



Linda Marinda Heywood, John Kelly Thornton. *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585-1660*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xiii + 370 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-77065-1; \$22.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-77922-7.

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Central West Africans in Diaspora

Linda M. Heywood and John K. Thornton first conceived of writing *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585-1660* as a way to exploit newly available data from the DuBois Institute and Cambridge University Press on the trade and transportation of slaves. As they studied these sources, they realized that the information these databases contained provided important support for the theory Ira Berlin developed in the mid-1990s that an “Atlantic Creole” culture developed in West Central Africa (the Portuguese colony of Angola, the kingdom of Kongo and, to a lesser extent, Ndongo, Matamba, and Loango).[1] In this region cultural contacts with the Portuguese dating from the mid-fifteenth century led to cultural exchange and syncretism in which an Africanized form of Catholic Christianity became widespread. Africans in this region also became well acquainted with European culture and technology and freely incorporated those aspects of them they found useful into their own societies and cultures. The result was a hybrid, Creole society that, while ravaged by internal conflicts that the Portuguese fomented and exploited wherever possible in order to further their goal of creating a colony to use as a secure base for exporting slaves and accessing African mineral and agricultural wealth, was also vibrant and culturally inventive, the very opposite of a “people without history.” African rulers were often at odds with the Portuguese, and increasingly so during the course of the seventeenth century as Portuguese rapacity and territorial ambitions became clear, but just as often were allied with them and willing to sell them slaves. At the same time, a Luso-African society of Portuguese inhabiting Africa, and their often mulatto descendants further spread Portuguese influence through their many interactions with Africans, including acting as advisors to African rulers. It was from this Atlantic Creole society that what Heywood and Thornton, again

following Berlin, call the “Charter Generation” of slaves exported to the Americas derived. Prior to the creation of large-scale plantations beginning in the later seventeenth century, it was this Charter Generation that dominated among the slaves of the New World, and it was their creolized culture that set the pattern for slave society. This remained the case until the new generations of slaves imported for the plantations and drawn largely from regions of West Africa outside the limits of this Atlantic Creole cultural region in Africa overwhelmed the Charter Generation and created a new, much less creolized African American culture except in those areas of the Americas where the absence of plantations allowed the cultural patterns the Charter Generation established to continue to provide the dominant model for African American culture.

Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585-1660 is in a way two books (not surprising given the dual authorship), although the two halves of the book are logically connected by the central argument. In the first half of the book, the authors use data drawn primarily from Portuguese sources to delineate the nature of the Atlantic Creole society in West Central Africa and the ways in which the Portuguese used a wide variety of pretexts to make war on the indigenous African polities they could safely define as enemies of themselves and their allies, and to incite internal unrest in those they could not openly attack, such as their erstwhile ally, the kingdom of Kongo. Even as Portuguese missionaries worked to evangelize the often receptive Africans, representatives of the Portuguese crown in Africa realized that they could never satisfy the demands of the Portuguese colonies in the New World for slaves, or of the Portuguese crown and Portuguese merchants in Africa or Portugal for the profits from slaves, if the only sources of these valuable “pieces” (slaves) was

peaceful trade. Hence despite the stated desire of the Portuguese rulers to obtain slaves and evangelize peacefully, their representatives in Africa usually did exactly the opposite, and were successful in part due to the political disunity within Africa that allowed them to pit Africans against each other. In particular the long-standing rivalry between the Kongolese rulers and those of Ndongo blossomed with the aid of the Portuguese into a protracted struggle in the middle decades of the seventeenth century that yielded a bonanza of slaves for the Portuguese (although the volume of slaves exported, rarely in excess of 10,000 per year prior to 1660, came nowhere near the numbers that would flow across the Atlantic during the Plantation Generation that followed). Hence the first three chapters are devoted to establishing the existence of the Atlantic Creole culture and demonstrate how and why this region became the primary source of African slaves in the Atlantic world prior to 1660.

