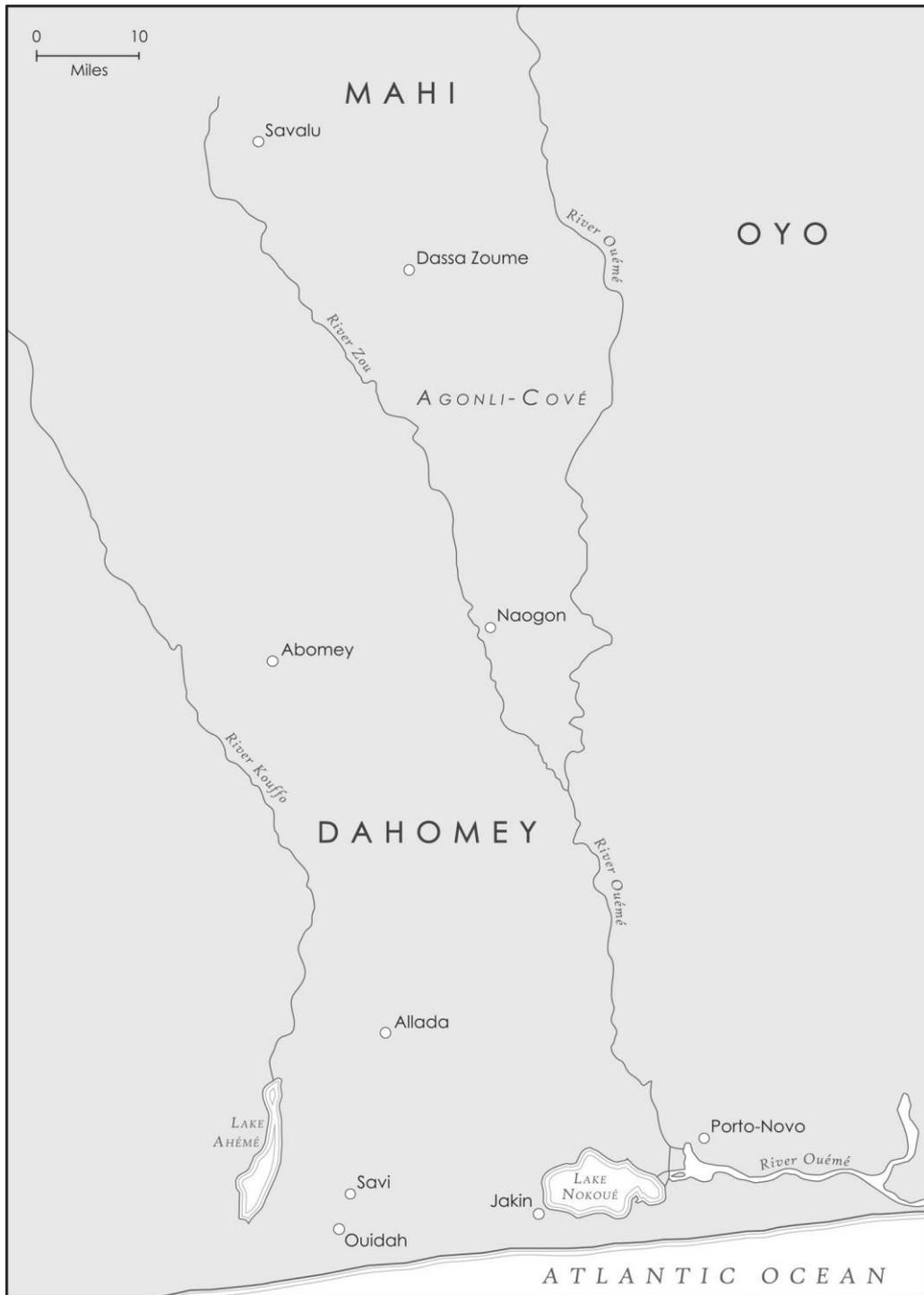


FIGURE 2: The Bight of Benin, circa 1730. Map by Daniel Huffman, University of Wisconsin Cartography Lab.

Thereza's distinction between herself (Arda) and Domingos (Cobû) can ultimately be interpreted as a statement on their political positions in the disputes with Dahomey. Allada was a longstanding, if declining, kingdom, widely recognized as the heartland of Fon history and culture. Across the region, political and spiritual leaders denounced Dahomey's conquest of Allada as illegitimate. Thereza viewed herself as rightfully a subject of Allada.⁴² Meanwhile, Domingos was on the leading edge of a new wave of Brazilian slaves from the politically acephalous interior regions of Benin that allied themselves with Òyó. From the African perspective, he did not fit the profile of many of the Mina slaves who had preceded him. This outsider status clearly retained its salience in the slave communities of Brazil, at least for the early years of the 1730s.

Thereza Allada was not the only commentator to distinguish between Minas and Cobûs during the 1730s. Describing the ability of Africans to respond to illness in Brazil's gold-mining regions, a Portuguese doctor named Luis Gomes Ferreyra wrote: "Cobûs and Angolas . . . are very sluggish, and those from the Mina nation [are] very tough."⁴³ The cultural distinctions between these peoples were apparently significant enough to merit comment in the 1730s, but there is little evidence to suggest that they persisted. The differences between Mina and Cobû appeared sharp in Brazil precisely because of the preponderance of slaves who had arrived from Dahomey-dominated regions south of Abomey prior to 1727. As Cobûs arrived in Brazil in the 1720s and 1730s, they appeared to be something altogether new. This snapshot moment of apparent difference quickly gave way to the realization that small numbers of Cobûs were just one more variation of Mina. These Cobûs joined others from "Mahi" territories—Savalus, Iannos, etc.—who collectively became known as "Jejes" in Brazil by the second half of the eighteenth century.⁴⁴

