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NEW WORLD REPATRIATES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The phenomenon of black slavery was an established institution in Brazil from the sixteenth century to the last decades of the nineteenth century. The Portuguese used African slave labour in their sugar farms throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The blacks were practically all introduced as slaves, Brazil being until 1888, a slave-holding state. The term New World Repatriates is used in this work to refer to the various slave repatriates majorly from Brazil and Cuba. By far the most numerous were the ex-slaves who came to Lagos when they gained their manumission or were deported from Bahia (Brazil) due to their supposed involvement in slave revolts. The work examines the labyrinths of origin, their conditions in Brazil as well as their return to Lagos littoral. These New World Repatriates left Brazil because the society was hostile to them and besides, they felt it offered them little or no opportunity towards achieving respectable positions socially, economically or politically.

Keywords: New World Repatriates, Black Slavery, Brazil, Manumission, Lagos Littoral.

Introduction

The term New World Repatriates is used in this work to refer to the various slave repatriates majorly from Brazil and Cuba. By far the most numerous were the ex-slaves who came to Lagos when they gained their manumission or were deported from Bahia (Brazil) due to their supposed involvement in slave revolts. The work examines the labyrinths of origin, their conditions in Brazil as well as their return to Lagos littoral.

The Labyrinths of Origin

The phenomenon of black slavery was an established institution in Brazil from the sixteenth century to the last decades of the nineteenth century. The Portuguese used African slave labour in their sugar farms throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The blacks were practically all introduced as slaves, Brazil being, until 1888, a slave-holding state, (DonaId Pierson, 1942:30). The first known landing of slaves from Africa took place in 1552, twelve years after the introduction of sugar and in 1580. On the eve of Brazils sugar boom, there were already 10,000 Africans in Brazil, (Phillip S. Foner, 1975: 170). In the seventeenth century, more than 44,000 Negroes were imported annually, a figure that grew to 55,000 per year in the following century (Phillip S. Foner, 1975). This article examines how New World Repatriates came to be in Brazil.

The slave traffic to Bahia can be divided into four periods, (Pierre Verger, 1976:1), the Guinea cycle, during the second half of the sixteenth century; the Angola and Congo cycle in the seventeenth century; the Mina Coast cycle, during the first three quarters of the eighteenth century; and the Bight of Benin cycle between 1 770 and 1 850, including the period of the clandestine slave trade. These were the places of origin of Bahia slaves of the Dahomeans, called Gege in Brazil, occurred during the last two periods. Similarly, that of the Nago-Yoruba took place mostly during the fourth period. Moreover, the Mineros preferred "Minas," exported principally from Whydah, both because they were stronger and more vigorous than the Bantu, and because they were believed to have almost magical powers of discovering gold, (C.R. Boxer, 1962: 175). Obviously, the incessant wars connected with the fall of Ardra and the rise of Dahomey in the early eighteenth century guaranteed a substantial supply of slaves, although the fighting often interrupted the slave trade. The bulk of the slaves classified as "Minas" were evidently from the Yoruba linguistic group, being Nagos and Geges; but the term also included the Twi-speaking Fanti-Ashanti from further west, (C.R. Boxer, 1962: 176).

The strong predominance of the Yoruba and their manners and customs in Bahia could therefore be explained by their recent and massive arrival; their ability to resist the cultural influences of their masters might have been due to the presence among them of many prisoners of war of high social class and also of priests, who, aware of the value of their institutions, were firmly attached to the precepts of their religion, (Pierre Verger, 1976: 1).
In addition, the contrast between the origins of Africans brought to the different Brazilian states is graphically shown in documents such as the report sent by Governor Count Da Ponte to Lisbon in 1807:

> This colony (Bahia) through the production of tobacco which is peculiar to it, enjoys the exclusive privilege of trading with the Mina Coast, resulting last year in the importation of 8,037 slaves of Gege, Ussa, Nago, etc. origin, the most warlike nations of the coast of Africa; consequently there are risks of revolt, (Pierre Verger, 1976: 6).

