Passages in Slavery

Early in the year 1821, a youth in his early teens named Ajayi was "enjoying the comforts of father and mother, and the affectionate love of brothers and sisters," when his town of Osogun in the war-torn Oyo Empire was attacked by an army of some 20,000. As he tried to flee, Ajayi was captured along with his mother, two younger sisters, and a cousin. Other relatives young and old were also captured and soon led off in different directions as trophies of war, tied neck to neck with ropes. Within "the space of twenty-four hours," Ajayi later wrote, "I was made the property of three different persons," the last time in exchange for a horse. After two months with that owner, he was swapped back for the same horse and joyously reunited with his mother and baby sister. One evening three months later he was marched off to a market-town to be sold again. Ajayi passed the night weeping, "thinking of my deplorable situation" and what would surely be a final separation from his mother. In the morning he was led away with many others all chained at the neck, to the market-town, where a woman speaking his own dialect of Yoruba bought him and took him to a distant town to the south, where he lived for some three months in comparative freedom as the companion of her son. He often thought of trying to escape, but the distance to his home was far and he feared the local spirits, whose shrines lined the roads out of town.

In his misery he tried suicide. Failing to strangulate himself, he resolved that the next time they were crossing a river, he would leap out of the canoe and drown himself. When his owner divined his intentions, she sold him to an African trader, who sold him to another near the coast in exchange for tobacco, rum, and other articles that came from the Atlantic trade. Two months later he was taken to a slave market on the bank of a large river opposite Eko, the important eastern Slave Coast port that the Portuguese had called Lagos (the lake) because of its large lagoon. There he was sold for the seventh time, but as he crossed the great river in the bottom of a canoe, he was too sick and frozen with fear to carry out his suicide plan. Ajayi spent three months in Lagos, scarcely ever seeing a white face, until the day he was sold to a Portuguese ship. His mind was unnaturally calm that day: "Being a veteran in slavery, if I may be allowed
the expression, and having no more hope of ever going to my country again, I patiently took what came; although it was not without great fear that I received, for the first time, the touch of a White Man, who examined me [to determine] whether I was sound or not.”

For a time he lived chained by the neck with other boys and men, the boys suffering great bruises and near strangulation when the men yanked the heavy chains, especially at night when they slept confined in a windowless room, until, at last, “we boys had the happiness to be separated from the men,” whose numbers had increased to the point that there were no more chains to spare for youths who didn’t really need such heavy restraining. Ajayi and the other boys were tied with ropes but otherwise allowed more freedom than the adults during the four months their owners waited for an opportunity to evade the British patrols that were then trying to suppress the slave trade from Lagos.

On the morning of April 6, 1822, more than a year after his initial capture, Ajayi was one of 187 slaves loaded aboard the Brazilian schooner Esmeralda Félix. He suffered his first dose of seasickness, but before the day was out, their slave ship was seized by a British patrol enforcing the five-year-old treaty with Portugal that made trading in slaves illegal north of the equator. After a fearsome new turn of events that resulted in some new physical injuries, and his five young comrades soon found themselves on one of the British naval vessels, where they were clothed, fed, and put to work aiding the crew. After seven and a half weeks, when other ships that had escaped the patrols would have been reaching their American destinations, Ajayi and his mates were landed in Freetown, Sierra Leone, quickly freed, and settled among other “receptives” rescued by the British. In his new village Ajayi was placed under the care of British Church Missionary Society (CMS) missionaries and soon discovered many other Yoruba speakers from his locale, although no one from his own family or former acquaintances.

The vivid details of Ajayi’s very full account of his enslavement bring to life four important themes that are developed in this chapter. First, he takes us beyond the stereotypes of the slave trade and inside the thoughts and intense emotions that anguished captive Africans experienced. His detailed account brings to life his frightening experience of war and capture, his painful separation from home and relatives, his growing despair of ever escaping, and the successive waves of suicidal depression, apathy, and resignation that were in some form common to other captives. Second, he reminds us that slave experiences were not all the same—boys and adult men had very different experiences and, by implication, so did women. Third, he tells us of the bonding that gradually took place among those friendless, kinless souls, which gave them the strength to endure. He and his fellow orphans, Ajayi tells us, had become “one family, . . . six . . . friends in affliction,” who kept together after their rescue so this new family would not be torn apart as their original families had been.

Finally, he suggests other ways in which African captives, receptives, and slaves began to build new cultural identities and acquire new cultural skills, both African and European. Although he was reunited with none of his family members or townsmen in Sierra Leone (of the latter he could not find a dozen in all of the colony), he records his immediate “pleasure of meeting many of our country people,” meaning simply people who spoke the same language. These Yoruba whose dialects, shrines, and other ways had seemed so strange to him as he passed through their districts appeared less alien in this distant place. But his transformation was just beginning. In six months’ time, under the missionaries’ instruction the bright teenager “was able to read the New Testament with some degree of freedom” (apparently in English). Three years later he accepted baptism, embracing a new Christian community and receiving a new name, Samuel Crowther, the name of a CMS benefactor. After four more years, he married a woman rescued from slavery, like himself an Oyo and, he emphasizes, a Christian.