While ethnographic signifiers provide good clues as to Domingos's African identities, qualitative evidence in the documents also yields crucial information about his African past. In presenting his genealogy to inquisitors in Lisbon, Domingos offered the names of his parents, Afenage and Oconon, which can be traced to Fon-derived descriptions of the earth vodun, Sakpata.⁴⁵ In a document confirming Domingos's arrival in Castro Marim in August 1744 to serve out the term of his exile, a Portuguese notary described him as "fifty years, more or less, preto buçal, short and stout of body, with one tooth filed on the top part of the jaw, and in correspondence on

⁴² It is important to note that externally ascribed "categories" of identity were not solely an assertion of European power; they could also be African. One finds similar political distinctions in the names applied to slaves in the Spanish-speaking Atlantic. Aguirre Beltran notes that "Ardas" (those from Allada) were distinguished from "Araras" (those in the interior north of Abomey). Araras arrived in places such as Cuba with double names—"Arara agicon," "Arara magino," and "Arara savalu." "Arara" represented a broad metaethnic region (similar to "Mina"), while the second word represented the particular nation or people. Among those arriving in Cuba were Arara cuevano, almost certainly the equivalent of the Brazilian Cobû. On the distinctions between Arda and Arara, see Gonzalo Aguirre Beltran, "San Thome," *Journal of Negro History* 31, no. 3 (1946): 321–322.

⁴³ Luis Gomes Ferreyra, *Erario Mineral* (Lisbon, 1735), 81.

⁴⁴ For a brilliant discussion of the development and evolution of "Jeje" identity in West Africa and Brazil, see Parés, *A formação do candomblé*.

⁴⁵ The word "vodun" represents both the belief system and the deities that encompass it; thus Sakpata is the earth god. "Afenage" is the name of one of the most powerful descendant qualities of Sakpata, while "Oconon" means "mother of the land" in the Fon language. To this end, both were ritual titles as well as names. Herskovits, *Dahomey*, 2: 142; R. P. B. Segurola, *Dictionnaire Fon-Français*, 2 vols. (Cotonou, 1963), 2: 448, 1: 298, 2: 408.

the bottom part he has two that are so far apart that he seems to be lacking one tooth, with two crippled fingers on his right hand, both ears are pierced with vestiges of the same on the left side of his nose.”⁴⁶ Obviously, Domingos was marked by the rigors of his servitude; the mention of his “crippled” fingers is clear enough evidence of that. The other body markings, however—filed teeth and piercings—were indicative of ritual experiences in his homeland.

There seems to be no documentary evidence that the peoples from central Benin filed their teeth during the eighteenth century. Modern anthropological evidence, however, suggests that dental modification was common among adolescents in Dahomey in the 1930s. According to Melville Herskovits, Dahomean boys between the ages of twelve and fifteen subjected themselves to tooth removal and tooth filing mostly for aesthetic reasons, although it was said of a man who had not submitted to this ritual that “his oxen have horns that are not separated.”⁴⁷ Similarly, ear and nose piercing was consistent with male body adornment among men in northern and central Benin. As early as the seventeenth century, Jesuit father Alonso de Sandoval noted that the only physical sign of “Lecumies barbas” was the piercing on the left side of their nose.⁴⁸ More striking, English slave trader Archibald Dalzel wrote in 1793 that among the “Mahees . . . some bore the ears, others the nose, thrusting a bead or a cowrie into the aperture.”⁴⁹ The culturally specific markings on Domingos’s body provide us with further clues about his African past.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Domingos’s ritual behavior suggests a strong connection to vodun, the spiritual powers that governed the lives of most people in Benin. He generally cured with various herbs and roots, but a close reading of some of his more elaborate rituals reveals what is likely the presence of vodun spirits. On one occasion in Rio de Janeiro, for example, he orchestrated a ritual at his *terreiro* in which “one white woman, another parda, and many negras” danced in a circle under an orange tree.⁵⁰ In the middle of the circle was a pot of water fortified with various leaves and with a knife in the middle. One of the “negras” entered the circle, “dancing and jumping like she was possessed.” Domingos cast some black powders on top of the woman’s head and began asking her questions, calling her “Captain.” The Captain responded by telling him that one woman suffered from witchcraft, others had “this or that illness,” and so on. Eventually Domingos ordered the sick women to put their hands into the pot of water. As they did, they immediately fell to the ground “like dead people.” Domingos approached each one and put his hand on her chest, “proffering words in his own language.” He then opened a wound on one arm and the sole of one foot of each woman and rubbed some black powders into the wounds, claiming that this would “close the women’s bodies so the evil spirits would not return.”

Many of the elements contained in this ritual point to vodun. The location of the

⁴⁶ The term *preto buçal* has pejorative connotations. *Preto* simply means “black.” *Boçal* means “rude, loutish, unrefined,” but was most often utilized to describe unacculturated African slaves.

⁴⁷ Herskovits, *Dahomey*, 1: 289.

⁴⁸ “Lecumies barbas” refers to the Bariba people of Borgu in present-day northern Benin. Alonso de Sandoval, *De instauranda Aethiopia salute* (Bogota, 1956), 95–96.

⁴⁹ Dalzel, *The History of Dahomy*, xviii.

⁵⁰ The word *terreiro* literally means “yard,” or “outdoor space”; in Brazil, however, it has come to be associated with the ritual space for the practice of the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé. This early use of the word in Brazilian documents is therefore significant.

ceremony, which took place under an orange tree, is consonant with the importance of trees in vodun cosmology.⁵¹ The vessel with the knife suggests the power of the god of iron, Gu. The knife was almost certainly an important implement in the possession ritual of the Captain, whose military title invokes Gu's warrior aspect. European military titles had already been adopted and naturalized in Dahomey at this early juncture. In 1727, the English slave trader William Snelgrave observed that the "principal person" at King Agaja's court, "whom the *Negroes* distinguish'd . . . by the title . . . *Great Captain*," presented himself "in the midst of five hundred Soldiers, who had Fire-arms, drawn Swords, Shields, and Banners in their hands."⁵² Finally, the choreography of Domingos's ritual—dancing and singing in a circle, followed by spirit possession, divination, and curing—would be familiar to practitioners of vodun religions, Old World and New.