The decline in the power of Oyo Empire and its inability to protect Porto Novo from regular Dahomey depredations interrupted slave supply to the western ports of Whydah and Porto Novo, both of which declined as major slave ports. In consequence, Lagos emerged as the leading slave port on the Slave Coast. From the first decade of the 19th century, the slave market of Lagos began to thrive, overshadowing in importance the trade in the neighbouring ports of Whydah to the Benin River. Moreover, the capture and movement of the slave cargoes to the European trading ship on the coast were kept in the local hands. Similarly, the European traders were restricted to the coast and periodic attempts made by the Europeans to break through this monopoly by the local middlemen turned out to be perilous. Apart from the local inhabitants, Hausa merchants also participated actively in the Lagos slave trade by the beginning of the century. In addition, traders also came from the northern Yoruba area where incipient warfare was already supplying the coastal markets with large number of slaves. Accordingly, a contemporary European account reported that about 1808, the agents of the Alafin brought for sale at Lagos over 20,000 war captives from the Mahi country (Abiola Dosunmu Elegbede-Fernandez, 1992: 10). Thus, Domingo Martinez, described as 'the most notorious Brazilian in the Bight of Benin' and a friend of Akitoye, was said to 'have made a

fortune from the Lagos slave trade within a few years (Abiola Dosunmu Elegbede-Fernandez, 1992: 6).

However, in 1848, Francis de Castelnau, the French Consul in Bahia, distinguished among the slaves in Brazil:

> The Nago who probably form nine-tenths of the slaves in Bahia and are recognized by three deep transversal lines tattooed on each cheek. Nearly all of them embarked at Onim (Lagos) or at Porto Novo. The hausas, most of whom are used in Bahia as black palanquin bearers; they nearly all come through Onim. The Gege or Dahomeans who form a powerful nation and are quite numerously represented in Bahia; they previously embarked at Whydah but today they come mostly through Porto Novo, (Pierre Verger, 1976: 6).

African Diaspora: The Conditions in Brazil

The nineteenth century Brazilian society largely influenced the New World Repatriates and determined their economic dispositions as well as their social aspirations when they returned to Africa. "A hell for blacks, a purgatory for whites, and a paradise for Mulattoes" - such was a popular Portuguese characterization of Brazil in the second half of the seventeenth century, (C.R. Boxer, 1962: 1). Also, writing on the conditions of New World Repatriates in the nineteenth century Brazil, Nina Rodrigues observed that:

> The African who was imported in the slave trade against his will into Brazil did not integrate himself into the life of the country, did not nationalize himself and did not adopt Brazil as his new country. In Brazil, black Africans remained separated from the general population in the midst of which they lived and worked, so as to withdraw and limit their circle to small special groups from the various African nations, (Pierre Verger, 1976: 429).

Writing on the situation in Brazil, S.Y. Boadi-Siaw in his article "Brazilian Returnees of West Africa," argued that:

The Brazil that these people were leaving provided both reasons for their departure and the background for an understanding of their actions and attitudes. ... The Brazilian society from which they came was a stratified one based on birth, race and wealth, (S.Y. Boadi-Siaw, 1982:293).

Furthermore, direct relations between white and New World Repatriates were conditioned by the system of latifundia and by the scarcity of white women. With regards to the former, the Brazilian feudalism was a combination of aristocracy, democracy, and even anarchy, (Phillip S, Foner, 1975:173). The Nobility, according to Freyre, showed as great a racial admixture as the bourgeoisie or the masses. With regards to miscegenation, he does not idealize this or pretend it was a consequence of some high principle. Besides, he speaks of the miscibility of the Portuguese, which placed sexual desire above concern over racial difference; he speaks of lust for black women and not of the lust of African women for white men, (Phillip S, Foner, 1975:173). In his book, *African Diaspora and the Black Experience in New World Slavery*, O.E. Uya, wrote that:

> The slave experience in Latin America thus varied from region to region. In much of central America and South America, slaves were gradually assimilated through the process of concubinage, miscegenation, and general miscibility. ... In the case of Bahia and Rio de Janeiro provinces of Brazil, slaves managed to create African-based social and religious institutions, (O.E. Uya, 1992:12).

Thus, as a result of manumission and self-purchase, the free blacks came to form a substantial part of the Brazilian population. According to the first federal census of Brazil in 1872, coloured people constituted 78 per cent of the population, (Phillip S. Foner, 1975: 179). Out of the total estimate of 3,817,000, 2,515,000 had African blood, (S.Y. Boadi-Siaw, 1982: 294). In 1822 in Maranhao, one of the major centres of black concentration, more than three-fourths of the mulattoes had been emancipated as against no more than one-eighth of the black population, (Phillip S. Foner, 1975: 179).

Also, in Minas Gerais, another centre of concentration, more than three-fourths of the mulattoes had been emancipated as against one-sixth of the blacks, (Phillip S. Foner, 1975: 179).

With the discovery of gold in the seventeenth century, large numbers of slaves were employed as miners. However, the simultaneous decline of the sugar economy caused many planters either to sell their slaves or to hire these slaves out to prospectors or mine owners. In the Brazilian society, slaves were cooks, bakers, washermen and washerwomen, carpenters, sailors, water carriers, porters, sweets sellers, cattle herders and so on. In the period up to 1888, according to Boadi-Siaw, the slaves formed the bottom section of the Brazilian society, (S.Y. Boadi-Siaw, 1975: 295).