New communities and new languages, new names, and altered identities were common to nearly all Africans transplanted by the slave trade; the incidence of literacy and Christianity varied much more. We can use Samuel Ajayi Crowther no further as a model of larger experiences for, as the next chapter will chronicle, his life took quite exceptional turns that led to his becoming a famous Anglican bishop. In that he was unique, although it is worth noting that one of his close shipmates, Joseph Bartholomew, also became a CMS missionary. It is also unlikely that many other captives of the slave trade would have joined with Crowther in proclaiming the “unhappy day” of his capture was also a “blessed day” because it brought him to “the service of Christ.” Crowther’s assessment is his own and must be respected. Although other victims of the slave trade surely found less fulfillment and more sorrow in their new situations, all came to see their relationship to other Africans and to European culture from new perspectives.

This chapter examines the external and internal passages of Africans in the Atlantic slave trade. It shows that the geographical passage across the Atlantic, the so-called “Middle Passage,” was also a cultural passage. Because these external and internal passages often began long before Africans’ first encounters with Europeans, the chapter begins with an overview of some additional African experiences of capture and enslavement. It probes the mental and emotional states of the trade’s victims in order to bring to light experiences that are often hidden in accounts that consider only the physical sufferings of the Middle Passage. Finally, it examines how people torn from their homes and families created new identities, both as Africans and as members of new hybrid communities dominated by Europeans.

It is impossible not to be moved by the tremendous sufferings of those millions of African men, women, and children who encountered Europeans as victims of the Atlantic slave trade, but it is also important not to assume that the only role an enslaved African could play in those brutal circumstances was one of victim. Despite the sadness and dejection in which they boarded a European ship, individuals and groups sought to reshape their lives through resistance and accommodation. Stripped of their clothing, per-
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Personal accounts like Ajayi's are tremendously helpful in grasping the emotions individuals felt as they were separated from their homes and relatives and—over periods of weeks, months, or even years—journeyed toward the coast. However, for a broader perspective, one needs to match individual experiences with larger patterns of how Africans became enslaved and reacted to that experience. To keep these issues within manageable limits this chapter focuses on the peak period of the Atlantic slave trade, from the middle of the eighteenth century through the first part of the nineteenth century. A particularly large collection of personal narratives comes from people rescued from the slave trade by British patrols in the nineteenth century and, like Ajayi, resettled in the West African colony of Sierra Leone. There in 1850 a missionary named S. W. Koelle recorded brief tales of capture from over a hundred liberated Africans who were his informants for his compilation of African languages. Although one cannot see into every dark corner of the slave trade, such sources reveal many of its broad patterns and individual variations.

A high proportion of those who ended up in the Atlantic slave trade were enslaved in the course of wars among different African states, often at some distance from the coast. Many of the captives were fighters in the wars, but others were women and children, like Ajayi, seized in the course of an attack, while fleeing the battle, or rounded up as part of the booty of war. As an earlier chapter has argued, Africans fought wars for many reasons, but slaves were usually the by-product of such conflicts, not their cause. A great many accounts of enslavement come from a series of loosely connected nineteenth-century wars fought in what is now northern Nigeria and Cameroon. The conflicts began in 1804 when a Muslim teacher from the Fulbe people proclaimed a jihad (holy war) against the nominally Muslim rulers of the Hausa states who continued to tolerate the non-Muslim practices of their rural subjects. The jihad spread rapidly across a vast area as Fulbe and Hausa Muslims raised armies that consolidated rule over a new Sokoto Caliphate, by 1810 the largest state in western Africa. Warfare continued for decades against the “pagan” villagers within or adjacent to this Muslim state, resulting in many prisoners. This was perhaps the fate of Yapanda, a man in his thirties from the Tiv town of Mukuwa on the southern edge of the caliphate, who told Koelle he was captured in a local war while on a trading tour in the 1820s. He was sold to Hausa traders, to Igala traders, and to others who carried him down the Niger River (probably through the market system mentioned in Chapter 4) to a coastal port that fed the Atlantic trade. Warfare also spread eastward against the Muslim-ruled state of Kanem-
nearly equal share of those sent into the Atlantic trade lost their freedom by being kidnapped, whether by strangers or false friends. Two youths who suffered this fate in the 1740s eventually escaped from slavery in the Americas and told their stories. One was Ukawsaw Greenson, a child of the royal family of Bornu, whose vivid imagination was captured by tales of white people and their ships ("houses with wings [that] walk upon the water") that were told by a visiting trader from the Gold Coast. He begged his family’s permission to accompany the trader on his long journey home, but when Ukawsaw got there he became convinced that the Gold Coast king was going to behead him for being a spy. However, the boy was able to charm the king into agreeing to his being sold as a slave. Some distance to the south of Bornu, an Igbo-speaking youth, Oludah Equiano, and his sister were kidnapped from their home by two men and a woman while their parents were away in the fields. In his famous autobiography Equiano tells of his passage through a series of African masters toward the coast, his separation from his sister, and his eventual sale to Europeans at a port in the Niger Delta. Another Igbo speaker, William Pratt, told a Parliamentary committee of his enslavement as a boy in the early 1820s in these simple but haunting words: "I and a friend went out to set traps for rice birds and other birds in the field, and this boy was kidnapped. Then Koele’s five Igbo informants were also enslaved by kidnappers, two as children and one "by a treacherous friend" as an adult."