COMBINING ALL OF THE EVIDENCE, we can begin to see the contours of the village-based, kinship-defined spiritual identification that Domingos forged in his homeland, a core of self-understanding that would remain salient as he moved across the Atlantic world. In his homeland, Domingos's sense of "self" was dependent on reciprocal relationships with a religious community that consisted of natal kin, ancestors, ritual adherents, and vodun spirits. Enslavement and shipment to northeast Brazil tore him away from this community. As he attempted to reconstitute a similar selfhood in Pernambuco, he encountered formidable challenges. Slave masters viewed him as simply another Mina slave, destined for backbreaking labor on sugar plantations. Domingos contested this fate, insisting on the freedom to move around, practice healing, and build new spiritual networks. At least one plantation owner issued a standing order to his overseer: If Domingos appeared on their property, he was to be summarily removed. Domingos's master tried to contain his mobility, but Domingos fought back. He allegedly poisoned the master's family, their slaves, and their cattle. His stubborn refusal to adhere to planter expectations eventually landed him in jail and on the auction block, where he was sold away from Pernambuco, a thousand miles south to Rio de Janeiro.

If slave masters sought to mold Domingos into a compliant Mina slave, some enslaved Minas in Pernambuco upheld political distinctions that were salient primarily among different groups of Minas. At least one Arda woman, and perhaps others, recognized Domingos as a Cobû "outsider" during his early days in Pernambuco. These nodes of political difference that distinguished Cobû and Arda as "different lands" in the African context gradually faded in Brazil, as Domingos integrated into the broader Mina category that was imposed on him by slaveholders. This should not come as a surprise. Despite subtle differences in language and slight variations in religious belief, Domingos shared much in common with the lot of Mina slaves from the coastal regions of the Bight of Benin. The fact that he was seen as

⁵¹ On the ritual importance of trees, see Parés, *A formação do candomblé*, 98–99. It is also worth noting that many years later, oranges became a favored offering of the Candomblé deity Osun.

⁵² William Snelgrave, *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave-Trade* (1734; repr., London, 1971), 27–28.

a powerful spiritual person, one who might alleviate the suffering of enslavement, no doubt facilitated his entry into the community.

Domingos's integration into the Mina community quickened when he arrived in Rio de Janeiro in 1737. During his time there, he purchased his freedom and established a series of healing clinics, as well as a vodun altar, where the majority of his initiates consisted of Mina men and women. Soon after earning his freedom, he married a Mina woman, who ironically was from Allada, just like his erstwhile friend Thereza. With his wife, their young daughter, and a group of ritual adherents, Domingos literally built a new Mina community from the uncertain and fractured lives of various African pasts. Each of these individual Africans reclaimed selfhood through idioms of kinship, healing, and collective identification that bound the ritual community. Drawing from the most significant elements of their shared African past, including the *lingua geral de Mina* and vodun, they muted past political differences and remade themselves as Mina to address their social alienation in Brazil.

To some extent, slaves' understandings of this new Mina identity overlapped with those of their masters, at least with respect to marking broad regions of African provenance and cultural commonalities. Where the two differed was in their disparate imperatives. For slaveholders, Mina was a category, a taxonomy into which they thrust individuals in order to facilitate surveillance and control over various forms of African property. For the enslaved, Mina developed as one idiom for collective responses to the challenges facing African slaves and their descendants in the Americas. Crucially, these broadened expressions of identity unfolded from *within* African communities, in a process of cultural exchange not unlike "creolization," but without the implications of Europeanization.

Although Domingos "became" Mina during his residence in Brazil, this is not to suggest a teleological or linear progression from a narrower identification to a broader one. Indeed, the narrower identity of Cobû, or even the village-based Naogon, no doubt inflected his leadership of his ritual community and could reassert itself in a given circumstance. For example, at around the same time that Domingos arrived in Rio de Janeiro, a group of Mina Africans established a Catholic brotherhood dedicated to Santo Elesbão and Santa Efigênia. This "congregation of black Minas" apparently coexisted peacefully until 1762, when a dispute over political succession within the brotherhood split it along ethnic lines. Interestingly, political fissures in the Brazilian brotherhood mirrored old rivalries from the Bight of Benin, as "Mahi, Agonli, Oyo, [and] Savalu departed the Dahomey group," forming a new, separate "Mahi congregation."⁵³ As when Thereza recalled that she and Domingos were from "different lands," political divisions of the Bight of Benin reemerged here, trumping the shared affinities among Minas in Brazil. In this way, core ethnic or kinship identifications were never completely subsumed in the Atlantic world; rather, they overlapped and ran parallel to newer and often broadened expressions of identification.

Just as Domingos began to enjoy the fruits of his labors in constructing new lineal and ritual communities, Catholic priests raided one of his healing centers in Rio. Domingos narrowly escaped capture, becoming a fugitive of ecclesiastical justice. He

⁵³ Soares, *Devotos da cor*, 199–230.

moved around frequently, but he continued to heal and preside over his ritual community. Meanwhile, he was denounced by one of his former masters for introducing a “malignant spirit” into the body of the man’s wife. Several other witnesses also came forward to reveal that Domingos was “well known as a fetisher” and “fortune teller” across Rio. Authorities eventually caught up with Domingos; he was arrested, removed from his family and friends, and sent to Lisbon to stand trial for witchcraft.