As slaves, Afro-South Americans in colonial Brazil were divided into urban and rural labourers and miners. In the urban areas, they served basically as domestic servants. Besides, there were slave workers in the arts and crafts, and slave vendors. Gilberto Freyre draws attention to:

> The deep difference between the house or sobrado slave and the street slave. The two types were clearly differentiated; those who were kept for the interior service of the house and those who were used for work in the street; the first were in contact with the white masters of the house and the other exposed individually to the degrading contacts of the streets, (Gilberto Freyre, 1963: 185).

A slave advertisement in a Brazilian newspaper, in the nineteenth century, ran as follows:

> For sale one slave girl, Nago Nation, without vices, knows how to wash and to cook; the interested party can enquire at the shop of Mr. Antonio Francisco de Oliveira, on Novo do Commercao Street; at the Barnabe depot, it can be known who is selling a handsome Nago Negro, young, palanquin porter, named Fortuna, who is in Ajuda prison, (Pierre Verger, 1975: 440-441).

However, the reasons for the sale of house slaves were not ׀ unimportant for the masters who were to live in permanent contact with them. On the other hand, it could be noted that certain advertisements did **not** hide the sometimes difficult and touchy character of some Afro-South Americans. Moreover, most of the escaped slaves were those who-lived by street selling for their masters. The nature of the activities of these slave street vendors was captured by the advertisers as follows;

> A Nago Negress by the name Carolina has disappeared from the home of Manoel da Costa Lima on the third of this month; she was going to sell water in a keg; good looking, stout and light skinned (fula) with marks of her country on her face, three very small ones on each side; she was dressed in a calico shirt, blue blouse and also blue cloth from the coast (of Africa); whoever supplies information to the stores of Santos Moreira and Brother will be well rewarded, (Pierre Verger,1975: 443).

On the sale of slaves, the prices they fetched naturally varied in accordance with their age, sex, physical condition, and the use for which they were intended, (C.R. Boxer,1962: 7).
On the daily life of slaves, a greater number of slave labourers were destined for work in the plantations which formed the basis of the Brazilian economy. According to Boadi-Siaw, a nineteenth century observer said:

> On the plantation, everything or almost everything is the product of the black man: it is he who has built the houses; he has made the bricks, sawed the boards, channelled the water, etc.; the roads and most of the machines in engenho (mill) are, along with the lands cultivated, the products of his industry. He has also raised cattle, pigs and other animals needed on the Faxenda (Plantation), (S.Y. Boadi-Siaw, 1975: 294).

In Brazil**,** slave labour was supplied by Africans for the production of coffee, sugar and cotton. The needs of the plantation and its inhabitants occupied slaves from four in the morning until ten or eleven at night during certain period, (S.Y. Boadi-Siaw, 1975: 294). At harvest time and when the mills were grinding the cane, work on a plantation was sometimes continued round the clock and otherwise lasted at least from dawn to dusk, (C.R. Boxer, 1962: 7). Plantation slaves had a breakfast of "broth or honey when there is some" (C.R. Boxer, 1962: 7). Only short breaks for early lunch, snacks or coffee or cachaca (a strong drink made from sugar cane), and the evening meal, all taken at the place of work, provided some rest, S.Y. Boadi-Siaw, 1975: 294).

In the plantations, discipline was enforced with severity which often Regenerated into sadistic cruelty where the infliction of corporal punishment was involved. In his work, *The Golden Age of Brazil*¸ C.R. Boxer, observed:

> These sadistic excesses were naturally avoided on the better-run plantations, where the recognised punishment "was not to beat them with a stick, nor to pelt them with stones and tiles, but, when a slave deserves it, to tie him to a cart and flog him. After being well flogged, he should be pricked with a sharp

> razor or knife, and the wounds rubbed with salt, lemon juice and urine after which he should be put in chains for some days, (C.R. Boxer, 1962: 8).