Still others were sold by relatives for debt or other reasons or were sold by local authorities after being found guilty of adultery, witchcraft, or other crimes. Telling their stories years later, Koele’s informants who had been sold for adultery did not deny their guilt, but two cases he recorded illustrate the injustice of some sales. Edia of the Kossi people of Cameroon had prospered enough as a young man to have seven wives in the 1810s "when he was sold by his countrymen out of jealousy of his ability and influence." Bembí of the Ovimbundu people of southern Angola was "sold in about his twenty-eighth year in 1832 because his family had been accused of having occasioned the king’s death by means of witchcraft." Although Bembí was transported across the Atlantic, he later emigrated to Sierra Leone.

It is likely that the different ways in which people were enslaved affected their frames of mind when they reached the coast, even if those effects cannot be traced with precision. Those taken in war or kidnapped are likely to have seethed at the injustice of their enslavement more than those condemned for a crime they had actually committed, but all felt the agony of alienation from home and family. Hausa captives and Yoruba like Ajayi and Wright came from good-sized towns and language groups whose speakers numbered in the hundreds of thousands, most of Koele’s informants came from very small communities, and some came from very small language groups. All must have suffered from a deep sense of homesickness, but more painful than the loss of place was the loss of the kinship network that defined who they were. It was not simply the separation from mother, fa-

other, siblings, and grandparents that Ajayi so poignantly described, but the fact that for adults one’s identity, position in society, and even one’s occupation were tied to membership in a kinship-defined lineage or clan. Many of those from smaller languages would not have found any “country people” in their new homes. Such alienation was the occasion of extreme suffering, but, as will be examined in a later section, it also led to the development of substitute communities based on different geographical and associational ties.

Besides their origin and circumstances of enslavement, captives were also affected by the differences in their age and sex. Of Koele’s informants enslaved during the first half of the nineteenth century, about a quarter were under twenty years of age, half were in their twenties, and a quarter were over thirty; only a few were older than forty. Other records suggest that in this period the proportion of children actually entering the Atlantic trade was closer to 40 percent. The proportion of females of all ages averaged about a third. Some studies suggest that because females in Africa were trained from childhood to accept a subordinate position in society, they accepted the circumstances of slavery more passively than males, who were raised to dominate and to fight. As Ajayi’s narrative shows, youths could develop deep depressions in reaction to their enslavement, but their age also gave them greater resilience and capacity for change. These differences had important implications during the ocean passage and what followed.

**THE MIDDLE PASSAGE**

First-person accounts by Africans of their passage to the Americas are precious, but many are frustratingly brief. Otrobor Cuganana, a slave who became an important abolitionist, wrote only this of his own experiences: "But it would be needess to give a description of all the horrible scenes which we saw, and the base treatment which we met with in this dreadful captive situation, as the similar cases of thousands, which suffer by this traffic, are well known." Female accounts are so scarce that one can only feel disappointment in discovering that an African woman named Try Norman who testified in 1848 to a British Parliamentary committee could only report that she was too young to remember her time on a slave ship before it was intercepted by a British vessel. One must try to fill in these missing witnesses with the voices of those who left fuller descriptions.

The account of a West African Muslim, Mahmoud Baquaqua, is more explicit than that of Cuganana about the great physical sufferings he endured on a voyage to Brazil in the 1840s:

> We were thrust into the hold of the vessel in a state of nudity, the males being crowded on one side, and the females on the other; the hold was so low that we could not stand up, but were obliged to crouch upon the floor or sit down: day and night were the same to us, sleep being denied us from the confined position of our bodies, and we became desperate through suffering and fatigue.
Africa’s Discovery of Europe

Oft the loathsomeness and filth of that terrible place will never be effaced from my memory; nay, as long as memory holds her seat in this distracted brain, I will remember that. My heart even at this day, sickens at the thought of it... The only food we had during the voyage was corn soaked and boiled... We suffered very much for want of water; but was [sic] denied all we needed. A pint a day was allowed, and no more; and a great many slaves died upon the passage...