Domingos endured a year and a half of monotony and suffering in a cramped cell in Lisbon’s inquisitorial jail. On rare occasions the inquisitors called him for questioning, menacing him with queries about the substance of his rituals and his alleged pact with the devil. In response to these convoluted and confusing questions, Domingos retreated to his earliest African past. When asked where he was from and where he had learned his cures, he consistently answered that he was from Nangon and that he had learned everything from his kinsmen. He also noted that everything he used in healing was “natural,” and that these same cures had worked for him since the time he lived in Nangon. Unmoved by his explanations, the inquisitors ordered that he be tortured on the *potro*, a device that used a series of cords to squeeze the arms and legs, eventually crushing the bones. Only when he cried for the mercy of Jesus and the Virgin Mary did they release him from the torture.

When Domingos arrived in the south of Portugal to serve out the term of his four-year exile, the category Mina no longer had much relevance, mostly because there were so few Africans in the region. For some Portuguese, he was just a *negro boçal*, implying an uneducated, unacculturated African. That was how he was described by the notary when he arrived in Castro Marim in August 1744. Others got to know Domingos well enough to learn that he was from the Mina coast. For example, in the village of Portimão, one woman claimed that Domingos had told her he was from the “Costa da Mina.” In the village of Farragudo, however, he led people to believe that he was from Angola. Leonor Alonso stated that when Domingos arrived at her house to perform a cure, “it arose that he was from Angola and that he had been punished by the Holy Office.” Caterina Jozepha was more emphatic. She was certain that he “was born in Angola because he told her so.” If this was the case, Domingos clearly acquiesced to the expectations of his uneducated rural clientele, some of whom probably equated all Africans with the category “Angola.”⁵⁴ Becoming “Angolan” was simply one more strategy for negotiating the unfriendly confines of southern Portugal, where Domingos struggled to find even the most basic sustenance.

Domingos did whatever it took to survive, moving quickly from one place to the next. In one town he sold sardines. In another he claimed that he could uncover buried treasures. And in others he continued to cure. Along the way, he continually remade himself to adhere to Portuguese expectations. When he divined the location of buried treasures, he drew upon an ancient Portuguese legend claiming that Moors had left untold riches in the Algarve hundreds of years earlier. These treasures were

⁵⁴ There are numerous reasons for this association. Portugal maintained strong historical ties to Angola going back to the late fifteenth century and asserted a colonial presence along the coast there from 1575. Until the early eighteenth century, roughly 90 percent of slaves arriving in Portuguese territories, especially Brazil, were coming from Angola. Thus, the ideological and human representation of Africa for Portugal’s most isolated metropolitan subjects was “Angola.” Not surprisingly, colonial Brazil had a much more sophisticated understanding of Africa’s complex histories and peoples.

supposedly guarded by enchanted Moors who could take the form of giant snakes.⁵⁵ Domingos said he had learned about this myth only after meeting an innkeeper named Bras Gonçalves. When Gonçalves discovered that Domingos had been exiled for witchcraft, he assumed that Domingos “must be familiar with the gold in the countryside and how to divine hidden treasures.” Given his “great need” and the promise that “that path would reward him,” Domingos acquiesced to Gonçalves’s presumptions, taking food and money in exchange for advice on how to find the treasures. According to the denunciations of Gonçalves and others, Domingos told them that he had spoken to the half-serpent, half-humans protecting the treasures, and they had given him permission to take them away.⁵⁶

The myth of the buried Moorish treasures was not the only Portuguese belief that Domingos used for his own purposes. On other occasions, he infused Christian prayer and ritual into his healing ceremonies. For instance, several witnesses reported that he preceded and concluded his ceremonies by making the sign of the cross. Despite these blandishments, Domingos continued to utilize rituals that resonated with his African past. On several occasions he passed live chickens over the bodies of people suffering from illnesses, a ritual designed to sweep away evil spirits. He also prepared curative baths for his patients, using herbs and roots with which he was familiar, but probably adding new ones as well.⁵⁷ Eventually, one of his patients accused him of witchcraft. In retribution for the woman’s refusal to pay for a cure, Domingos left a bundle of “evil” at her door, which included a “doll” with thirty-nine pins in it, human hair, dog hair, chicken feathers, bones, sulfur, glass, pepper, corn, and grave dirt. This stereotypical “voodoo doll” was in fact a figural representation of his nemesis—a *vodun bochio* (literally “empowered cadaver”).⁵⁸ With each pin he stuck in the “doll,” Domingos would have cursed the woman to suffering until such time that she rendered payment.⁵⁹

When the Inquisition prosecuted Domingos a second time, he again claimed that his cures were natural, and that he had learned them in Nangon. The only modification he made to the testimony from his first trial was to note that he was now using Christian prayers. He also noted that some of the rituals he used in Portugal he had learned “from the whites in Brazil.” As he was shuttled off to serve his exile in the mountains of Bragança, Domingos Álvares was the sum of his many-traveled, interchangeable parts—Cobû, Mina, Brazilian, Portuguese, vodun priest, and even

⁵⁵ Rodney Gallop, *Portugal: A Book of Folk-Ways* (1936; repr., Cambridge, 1961), 77–80.

⁵⁶ Although it might be a stretch to think that Domingos actually “talked” to snakes, it is worth noting that snakes were also feared and revered in Dahomey, where the snake god, Da, was believed to capriciously “give and take away.” According to Dahomean myth, when the deity Mawu began creating the world, she was carried from place to place in the mouth of the serpent. Wherever they spent the night, the excrement from the snake became mountains. “That is why when a man digs into a mountain slope, he finds riches.” Quoted from Herskovits, *Dahomey*, 2: 248–249. For a broader description of the meaning of Da, see *ibid.*, 245–255. For eighteenth-century descriptions of snake “worship” in Dahomey, see Snelgrave, *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave-Trade*, 10–14.

