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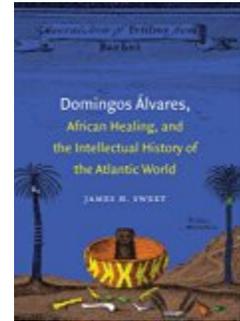
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James H. Sweet. *Domingos Alvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. xvii + 300 pp. \$37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3449-7.

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Atlantic Interactions: Between Africa, America and Europe

This is the story of an African man in the Portuguese Atlantic world of the mid-eighteenth century. Domingos Álvares is the name he was given in baptism, as a slave in Brazil. Most of what we know about Domingos comes from the extensive, and extremely interesting, records of his Inquisition trials in Lisbon and Évora. In this book, the U.S. historian James Sweet has traced the trajectory of Domingos from Africa to Brazil and then to Portugal, not only through the Inquisition records but many more other sources, showing an impressive scholarship. The result is a monumental fresco of the Atlantic of the time, written in a powerful prose that is at the same time engaging and erudite. This is not only an excellent historical work, but also a very good book, a pleasure to read, and an extraordinary introduction to a world that so far has been quite marginal in the historical imagination of the West.

Step by step, Sweet traces the narrative of Domingos's life. News of his early life in Africa is sparse, but through the names of his parents and place of birth, Sweet conjectures that Domingos came from the "Mahi" region, on the borders of the then expanding Dahomey kingdom. From the descriptions of his ritual and healing practice in Brazil, it seems quite plausible that Domingos had knowledge of the vodun religion, and more specifically of the Sakpata cult, which was persecuted by the Dahomey army as a challenge to its authority. The priests of Sakpata were captured and sold into slavery. Sweet's

description of the growth of the Dahomey military, its entanglement with slavery in the Atlantic world, and its repression of the vodun cults gives a full picture of an "Africa" that was not simply the victim, but a participant of the colonial machine. Sweet thinks that Domingos may have been a fully trained Sakpata priest before he was captured as a slave when he was about eighteen years old; but there is no clear proof of that.

The central chapters of the book describe Domingos's passage to and life in Brazil, first as a plantation slave in Pernambuco, then as a city slave in the streets of Recife and Rio. From very early on, Domingos seems to have shown knowledge of plants and healing ability. His masters identified this ability as an asset, not just to cure other fellow slaves but also to gain from his work as a healer. However, Domingos's increasing fame and independence ended up generating a conflict with his owners, who wanted to keep him under control, and accused him of being a *feiticeiro*, a sorcerer. Domingos was jailed in Recife and sold away, sent to Rio de Janeiro. On the ship to Rio, his presence was considered a bad omen and he barely survived; but while in Rio, his new masters also used his healing skills, and again, the relationships of slave and masters became extremely convoluted. Domingos took care of the illness of his mistress, a "mulata" in his own words, despite the fact that she didn't seem to trust him; their relationship was full of ambiguities and inversions: Was Domingos trying to cure or kill her? Did

she fear Domingos or was she seduced by him? Who, ultimately, was in control of whom?

In any case, Domingos managed, for a while, to be extremely successful in Rio. His work as a healer allowed him to buy his own freedom. As a free man, Domingos established his own practice and what seems to have been a vodun shrine, under an orange tree in the periphery of Rio, around which he would develop what Sweet calls a “healing community,” what seems like the outline of a vodun convent, with followers, mostly women, of different colors and backgrounds who appeared to be possessed by spirits.

It didn’t last long. Domingos was accused of *feiticaria* again, this time to the Inquisition. As a free man, he was fully responsible for his actions; he lacked the protection of a master, and was taken to Lisbon to be processed.

Domingo’s testimony is the central part of the book; the narrative from which the the book unfolds. In it, Domingos presents himself and his actions in a biographical sequence that has two very meaningful points: one, he omits mentioning that he is free, and presents himself as a slave; second, he insists that all he did was to heal, using the “natural” effects of plants. Thus, on the one hand he diminishes his own agency and autonomy, by presenting himself as a slave; on the other hand, he tries to preclude any accusation of using “supernatural” artifices, and thus of having made a pact with the Devil. Domingos denied having any supernatural power, but said that conversely, it was the people that came to him, who thought he had this power: they believed in sorcery. This argument reveals to what extent Domingos was by then in full control of the cosmological discussions that determined the practice of the Holy Office, distinctions between nature and the supernatural, sorcery and medicine, the given and the made, that were totally alien to his African background. Yet, the Inquisition needed to follow its course; regardless of what they believed, the judges of the Inquisition had to close the case, and they ended up extracting a confession from Domingos under torture. After that, he repented his sins, and was exiled to Castro Marim, on the southern border with Spain. In the years that followed, Domingos became a shadow of his previous self in Rio. For the sake of survival, he exploited the credulity of people who believed in his healing powers, and, more interestingly, his power of finding hidden treasures. But in Sweet’s terms, he was unable to create a healing community in Portugal, and became increasingly marginal and alienated. He was judged again by the Inquisition in Evora; his testimony

there is a sorrowful acknowledgement of his miserable life, forced to trick people because everybody expected him to be a sorcerer, a *feiticeiro*. After this trial, Domingos was exiled again, this time to northern Portugal, and Sweet loses his trail there.