When any of us became refractory, his flesh was cut with a knife, and pepper and vinegar was [sic] rubbed in; to make him peaceable! I suffered, and so did the rest of us, very much from sea sickness at first, but that did not cause our brutal owners any trouble... Only twice during the voyage were we allowed to go on deck to wash ourselves—once whilst at sea and again just before going into port.13

A youth named Augustino, who was brought to Brazil in 1830, likewise emphasized the disagreeable physical circumstances of the voyage in his testimony to a Select Committee of the British Parliament in 1849. Because of his youth he was not chained and was allowed on deck, but he witnessed the misery of the naked adults below deck, the diet of boiled meal, the heat, the inadequacy of the water rations, and the large number of deaths. He believed most deaths were due to dehydration, but noted that some slaves who were allowed on deck “jumped overboard, for fear they were being fattened to be eaten.”

These two accounts are from late in the trade and may reflect some circumstances peculiar to the illegal trade to Brazil. Their concern with detailing the physical sufferings of slaves is in line with the British abolitionist campaign to stop the traffic in human beings by bringing such horrors to light. Indeed, the two accounts derive from anti-slave trade efforts: Baquaqua told his story to an abolitionist publisher in New York, and Augustino was responding to questions of a Parliamentary committee with an abolitionist mandate. The reality of these sufferings is beyond dispute, but there are hints that Ajayi’s emphasis on his mental anguish at this point in his captivity was true here, too. Baquaqua acknowledges his deep inner pain in a single sentence: “Our sufferings were our own, we had no one to share our troubles, none to care for us, or even speak a word of comfort to us.” Augustino hints at the terrors that drove some to suicide.

Other narratives emphasize how the emotional strain and fears experienced en route to the sea continued to dominate many captives’ minds in their encounters with their first Europeans and the slave ships. Equiano’s well-known description of his passage in the mid-eighteenth century put great emphasis on his emotional anguish. He recounted his “astonishment” at the slave ships and their “terrors” at the sight of the strange “red” men who examined him. Here, too, his abolitionist views may have influenced his portrait, but the sentiments resonate with those expressed by others and are tied to fundamental African beliefs. Just a few pages earlier in his Narrative Equiano had recounted how “magicians” in his homeland were revered for curing people of evil curses and discovering the perpetrators of evil magic. It is in the context of this belief in witchcraft that one needs to interpret his statement that on the slave ship he became convinced that he “bad gotten into a world of bad spirits” who would feed on his flesh, just as Augustino’s shipmates had feared. The idea already in his head was confirmed by the large copper cooking pot he saw on deck and by the dejected looks on the faces of the black people in chains all around him. All this pushed him into an emotional abyss at least the equal of the physical sufferings others endured. “Indeed,” he writes, “such were the horrors of my views and fears at the moment, that, if ten thousand worlds had been my own, I would have freely parted with them all to have exchanged my condition with that of the meanest slave in my own country.” Overcome by these emotions, Equiano fainted. When he regained consciousness, some of those Africans who had sold him tried to steady his nerves with a glass of alcoholic spirits and assurances that he was not to be eaten, but it had no effect. Already “abandoned to despair,” he was moved below deck where the loathsome stench added to his miseries and drove him still deeper into despair that he lost all desire for food and “wished for the last friend, Death, to relieve me.”

Many other accounts attest that fears of Europeans being evil spirits who feasted on human flesh had long been widespread and did not diminish during the century after Equiano’s own enslavement. As Chapter 1 recounted, the Portuguese first heard such accusations on the Gambia in 1455. A French account in the late seventeenth century attributed the melancholy of slaves to the fact that “many of the slaves... are possessed with the opinion, that they are carried like sheep to the slaughter, and that the Europeans are fond of their flesh.” A century later, an English observer in Jamaica, who had questioned his slaves about this as soon as they learned enough English, got a similar but fuller account of what was in their minds during the Middle Passage: “[s]ome of these poor wretches believe that they are bought in order to be fattened, and eaten. Others suppose, that the Europeans buy them to make gunpowder of their bones.” An experienced British slave captain in the 1770s and 1780s reported that slaves usually showed fears of being eaten, “which it is the business of the traders to remove.” In the 1820s, Joseph Wright similarly testified that he and his companions were driven to despair by the rumor “that the Portuguese were going to eat us,” while the Portuguese, in turn, warned them that the British anti-slave trade patrol would eat them if they were caught. An allied belief was that the French made their red wine from the blood of slaves.