⁵⁷ In his travels across southern Portugal, Domingos encountered people who were already predisposed to forms of “folk medicine” and healing similar to the ones he performed. On popular forms of healing in Portugal, see Timothy D. Walker, *Doctors, Folk Medicine, and the Inquisition: The Repression of Magical Healing in Portugal during the Enlightenment* (Leiden, 2005).

⁵⁸ On the definition of *bochio*, see Blier, *African Vodun*, 2.

⁵⁹ On the significance of piercing needles in *vodun bochio*, see *ibid.*, 107, 249–251, 287–292.

Christian. But at his core he was still the person he had always claimed to be—the man wrenched from friends, family, rituals, and rites in Naogon twenty years earlier.

IT WOULD BE FOOL'S PLAY TO ASCRIBE a singular identity to someone like Domingos Álvares. Clearly, he was many things to many different people. Reading any of the Inquisition documents in isolation, one might conclude that Domingos fit into any of four different “ethnic” or “national” categories—Nagô, Cobû, Mina, or Angolan. From a purely methodological perspective, this uncertainty reveals a pitfall in the approaches of many scholars who study the identities of enslaved Africans. The tendency of the scholarship has been to focus on collective categories of identity instead of individual identities. This often means looking at “ethnic” or “national” labels in documents recording baptisms, marriages, manumissions, and so on. Unfortunately, this approach provides only a snapshot of a person's identity, without attempting to understand individual, situational experiences over the life course. Although these quantitative analyses might reveal dominant trends among groups of Africans in a particular locale at a given time, they fail to capture the kinds of important historical changes that are brought into sharp relief when individuals are studied.

Domingos's case illustrates this perfectly, but there are other examples. To take an instance from my own research, in September 1711, Jacinta Angola appeared at her local parish with her mixed-race (*pardo*) husband, Joaquim Ribeiro, for the baptism of their son Agostinho. For the purposes of collecting evidence of group identity, Jacinta was recorded in my data set simply as “Angolan.” But one year later, in December 1712, she and Joaquim Ribeiro returned to the parish for the baptism of their daughter Caetana. This time the priest described Jacinta as a “creole from Guiné.” By virtue of her marriage to a mixed-race man, the fact that she had borne multiple Brazilian children, and her embrace of the Catholic Church, Jacinta shifted from the “Angolan” category into a category of acculturated Africans with no discernible nationality. Whether she embraced this new category of identity is unclear. Indeed, Jacinta's identification as something more closely approximating “Angolan” may well have continued in certain social contexts. In the eyes of the Church, however, she was shedding “Angola” and becoming Brazilian.⁶⁰

A similarly compelling case of overlapping, shifting, and situational identity occurred during the famous *Amistad* slave rebellion of 1839. Among the crew of the Cuban-Spanish slave ship was a sixteen-year-old cabin boy named Antonio, property of the ship's captain, Ramón Ferrer. When the African captives seized control of the ship, they killed Ferrer and the ship's cook, leaving Antonio, José Ruiz, and Pedro Montez as the only surviving crew members. With the help of the young cabin boy, the African rebels ordered Ruiz and Montez to steer the ship toward Africa. According to Ruiz, Antonio was “African by birth, but has lived a long time in Cuba . . . [The rebels] would have killed him, but he acted as an interpreter between us,

⁶⁰ Arquivo da Cúria Metropolitana do Rio de Janeiro, Santíssimo Sacramento, Freguesia da Sé, Batismos de Escravos, September 11, 1711, and December 12, 1712. For the use of these baptisms to chart collective African trends, see James H. Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441–1770* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2003), 36–37.

slavery, forming runaway communities that resembled maroon communities in the Americas.⁶⁴ At the very least, many Africans who entered the slave trade understood several languages, worshipped multiple deities, and shared broad aesthetic values. Thus, even as ties of lineage and “ethnicity” unraveled as a result of warfare and enslavement, new, broader forms of group identification emerged, even in the African context.

In the diaspora, these broad African group identifications were often expressed as “nation” or “caste.” Those categories were invented by Europeans; however, we must not neglect Africans in this larger identity-making equation. Yes, Europeans sometimes imposed categories of identity that adhered to African ports of departure—Benguela, Cacheu, Ouidah, and so on. And, yes, Europeans sometimes imposed slave identities that were more reflective of the Africans who sold slaves into the trade than of those who were the victims of the trade. But “national” categories never would have endured in the diaspora had there not been some degree of African acquiescence to them. After all, these were essentially cultural categories used by Europeans to help them distinguish (and conduct surveillance on) groups of Africans by language, religion, country marks, and the like. They were useful to Europeans only insofar as they actually reflected some coherence of group identification and self-understanding. While it is certainly important to be mindful of the differences between essential, static “ethnicities” and the more elastic categories of “nation” and “caste,” we must also recognize that “nation” and “caste” were often little more than broadened expressions of “ethnicity,” village, and kin. This can be seen clearly in the case of Domingos, whose primary identification as a native of “Nangon” persisted even as he embraced the broader meaning of the term “Mina” in his marriage and in the construction of his ritual community in Rio de Janeiro. The cultural flexibility that was a necessary response to the conditions of enslavement in Africa simply continued in the diaspora, as categories of identification expanded to meet new social realities.

It is vitally important, of course, that we also look at what people were doing. The concentric, and usually additive, nature of self-understanding in the diaspora is explicitly demonstrated in the case of Domingos Álvares. Different layers of group affiliation and “connectedness” were added over the course of a lifetime, as individuals encountered new settings and new cultural milieus. At the same time, core identifications and self-understandings often remained crucial in making sense of the new. Unfortunately, many scholars seem intent on squeezing African slaves and their descendants into boxes that define them in the singular—as either essentially African or essentially American (read: “creole”)—when, in fact, they often lived in a constantly moving, pluralistic world. As Domingos clearly demonstrates, survival was contingent upon the ability to adapt. Depending on the context and who was dictating the categories of identification, Domingos really was the chameleon-like character who emerges in the documents, shifting his identification (or having it shifted for him) to fit the circumstances. For Thereza Allada, he was Cobú. For most white

⁶⁴ For example, on refugees and the creation of new identities in Central Africa, see Beatrix Heintze, *Asilo ameaçado: Oportunidades e consequências da fuga de escravos em Angola no século XVII* (Luanda, 1995); and Joseph Miller, “Central Africa during the Era of the Slave Trade, c. 1490s–1850s,” in Linda M. Heywood, ed., *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora* (Cambridge, 2002), 46–47.