Brutal of punishment were commonly employed on the plantation: the horse whip, wooden or iron stocks in which arms and legs could be held, iron collars put on neck, chains and iron weights that could be attached to the feet of slaves even while they worked, (Stanley J. Stein, 1970: 134-138). Some planters "for trifling infraction threw their slaves alive into furnaces, or killed them in various Barbarous and inhuman ways" (C.R. Boxer, 1962: 8). There were laws in Brazil and the United States. Despite the supposed little difference by some scholars, (Frank Tannenbaum, 1947:93), both societies had laws protecting the slave against murder, mistreatment or overwork by his master, (Kenneth M. Stampp, 1956: 192). The question for determination should have been //nether the law was actually enforced in order to intercede between the master and the slave or on behalf of the latter. Obviously, in the United States the evidence is not convincing, (Carl N. Degler, 1973: 345). If there was little difference in the conception of the slave in Brazilian and United States law, there was also little difference in the law's supposed protection of the slave's humanity. According to Henry Koster, an English planter in Brazil, in the early nineteenth century, the Brazilian government was a weak reed on which to lean for anything, much less for control over members of the ruling slaveholding class, (Carl N. Degler, 1973: 345-346).

Although there were laws in Brazil limiting the use of the whip and fixing the number of lashes at one time, John Rugendas, a German traveller, wrote in 1835:

> these laws have no force and probably may be unknown to the majority of the slaves and masters; on the other hand, the authorities are so removed that in actuality the punishment of the slave for a true or imaginary infraction or the bad treatment resulting from the caprice and the cruelty of the master, only encounters limits in the fear of losing the slave by death, by flight or as a consequence of public opinion. But these considerations are never sufficient to impede the evil and it is inescapable that examples of cruelty are not lacking, which result in the mutilation and death of slaves, (Carl N. Degler, 1973: 345-346).

In fact, many slaves worked in the homes of their masters. These slaves, de qanno, as they were called, formed an elite group among the slaves. The ganho slaves did not have as difficult a life as might be imagined – they often enjoyed a great deal of freedom. The ganho slaves often had the opportunity to earn more than was due their masters, and over a period of time they used this money to purchase their freedom. However, the ganho .worked and paid a weekly stipend to their owners. City slaves also had more opportunities for knowing their rights under the laws which regulated such self-purchase than their counterparts on the isolated plantations under the control of the all-powerful patriarchs, (S.Y, Boadi-Siaw, 1975:296). Brazil continued to be, by and large**,** "a hell for blacks" (C.R. Boxer, 1962: 9).

In recent years, however, several Brazilian students of race relations, particularly those centred at the University of Sao Paulo, have questioned the widely held view that there is no colour or racial prejudice in Brazil, only class prejudice, and have demonstrated that colour and race prejudice, as distinct from class prejudice, is widespread in Brazil even though it may

take a different form from that in the United States, (PhilIip S. Foner, 1975:183). Carl N. Degler in his study of *Neither Black nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States* subscribes to this view point, (PhilIip S. Foner, 1975:183). He further observed that "the physical treatment of slaves in Brazil may well have been harsher than that in the United States" (PhilIip S.Foner, 1975:179). Religious endorsement of these racist concepts was easy to obtain since even the Catholic Church held that the black people suffered "infected blood" (Abdias Do Nascimento, 1977:56).

The planters generally regarded the African as an inferior being who had to be harshly disciplined, closely supervised and constantly kept under surveillance; otherwise, he would not work since he was "by nature the enemy of all regular work." (S.Y. Boadi-Siaw,1975: 295). As Boadi-Siaw puts it, "the slave not only .worked hard and was harshly treated, but he also was the object of racial prejudice and abuse" (S.Y. Boadi-Siaw, 1975: 295). Although some planters and town dwellers did not the prejudices, but the general belief in the inferiority of the African and determined the harsh treatment meted out to the black ender, the unwillingness of managers of non-agricultural industries to train them for employment and the unwillingness of the government to suppress discriminatory practices or mitigate the cruel treatment given to African slaves (S.Y. Boadi-Siaw, 1975: 295).

Some New World Repatriates came to West Africa before the nineteenth century. However, significant numbers began to arrive the Lagos-Dahomey axis in the first decades of the nineteenth century. The connections between Brazil and Africa were so close in the nineteenth century that some slaves, after they earned their freedom or otherwise gained manumission, elected to return to Africa. So intimate was the connection between Brazil and Africa that until 1905, at least almost twenty years after abolition ships, plied between Bahia and Lagos, "repatriating nostalgic, emancipated Negroes and returning with West Coast products much prized by Africans and their descendants in Brazil" (Carl N. Degler, 1965: 355).

In conclusion, these New World Repatriates left Brazil because the society was hostile to them and besides, they felt it offered them little or no opportunity towards achieving respectable positions socially, economically or politically. Generally, Afro-South American returnees to Lagos made an important contribution to the development of Lagos in the nineteenth century. They took with them vestiges of their stay in Brazil which they revealed in the way they viewed things, in their social aspirations and economic activities in Lagos.

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