These accounts suggest that the mental states of African captives on a slave ship may provide deeper insight into some aspects of the bidirectional Passage than do the familiar details of the physical accommodations. At different ends of the emotional spectrum, both suicide and mutiny were expressions of how slaves’ depression, fear, and anger displaced their natural impulse for self-preservation. As both Ajayi and Equiano testify, they often thought of ending their miserable lives. It was so common for en-
slaved Africans on the Middle Passage to suffer from the state of depression that contemporary Europeans called "fixed melancholy" that the slavers took special steps to deal with it. Equiano states he was severely fogged for not eating, despite his tender years. Others had food forced down their throats by means of special devices the ships carried. A French slaver, who believed himself compassionate by nature, reported that the necessity he felt in forcing reluctant slaves to eat had sometimes resulted in breaking their teeth in order to inset a metal feeding device into their mouths.17 Because the tedium of the voyage and overcrowding of the ships added to the slaves' depressed state, slavers enforced dancing and singing, knowing that activity would help break the melancholy. Perhaps it had a therapeutic effect, but one account reported the songs were all sad ones of "sickness, fear of being beaten, their hunger, and the memory of their country." When slaves on another ship began to cry out in a most melancholy and anguish way, they told the female slave interpreter sent to investigate that the reason was because they had been dreaming they were in their homes and, when awakened, found themselves in the hold of the slave ship.18 Depression and misery drove many to contemplate suicide by more immediate means than self-starvation. Slave ships had to erect netting around the upper deck to prevent the slaves from leaping into the sea. Equiano says he would have done that himself if the netting had not prevented him and tells of two Igbo men on his ship who, despite being chained together, managed to get through the netting into the deep. Another "quite dejected fellow" quickly followed them and more would have followed had not the crew rushed to stop them. The first two drowned but the third was rescued and "flogged ... unmercifully, for thus attempting to prefer death to slavery."19

Investors in the slave trade could suffer financial loss if crews failed to prevent individual suicides, but crews had greater reason to take precautions against another expression of slaves' disregard of their lives—slave rebellions, often termed "mutinies." To meet this threat, crews on slave ships were twice as numerous as on other vessels and were well armed. Although the chance of rebellious slaves successfully gaining control of a ship or escaping to shore were slim, this did not seem to discourage attempts. Modern research has uncovered evidence of slave rebellions on 383 ships, of which in only twenty-three cases did a slave succeed in making it to shore. In most cases the crew managed to put down the rebellion, although often at the cost of many slaves' lives. Captured ringleaders were often executed with extreme cruelty to intimidate the others. Mutinies resulted in the deaths of an average of fifty-seven slaves per revolt on ships from Senegambia, although the figure is lower for other coasts.20 Although there are many striking accounts by captains and crew of suppressing revolts, African views were rarely recorded. Many seem to be desperate acts in which death was an acceptable alternative to enslavement or to the worse fates many feared. We get a clearer African perspective from the last recorded revolt, a successful one that killed many of the crew on the French vessel Regina Coeli off Liberia in 1858. It was not the conditions on the ship (nor perhaps the distant destination of the voyage) that drove them to rebel, but the injustice they felt at their African masters selling them away from their homeland. As domestic slaves born in slavery in this land, they believed their masters had no right to sell them away. Some rebels later asserted that had their masters been on board they would gladly have killed them along with the Europeans. Fleeing to Liberia, the rebels sought to escape the control of these unjust masters as well as to remain in Africa.21 The success of the rebellion on the Regina Coeli owed much to the fact that the slaves' common origin gave them a high degree of unity. More often slaves bought at a single port came from a number of different places, spoke different languages, and pursued different strategies. A slave revolt on the English ship Brown in 1663 was led by "Jolloff" (i.e., Wolof speakers from Senegal), the captain reported, but the Bambara speakers from further inland "sided with the Master." Why the Bambara acted in this manner can only be guessed at, but the implication is that they feared if the Jolof were successful they might be worse off than they were in the hands of the Europeans. It is possible that religious differences lay behind this ethnic division: The Jolof were Muslim; the Bambara at this time were not and would have been sold to the English by Muslim traders.22 One wonders how Ajayi might have reacted to a revolt led by the Oyo Muslims who had enslaved him.

If the mental states of the slaves deserve serious attention, this does not mean that the physical conditions and pain associated with them should be ignored. Although some authors give the impression that the arrangements on a slave ship were chaotic, that the slaves just jammled as many Africans into the hold as they could and sailed off, the slave trade was in fact a highly organized business driven by a very specific goal: to get the costly cargo of slaves across the ocean with as few losses as possible. Otherwise, profit was impossible, as not a few investors seeking a quick return discovered. As the abolitionists recorded, outrageous lapses could and did occur, but the rational purposes are evident in the statistical regularities that modern scholars have compiled.

During the peak decades of the trade, the ships themselves were specially built or adapted for slave cargoes. Special platforms between decks provided additional space to stow the slaves during the weeks of the passage. The maximum capacity was calculated carefully and sometimes diagrammed on charts, generally permitting each adult slave just enough room to lie down (although sometimes only on one's side or not at full length). Some ships failed to get the full cargo they desired; other captains could not resist packing extras in, but the averages were remarkably similar overall.