Brazilians, he was Mina. For a handful of Portuguese, he was Angolan. These interpolated categories of identification were contingent upon the situational dialogues between Domingos and those he encountered in the diaspora. At the same time, Domingos steadfastly maintained beliefs and practices from his Nangon past that sustained him no matter where he went. Those beliefs were never abandoned or shed; if anything, they were probably fortified by the experiences of marginality and suffering that often accompanied slavery, and freedom, in the diaspora.

So what does the story of Domingos Álvares tell us about Olaudah Equiano and the disputes surrounding his “identity”? The documents claiming a South Carolina origin for Equiano are similar in quality to those ascribing to Domingos an “Angolan” identity, or to the *Amistad* cabin boy Antonio a “Cuban” identity. In all three instances, each allegedly made contradictory assertions about his birthplace. Given Equiano’s own claims about his African past, as well as the other contextual evidence he lays out in his narrative linking him to Igbo land, it seems that the burden of proof falls on Carretta to explain the situational contexts that might have inspired claims of a “Carolina” birth. Instead, he takes these documents at face value, and then goes the extra step of suggesting that they may overturn everything we thought we knew about Equiano’s African past. Methodologically, this would be akin to rejecting the preponderance of evidence pointing to Domingos’s origins in the Bight of Benin in favor of the two documents that suggest he was Angolan. The more fruitful historical question is, Why was Equiano characterized as being from “Carolina” at particular moments and times?

As Paul Lovejoy has pointed out, Equiano’s godmother may well have been the one responsible for claiming his Carolina ancestry in his baptismal record. At the end of 1757, less than two years before he was baptized, Equiano noted that he “could now speak English tolerably well.” When he appeared at the baptismal font, he was probably still mastering the language. Would he have fully comprehended the concepts “Eboe” [Igbo] and “African,” let alone have known that he was from these places?⁶⁵ How could he have possibly explained his birthplace to an Anglican priest in London? Not only would the priest have had little context for understanding a particular African birthplace, but Equiano’s growing comfort in the Anglo world meant that he “appeared” to be something other than African. Claiming that he was born in South Carolina was likely a matter of expediency and cultural mollification on the part of his godmother, who, incidentally, would later vouch for his African past, noting that he spoke only a few words of English upon his arrival in England.

The entry that corresponds to Equiano on the muster roll of the ship *Racehorse* lists him as “Gustavus Weston,” born in “So. Carolina.” According to Carretta, Equiano was an “able seaman,” receiving “a premium wage for a voyage of high adventure.” Among other tasks, he assisted Dr. Charles Irving in experiments with distilling seawater. Yet Carretta also concedes that Equiano served as Irving’s “personal

⁶⁵ Alex Byrd argues that even as an adult, Equiano was “confounded” by the meaning of Eboe. See Alexander X. Byrd, “Eboe, Country, Nation and Gustavus Vassa’s *Interesting Narrative*,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (2006): 134. Likewise, James Sidbury argues that Equiano’s sense of himself as “African” coincided with his “true” conversion to Christianity as an adult. Sidbury, *Becoming African in America: Race and Nation in the Early Black Atlantic* (Oxford, 2007), 39–65.

servant.”⁶⁶ The ship was deeply embedded in a North Atlantic world, an Arctic expedition far from African realities. Lovejoy suggests that Equiano may have asserted a South Carolina birthplace in an effort to achieve some sense of “British respectability” on a ship with such lofty scientific aspirations. Or perhaps he was trying to emphasize his role as an “able seaman” versus his role as Irving’s “personal servant.” Among the European-dominated crew, Equiano’s racial difference and his subservience to Irving no doubt served as powerful visual evidence of his social status. Equiano would have been acutely aware of the ways these silent cues could shape attitudes and behaviors toward him. The *pro forma* chore of responding to the muster call would have been fraught with self-reflexive anxiety. Should he embrace his African past, amplifying his role as “personal servant” and perhaps even “slave,” or should he rise to the expectation that a well-paid “able seaman” was more likely to be American-born? It seems he opted for the latter. It is also possible, of course, that these identities were interpolated, thrust on him by a lazy or negligent scribe.⁶⁷ Either way, just as with Domingos Álvares’s admission of “Angolan” identity, there are moments in every life when it is easier to adapt to social expectations of identity than it is to adhere to “realities.”

Even if one rejects the methodological challenges to Carretta’s claims, there is still ample evidence in Equiano’s narrative that he was from Igbo land.⁶⁸ Carretta suggests that Equiano’s description of his Igbo childhood is a fabrication, but there are simply too many Igbo-language words in the narrative for Equiano to have invented them all. Some of these words, such as the name of his homeland, “Essaka,” are simple labels he could have learned from people outside of Africa.⁶⁹ But others, including the words for ritual scarification (“embrenché” = mgburichi) and diviner/healers (“Ah-affoe-way-cah” = Ofo-nwanchi), embodied broader, culturally specific concepts that were not easily articulated for an English readership.⁷⁰ Equiano went to some pains to explain these concepts, framing them comparatively in an English epistemology. These uneasy acts of translation point to much deeper understandings of Igbo language and culture that could only be learned through immersion.