The second half of the book shifts gears rather radically, in geographical focus, sources, and societies. Whereas the first chapters are drawn from Portuguese sources and examine Portuguese activities in Africa, the second set of chapters relies on English and Dutch sources and examines the foundation of African American communities not in Iberian America but rather in the Dutch and English Caribbean and North American colonies. The authors implicitly justify this shift in focus and sources by establishing convincingly that the Dutch and English were obtaining their slaves partly through licit but mostly through illicit means from the same regions of Africa as the Portuguese—often by preying upon Portuguese shipments of slaves intended for Portuguese colonies. Thus, most of the slaves carried to the Anglo-Dutch colonies prior to 1660 came from the same Atlantic Creole regions in Africa that supplied the bulk of slaves sent to Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the New World. The transition in the book is still jarring, however, as the Portuguese Atlantic is abandoned rather abruptly for that of the Anglo-Dutch. Even as the authors make a strong case for the primacy, distinctive trajectory, and cultural importance of the Charter Generation in the English and Dutch colonies, the question arises as to whether a similar case could be made regarding the Iberian world or if the histories and historiographies of the two regions are too distinct even for such comparisons to be attempted.

The issue of whether a Charter Generation of creolized African slaves more familiar and comfortable with European culture dominated among the early generations of slaves in the New World is important not only in its own right, but also because it speaks to controver-

sies central to the historiography of the origins and ideological roots of slavery in the New World and the nature of African American culture. Scholars have been deeply divided over the issue of whether African slavery was rooted primarily in European economic considerations or European racism, and whether Europeans always regarded Africans as fit only to be slaves, and African slavery as always hereditary, permanent, and legally different from other forms of servitude to which Europeans could be reduced, such as serfdom or indentured servitude. The authors argue that it was only in the later seventeenth century that the most negative views of Africans and the harshest interpretations of African slave status came to dominate in the minds of English and Dutch colonists. By the same token they assert that it was no accident that the transition from much more nuanced and positive views of Africans and less severe terms of slavery to the darker views and harsher regime coincided closely with the transition in many colonies from the Charter Generation to the Plantation Generation. They demonstrate that European views of Africans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were drawn largely from eyewitness accounts of Europeans in Africa that, while often critical of some aspects of African societies and cultures, also found much to praise and acknowledged that at least some Africans were Christians, for Europeans a necessary attribute to achieving truly civilized status. Moreover, the Charter Generation slaves were usually Christian and this and their greater familiarity with European culture allowed them to navigate with greater success in colonial societies and in a surprisingly large number of cases achieve their freedom and, occasionally, even a measure of prosperity. The Europeans in turn were both more comfortable with these creolized Africans and more inclined to treat them humanely and to manumit them after a term of service which, while always longer than that of indentured servants, was not automatically permanent or hereditary. This proclivity toward moderation also stemmed from the Europeans' as yet unsettled conceptualization of Africans and of slavery—the authors contend that until the end of the seventeenth century the two were not automatically linked in colonists' minds. Thus, they imply, without definitively stating it to be the case, that redefinition of Africans as always slaves, and of slavery as always African, hereditary, and permanent, was a direct result of a new, plantation regime that required a new, harsher kind of slavery and a new type of slave, less familiar, and thus more easily reduced to chattel. The Plantation Generation, drawn mostly from outside the sphere of the Portuguese Atlantic Creole world, mostly

non-Christian, and largely unfamiliar with European culture, met that need. As a consequence, in regions where plantations dominated and where the Plantation Generation's demographic dominance was greatest, their culture mostly overwhelmed the culture of the Charter Generation, whose more fortunate members seem to have obtained their freedom and melded into the ranks of free blacks or even white society. The less fortunate descendants of the Charter Generation remained slaves and melded into the African American society and culture the Plantation Generation created. Hence Heywood and Thornton seem to be arguing that although Europeans always considered Africans in the New World as slaves and as different from whites, racism neither created African slavery in the New World nor dominated how Europeans viewed their African slaves until the end of the seventeenth century. For early modern Europeans, it was ethno-cultural differences at least as much as skin color that truly distinguished Africans from themselves and justified the enslavement of Africans. Only during the plantation era did racism based on biological distinctions become the ideological basis for slavery.

Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585-1660 lacks a concluding chapter, so

that it ends as abruptly as it transitions between chapters 3 and 4. A conclusion would have been particularly useful in light of the ways in which the authors link their evidence and arguments to the major historiographical debates regarding the origins and nature of slavery in the Atlantic world discussed above. The book also would have benefited from better copyediting to correct the numerous errors throughout the text. These problems do not, however, detract from the important contribution *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585-1660* makes to the history of Atlantic slavery. Not the least of its achievements is its demonstration of how the available data on the transatlantic slave trade can be used in more creative ways than in the past to provide a much better understanding of the African sources of slaves and a richer history of African American culture.

Note

[1]. See especially Ira Berlin, "From Creoles to Africans: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African American Society in Mainland America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 53 (1996): 251-288, and *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

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