Slavers took great care to prevent disorder. All but the smallest vessels segregated the women, girls, and young children from the stronger and more aggressive men. Some vessels also kept older boys by themselves, just as Ajayi had experienced on shore, or allowed them greater freedom of
movement above deck, since they posed no physical threat. On ships from Angola, the men were placed below decks, while women, infants, and small children were kept in the cabins. A common British design of the 1780s had strong partitions to divide the cargo hold into three chambers: "[T]he men are cooped up in the fore part of the ship, the boys in the middle, and the women and girls in the aft part of the vessel." Once ships were out of sight of land slaves were less inclined to revolt, as they lost hope and resigned themselves to their fates. One British slaver testified that women, youths, and children were always at liberty and the men's chains would gradually be taken off, "if they appeared reconciled to their condition," but another had a different emphasis: "[T]he females and boys soon recover their spirits—the men seldom; they remain gloomy a great while."

Keeping a slave vessel clean was a nearly impossible task, not only because of the large numbers of people crammed into a small space but also because a high percentage of the slaves suffered from diarrhea and dysentery. Inevitably the sleeping platforms became fouled with the blood and excrement of those too weak to reach the tubs for public evacuation in the holds. Efforts at cleanliness varied from ship to ship and by nationality and century. Miller says the Portuguese only belatedly took up bathing slaves and describes their efforts to cleanse the ship as consisting, "mostly of mopping up the mess, scrubbing down all parts of the ship at least once a day," and trying "persistently but vainly to clear the air below decks" with a variety of products from vinegar and tar to whitewash, whose efficacy he doubts. Stein, on the other hand, states that the French were quite fastidious, bathing slaves at least twice a week, washing the whole ship daily and scraping it down every two or three days in good weather, and doing a good job of ventilating and deodorizing the vessel. A contemporary Dutch source said that "the French, Portuguese, and English slave-ships are always foul and stinking," compared to the Dutch ships, which were "for the most part clean and neat." A British slaver, proud of his own record, reported that on his ships the slaves were "comfortably lodged" and their quarters were washed and fumigated every day. He believed the French were not so concerned with cleanliness as the Dutch.

Although conditions varied greatly from ship to ship, over time improvements in food, water, ventilation, and sanitation led to a decline in the death rates on slave ships. To ensure their profits captains took great precautions to secure enough water and food to last the voyage, most carrying a substantial surplus to guard against emergencies. Nevertheless, as the testimonies of Boaqua and Augustino confirm, shortages could occur. Overall, the efforts to reduce losses of life succeeded. Modern studies reveal that losses averaged 20 percent before 1600, but fell to 12 percent during the second half of the eighteenth century. However, such averages hide the fact that mortality varied widely from ship to ship. While a distressing number of ships lost a third or more of their slaves, the greatest number of ships recorded slave deaths below 5 percent. In the early nineteenth century death rates fell below one in ten per voyage, but as pressures on the illegal trade mounted from British patrols, evasive maneuvers and longer voyages from unpatrolled ports in southeastern Africa pushed losses back up in the last decades of the trade. Because so much of the trade was conducted during the period with the lowest losses, the average loss per voyage during the entire period of the Atlantic slave trade was 12.4 percent, one slave in every eight. Only in comparison to still worse cases can such numbers be seen as anything but horrific.

The decline in mortality was the result more of a desire to increase profits than of a greater humanity among the slave traders, but the character of the slave traders is worth further exploration. It suited the abolitionists' propaganda efforts to stress slave traders' moral depravity, and they did not want for examples. The nature of the trade and the risks to life and limb did not attract the sea's finest. Already in the seventeenth century, Barbot had argued that most of the agents and employees the trading companies stationed in Africa were men driven by poverty who were not likely to be deterred in their pursuit of wealth by any moral scruples: "men of no education or principles, void of forethought, careless, prodigal, addicted to strong liquors, [and] some, perhaps no small number, are over fond of the black women." A youthful crewman familiar with the peak years of the Liverpool slave trade lamented the officers' stinting on provisions for the crew and other forms of "rascality." However, many of the abolitionists' most valuable recruits were ex-slave traders, especially ship doctors, whose firsthand testimony so vividly captured the horrors of the passage. Some of these had undergone a religious conversion, but their sensitivity and efforts to alleviate the misery of the slaves, even if for the sake of profit, made it clear that not all slaves were from the bottom of the barrel. As the author of one esteemed recent history of the trade puts it, "Brutality was neither normal nor inevitable." No owner would knowingly place a valuable ship and cargo in the hands of a drunkard or psychopath. Ships' officers and doctors were well paid to complete the voyage expeditiously and with as few losses of life as possible. Moreover, captains were themselves often investors in the voyages and well understood the role of order and discipline in producing profits. It is against this background that one must consider the differences in Africans' encounters with European slavers. A distressing number of Africans, of course, died during the Middle Passage. Some slaves took their own lives, finding in death, as Equiano put it, "the last friend" to rescue them from physical discomfort and mental anguish. Others died in revolts or from whippings and other cruel punishments afterwards. But it has long been clear that the principal cause of death was disease. The journal of the English ship Arthur in March and April 1678 recorded the all-too-familiar experience. The slaves had chosen their slaves with utmost care, "as likely negroes as a man should see," treated them humanely, and fed them "as much provisions as they can make use of," yet some became sick. The sick were tended with "the greatest care we could" and given brandy and red pepper to revive them. Some recovered, yet by ones and twos
that was a part of his intention, there is no reason to think he did not sincerely return the captain's friendship.