Another powerful clue, also related to language, was Equiano’s longstanding anxiety about his sister, who was enslaved along with him but ultimately became separated from him on the African coast. More than six years after his enslavement, he was still mourning her loss. While working on board his master’s ship in the Mediterranean, Equiano went ashore at Gibraltar and recounted his story to a group of people. Immediately, a man responded that he knew where Equiano’s sister could be found. Equiano’s “heart leaped for joy” as the man led him to a “black young

⁶⁶ Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, 147–149, and Carretta, “Response to Paul Lovejoy’s ‘Autobiography and Memory,’” 118.

⁶⁷ Altogether, three different musters were taken during the journey of the *Racehorse*. In the first two, no birthplace is listed for Equiano. Only in the third does the “So. Carolina” delineation appear. In all three musters, however, the purser inaccurately recorded Gustavus Vassa’s last name—once as “Feston” and twice as “Weston.” At the very least, the purser was inconsistent in his recordkeeping. Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, 147–148.

⁶⁸ For the most trenchant critique of Carretta’s treatment of Igbo, see Lovejoy, “Autobiography and Memory.”

⁶⁹ Carretta argues that “the possible Igbo words Equiano uses are so few (fewer than ten) that he could easily have learned them outside of Africa.” Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, 9.

⁷⁰ On the Igbo terms and their meanings, see Catherine Obianju Acholonu, *The Igbo Roots of Olaudah Equiano: An Anthropological Research* (Owerri, 1989).

woman who was so like my sister, that, at first sight, I really thought it was her: but I was quickly undeceived; and, on talking to her, I found her to be of another nation.”⁷¹ Here two layers of the African past must be erased if one is to sustain the argument that Equiano was born in South Carolina. First, one must reject the existence of his sister and his haunting memories of her loss. Second, one must conclude that when he described the woman as being “of another nation,” he meant a non-African nation. There seems to be no other way to read his statement, other than “on talking to her [*in my language*], I found her to be of another [*African*] nation.” In short, if we believe Carretta’s suggestion of Equiano’s Carolina provenance, the entire Gibraltar episode must have been an invention.

Interestingly, by the end of his narrative, Equiano embraced a sense of belonging to a “country” that included not just Igbo, but all Africans and slaves. In 1776, just three years after the Arctic expedition, he was again employed by Dr. Irving, this time to oversee the establishment of sugar plantations along the Mosquito Coast of Nicaragua. In order to obtain slaves for the new plantations, Irving and Equiano traveled to Jamaica, where they boarded a “Guineaman.” According to Equiano, he “chose them all of my own countrymen, some of whom came from Lybia.”⁷² Here “countrymen” seems to include Africans writ large.⁷³ Still later, in expressing his desire to go to West Africa to become a missionary, Equiano again writes of Africa as his “country” and Africans as his “countrymen.”⁷⁴ As Alex Byrd argues, Equiano’s uses of “country” and “nation” in his narrative are “tentative and uncertain,” variously describing ethnicity, language, race, local spaces, and, in the end, even continental space.⁷⁵

These apparent inconsistencies reflect the competing social forces that buffeted Equiano as he moved across the Atlantic world. As with Domingos and Antonio, Equiano’s identification with multiple “countries” was not so much a series of positive affirmations of individual identity as it was a persistent grasping for social inclusion. To be sure, some Africans found new and enduring communities of belonging in the slave societies of the Americas, but for those whose lives were defined by the perpetual motion of the Atlantic world, “country” often remained an elusive, contradictory, and ill-defined ideal, a new way of asserting group cohesion and communal identity, but also a marker of profound alienation and instability. Thus, even as we recognize the flexibility, creativity, and resilience that Africans displayed in moving from one identity to the next, we should also recognize that each of these shifts represented a painful rupture with the past.

Instead of analyzing the various disjunctures of African identity as products of

⁷¹ Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano; or, Gustavus Vassa, the African: Written by Himself*, 8th ed. (Norwich, 1794), 89–90.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 307. Lovejoy uses this passage to argue that Equiano chose Igbo speakers for the plantations; however, the reference to Libya calls this conclusion into question. Lovejoy, “Autobiography and Memory,” 332.

⁷³ Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, 184.

⁷⁴ Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 335. James Sidbury convincingly argues that Equiano’s “African” identity was closely tied to his Christian awakening. For Equiano, “African” identity centered on a shared Christian past interrupted by the fragmentation and dispersal of diaspora. The reunification of “Africans” could be achieved only through Christian redemption. Sidbury, *Becoming African in America*, 39–65.

⁷⁵ Byrd, “Eboe, Country, Nation,” 123–148.

“inconsistency” or “invention,” perhaps scholars should embrace them on their own terms, as accurate reflections of the social instability and trauma that characterized the histories of so many Africans in the Atlantic world.⁷⁶ Approaches to identity that emphasize Enlightenment-style individualism over kith and kin, and chronological, narrative order over starts and stops, simply do not suffice in telling the histories of many Atlantic Africans. Autobiographical narratives such as Equiano’s are exceptional in that they exist at all, to say nothing of their revelations about Africa, slavery, and black life in the Atlantic. That such documents of African lives survive in European languages, in representative forms such as autobiography, following linear, chronological arcs, should raise suspicions about the very production of history. In order to accommodate the Western genre of autobiographical narrativity, Equiano not only had to adhere to particular literary patterns and plots for an English-speaking audience, he also had to obey Western conceptions of individual, “self” history that were representative of other Africans but not necessarily constitutive of them. In this way, the act of writing “self”-biography only reinforced his alienation from group ties of “country” and “nation.” For Atlantic Africans who spoke and thought primarily in Kimbundu or Fon-Gbe or even Igbo, we can imagine not only a very different language in the telling of a life story, but perhaps even different ideas about history itself, alternative epistemologies of violence, rupture, erasure of kinship, and the quest for communal redemption.