This is the story of Domingos Álvares. What conclusions does Sweet draw from it? In the introduction, Sweet says that Domingos “contested the very legitimacy of European imperial power.” (p. 6). In what ways? This is not very clear. Throughout the book, Sweet insists that Domingos always had the objective of forming a “healing community,” and that this community would be based on kin and ancestry; as opposed to colonial mercantilism, healing would be a form of sociopolitical critique; healing practices would be “almost always a broader commentary on the collective health and well-being of society” (p. 121); health would be “an alternative political discourse” (p. 230). But how that is so, is never made clear. In fact, the book’s evidence seems to offer a much more complex picture than its argument suggests.

First of all, it is not clear what “community,” “health,” and “healing” mean in this context. Domingos’s actions don’t seem to conform to this model of “community building.” It is true that he seems to have gathered a group of followers around a shrine in Rio, something that might resemble a vodun covent in Africa, or a Candomble house in Brazil today. But to what extent does it make sense to call this “a community” based in kin and ancestry? The documents seem to show a fairly interracial group of people, of different statuses (both slave and free). Furthermore, even in ritual terms, Candomble houses or vodun convents are difficult to define as “communities”; they are highly hierarchical institutions. And these religious institutions can have a perfectly mercantile outcome—they can sell their services to clients. They are not built in opposition to mercantilism, but thrive on it. In fact one could say that in Rio, Domingos became a successful businessman, and that wouldn’t contradict his prowess in the vodun cult.

On the other hand, the discourse on “health” also seems a bit limited. It is clear that Domingos would insist on the fact that he was a “healer” and not a “priest,” in front of the Inquisition, to avoid being accused of working with the Devil. But why would we, historians and anthropologists of today, need to do the same? Do we need to justify ourselves in front of the Holy Inquisition? Why “healing” and not “religion”? Describing Domingos’s practice as “healing,” we reproduce an old functionalist reductionism, circumscribing ritual practice to a Western

discourse on nature and well-being.

The weakness and vagueness of terms such as “community” and “health” don’t do justice to Sweet’s rich and complex argument. Although there is some reference to it, Sweet doesn’t seem to engage with the contemporary literature on witchcraft and sorcery, and doesn’t engage with the problem of the fetish, which would be very useful for his argument. First, the contemporary anthropological literature on sorcery is focused precisely on the problem of ambiguity—between the accuser and the accused, masters and slaves, subjects and objects, which is central to Domingos’s story. Secondly, it was precisely during the eighteenth century in the Atlantic world, that this discourse of sorcery began to be replaced by the problem of the fetish, as has been described by William Pietz and Bruno Latour: the ambiguity of sorcery was replaced by a set of radical distinctions, between the natural and the manufactured, religion and commerce, objects and subjects, Africa and Europe, in a process of “purification.”[1]

In the end, the trajectory of Domingos as described by Sweet seems to fall back into the “biographical illusion,”[2] the notion that life has continuity, and makes sense; Sweet guesses that Domingo was fully formed as a healer and leader of a “healing community” in Africa before being enslaved, and in the colonial world, he was trying to recreate the “healing community” he had in Africa. This linear narrative is totally conjectural and unneces-

sary. Perhaps Domingos was not fully trained as a healer or wasn’t the leader of a healing community in Africa; we don’t know. Perhaps we have to give some credit to his wit and imagination, besides his ancestry and training. Wouldn’t it be more useful to open the plot and look at Domingos as a multifaceted and complex figure without a single, clear objective? Sweet explicitly refuses to identify Domingos as a trickster figure, and yet that is what seems to define the character with more precision. In fact Domingos as a character seems to fit perfectly in the contemporary literature of the “picaresque,” a genre of characters without character, who adapt with plasticity to the world of monstrous inequality they have to live in; a literature that under the appearance of comedy hides a deep, bitter social criticism. In Brazil in particular, Domingos could fit perfectly into the writings of Gregório de Matos, “The Devil’s Mouth.” Perhaps this would be a more effective mode of reading the history of Domingos than as a moral tale of loss and re-creation.

Notes

[1]. William Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* No. 9 (Spring 1985): 5-17; and Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish God* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

[2]. Pierre Bourdieu, “The Biographical Illusion,” in *Identity: A Reader*, ed. P. Gay, J. Evans, and P. Redman (London: Sage, 1986).

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