Another clear example of a youth's devotion to his captors occurred during a slave revolt on the ship Eagle Galley in 1764. Seeing that one of the rebels was about to club the captain, who had treated him well, the unnamed lad of about seventeen placed himself between them and took a heavy blow that fractured his arm. During an unsuccessful slave revolt on another English ship in 1787 a boy named Bristol, whom one of the officers was taking to England to give to his mother, helped the Europeans to persuade the slaves to submit and later gave warning of another plot to seize control. On the same ship the African cook played a leading role in putting down the first revolt. Lest it seem that such devotion can be only a sign of unusual subservience, consider the case of an African boy named Telemaque, who became the pet of Captain Joseph Vesey. Vesey sold the boy at the end of the trip but agreed to take him back when the boy began having seizures, faked, it would seem, to regain his former relationship. In any event it worked and Telemaque served Captain Vesey for two years on his slave ship, even taking the captain's name, before he was sold again. We do not know what Telemaque was thinking but in later life he played a different role in a slave revolt than the Eagle Galley lad. In 1822, Denmark Vesey (as he was then known) led the largest and best planned slave rebellion in the history of the United States.

Female voices are so rare that their experiences must be sketched from other sources. Because it was believed that there was little chance of their starting a rebellion, females were less likely to be shackled and more likely to be allowed above deck, which certainly alleviated them of some of the horrors of the voyage. On the other hand, historian Joseph Miller suggests, women's freedom made them more "accessible for sexual abuse without requiring the crew to offend their senses or risk assault by the males by venturing below." There are no ways to measure either the frequency or the consequences of sexual abuse, but most accounts believe it was common. One reported instance, one hopes worse than most, involved the second captain on a French ship in the 1770s. Philippe Liot first raped a very pretty African woman, whose resistance is suggested in the fact that she sustained two broken teeth. Then he entered the hold and removed a little girl of eight to ten years, covering her mouth so that his fellow officers would not hear her protests. Three nights running he brutally raped her before being discovered. The physical and emotional damage to both slaves reduced their sale price in Saint Domingue, which is why the incident came to be reported.

Women were capable of being much more than victims. A case of a woman who had the trusted role of interpreter has already been mentioned. Women also did some of the work of food preparation on ships. Despite stereotypes of their passivity, some also were rebels. A powerful woman on the Liverpool ship Hatters out of Old Calabar in 1786, for example,
was put in charge of the female slaves and used her position to plot with the men to try to take over the ship. After a slave revolt on the Kentucky, an American slaver trading from Mozambique to southern Brazil in 1844, a woman was among the forty-six rebels put to death.36

Adult men were usually the largest group of slaves, and in some ways their experiences may have been the least varied. However, as we have seen, there could be sharp differences among them along ethnic and religious lines. During part of the slave trade some male slaves helped the Europeans maintain order on the ships. The practice may have arisen from the castle slaves, or grummetas, who were brought from elsewhere in West Africa to serve European trading companies on the Gold Coast. As foreigners, these were loyal to their European owners and were useful in warning of impending rebellions among the slaves being readied for shipment.

In the seventeenth century trading companies also employed African "guardians" from the Gold Coast on vessels carrying slaves from the Slave Coast. According to one report, these guardians were given whips and placed among the other slaves "to keep them from quarrelling" and to enable them to report any plotting before it could produce a revolt. Even though the guardians were themselves sold along with the rest of the slaves when the ship reached the Americas, the practice worked very successfully. The practice of African guardians on slave ships disappeared along with the trading companies themselves in the early eighteenth century. As Eltis notes, in the absence of guardians, the frequency of slave revolts rose.37

NEW IDENTITIES

Toward the end of the seventeenth century a West African woman had the great misfortune to be sold to a French slaver and the extraordinary luck to discover on his ship her husband and their four children from whom she had been separated after their capture. She was also lucky that the French captain was so struck by their rare good fortune that he decided to permit the family to stay together on board and even insisted on selling them as a family unit to a Martinique planter who promised to keep them together.38 How fascinating it would be to follow the subsequent life of the family, if only the records existed! But it would be a very exceptional story. Families almost never made it to the New World intact. Indeed, it was unusual for even a married couple to be sold and transported together, although siblings sometimes were. With rare exceptions, enslaved Africans entered a world where they had no kinfolk, no old friends, and no fellow villagers. Some might pass years without speaking to a single person who knew their mother tongue. In such trying circumstances Africans were forced to build new social networks and new identities.