For some, including Domingos Álvares, the Atlantic represented a series of social deaths and rebirths, a repeating circuit of dislocation and dismemberment, marked by an unceasing desire to reconstitute the self through family, friends, and community. His was a history without an end, quite literally a feedback loop of subjection and social subjectivities. Even for Equiano, despite the tidy conclusion of his narrative—his strong assertions of Episcopalian and abolitionist sentiments, his marriage to an Englishwoman, and so on—other parts of his story remain tragically unfinished. The confines of the traditional historical narrative do not easily reconcile memories of lost kin, like those of his sister. Nor do they easily accommodate the chronic vulnerability and disequilibrium that plagued many Africans as they attempted to realize themselves in new communities, new “nations,” new “countries.”⁷⁷ Instead, most histories seek spatial and temporal closure, to render Africans as “resistant” ethnics who bravely fought slavery and colonialism from the barri-

⁷⁶ In thinking about the fragmented histories of Atlantic Africans, I build on the provocative work of Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), esp. 202–207.

⁷⁷ In addition to the experience of losing his sister, Equiano recounts other filiative losses in his journeys through the Atlantic world. For example, shortly after his original enslavement, he was purchased by an African woman whose family made him “forget” that he was a slave, treating him as though he were “to be adopted.” Reflecting on the moment he was kidnapped and taken away from this family, Equiano captured the cruel promise of social redemption and the horror of instability: “Thus, at the very moment I dreamed of the greatest happiness, I found myself most miserable and it seemed as if fortune wished to give me this taste of joy only to render the reverse more poignant. The change I now experienced was as painful as it was sudden and unexpected. It was a change indeed, from a state of bliss to a scene which is inexpressible by me . . . and wherein such instances of hardship and cruelty continually occurred, as I can never reflect on but with horror.” Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 42–43. See also Equiano’s description of his connection to a “benevolent boy” who treated Equiano as if he “had been his brother.” The two boys were “very happy in frequently seeing each other” for several months in 1761, until Equiano was once again taken to sea. *Ibid.*, 98–100.

cedes, or as “finished” Americans who creatively adapted their African pasts to Christian, democratic, and revolutionary principles.

What is ultimately needed is an ontological narrativity that challenges the unified closures and singular “moral meanings” that are so common to African Atlantic histories. We should heed the earlier calls by Hayden White and Dominick La Capra to question the apparent unity and order in representations of historical “reality.”⁷⁸ Indeed, precisely because their temporal “realities” were often so unstable, the histories of Atlantic Africans represent a sort of *sine qua non* of discontinuity that must be acknowledged in narrative representation. It was through these discontinuous narratives that Atlantic Africans attempted to construct new social identifications, incorporating the destabilizing effects of “time, space, and analytical relationality—each of which is excluded from the categorical or essentialist approach to identity.”⁷⁹ Thus, the disjointed, fragmented “stories” of Atlantic African lives are key to unlocking the contingent meanings of documentary signifiers such as “Cobû,” “Mina,” and “Igbo.” These signifiers mean very little outside of the contexts that produced them; yet in their convolutions and contradictions across individual lifetimes, they are documentary guideposts that offer historians a glimpse of an alternative narrative of Atlantic history, one that recasts the meaning of “entanglement” to include those people who were literally “trapped” in a cycle of chaotic, episodic histories, perpetually grasping for self-understanding through social belonging. To be sure, Atlantic Africans made important contributions in forging the interconnected, mutually influencing entanglements of the Atlantic world; yet they were also often ensnared by them—through slavery, through racism, through colonial subjectivity.

Africa survived in the Atlantic, but it was an Africa that could be muted, hidden, or even erased, in accordance with given sociocultural realities. Unfortunately for historians and anthropologists, these shifts were often deeply personal, reflecting the dialectic between the individual and his or her environment. Although we will continue to chart identity in collective fashion, a careful examination of individual life histories might better reveal the actual processes by which people retained old identities and added new ones. Moreover, multiple life studies would reveal the divergence of experiences among individuals, even those who claimed common group identification. By charting identity changes over the individual life span, we can focus more clearly on the dynamic processes that resulted in group formation and perhaps abandon the stale debates that focus on “ethnic” and “national” signifiers as ends unto themselves.⁸⁰ At the same time, we might render an Atlantic history that is more inclusive of African forms of kinship, memory, and epistemology, moving beyond debates over European “cores,” “peripheries,” and American exceptionalism, to-

⁷⁸ On the desire of scholars to impose “moral meaning” on historical narrative, see Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Content and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, 1987), 21. For critiques of historical “reality” and the importance of recognizing the discontinuity between events and narrative representation, see White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1978), and Dominick La Capra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1983).

⁷⁹ My suggestion that narrative creates social experience, expectation, and memory draws heavily from Margaret R. Somers, “The Narrative Constitutions of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach,” *Theory and Society* 23, no. 5 (1994): 605–649, quote from 621.

⁸⁰ This call for a data bank of biographies echoes Lovejoy’s. See Lovejoy, “The African Diaspora.”

ward a fuller consideration of Africa's "entangled" role in the non-linear history of the Atlantic world.⁸¹

⁸¹ Here I endorse the position adopted by Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra in his December 2007 *AHR* Exchange with Eliga Gould. As in much of his work, Cañizares-Esguerra makes a strong case for integrating Spanish and Latin American ideas into "core" Anglo-American national narratives. In this way, he seeks to interrupt the ahistorical, Anglo-centered exceptionalism that defines contemporary understandings of American history. By challenging the Western form of "self"-driven, chronological narrative, I am suggesting a similar reconfiguration that more readily accommodates African forms of kinship, memory, and worldview in the "entanglements" of the Atlantic. See Cañizares-Esguerra, "The Core and Peripheries of Our National Narratives: A Response from IH-35," *American Historical Review* 112, no. 5 (December 2007): 1423–1431.

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