Several excellent new surveys explore the tribulations and survival strategies of Africans and their descendants in slavery comparatively or in various regions of the Americas.39 To maintain this study's focus on persons born in Africa and on the lives of particular individuals, this section ex-
creoles. Thus, liberated Africans were not creoles, but their ways of living were being reshaped under the strong influences of European authorities and the African diaspora creoles who had first settled the colony. Their acculturation in Sierra Leone involved becoming familiar with English, the dominant language of the colony, as well as with other cultural norms, such as types of dress, decorum, and religion. Because the language, religion, and other cultural practices were of European origin, the process could be called “Europeanization,” but creolization is preferred because it conveys the important fact that identities and cultures in colonial societies were derived only partly from Europe and partly from the large non-European population. In the Americas, the process might be called “Americanization” were it not for the widespread use of this term to describe the process of cultural amalgamation and innovation taking place just within the boundaries of the United States, especially the acculturation of large numbers of European immigrants between the 1840s and 1910s.

The other side of the cultural transformation taking place among newly arrived Africans in Sierra Leone and the New World lacks a common name. Indeed, it was once common to argue that Africans descending from slave ships brought no culture with them, that the traumatic experience of captivity and transport had made them into a kind of blank page on which a new creole culture could be imprinted. Recent historians have rediscovered the rich cultural baggage captured from their homelands and traced how it survived even under the harshest slavery. The most insightful of these historians have seen that this was not a static “survival” of pieces of old Africa but a dynamic part of the process by which Africans reconstructed their shattered lives and identities. Some have called this process of ethnogenesis (ethnicity formation) “Africanization,” which seems a useful descriptive term. Although it may seem odd from an outsider’s perspective that people from Africa could be Africanized, for those who descended from the slave ships that process was just as meaningful as creolization. Alienated from the rural villages of their homelands, they began to reidentify themselves with the broader population whose fate they shared. Just as the African coastal elite interacting with Europeans had been doing for centuries, the masses on slave ships were rediscovering themselves as part of a vast continent of dark-skinned people and repositioning themselves as members of newly defined cultural nations within Africa.

The processes of creolization and Africanization will be examined separately, but it is important to realize that they progressed simultaneously, if at separate paces. Some immigrants clung tenaciously to older ways, while many others made substantial changes in their lives. Young immigrants were the most open to change and in Sierra Leone’s church-run and public schools some liberated Africans creolized themselves rapidly, becoming important agents of cultural transformation and occupying important positions in the churches, schools, and the colonial government. The conditions of slavery prevented such high achievements in the Americas, where it took more time and more freedom to produce a Westernized African elite. In parts of the Americas where the majority of slaves continued to be African-born well into the nineteenth century (notably in Brazil and the West Indies) Africanization remained a vibrant process that left a deep imprint on entire colonies. However, to describe all the different variations of acculturation and ethnogenesis in the Americas would require a much longer study. Let us return to the case study of Sierra Leone.

CREOLIZATION

In Sierra Leone as in the Americas those who descended from the slave ships had to adjust to a world in which Europeans dominated politically and European speech and culture were paramount. For some the process of creolization had begun before their arrival. As earlier chapters have shown, many coastal Africans were conversant in one or more European languages or pidgins. Inland Africans who spent much more than a brief time in coastal shipping ports might acquire some knowledge of a European language. Several men in a slave cargo taken from Old Calabar in 1786 had a good command of English, which they had learned while living in Old Calabar and its vicinity—whether as slaves or as free people is not clear. Others began learning a new language during the Middle Passage. Mahommad Baquaqua related, “I had contrived whilst on my passage in the slave ship, to gather up a little knowledge of the Portuguese language,” which was sufficient, he found on arrival in Brazil, to understand what he was new master wanted of him.9 In surviving the harsh experience of enslavement new African and European languages would be important, as would new identities.

In many ways the spread of English in Sierra Leone mirrored the New World experience of slaves, but no one has ever suggested that enslaved Africans lost all memory of their mother tongues. Koelle had little trouble collecting vocabulary lists from Africans who had lived in the colony for decades, even in some cases with few occasions to use their language. His informant for the Karekare language of Northern Nigeria, for example, had spent twenty-six years in the colony without another countryman to talk to until one arrived four years earlier. Another man, forty years away from home with hardly any other speakers, still had a fine command of his mother tongue. However, Koelle did encounter some individuals who had lost fluency in their mother tongues.10

Of course, none of those whose first language had grown rusty were without a language, and the experience of most in Sierra Leone included learning one or more new languages. This might be the dominant language in their settlement or another language they had brought from home. But for most the new language was English. A liberated African named George Crowley Nicol testified to a British Parliamentary committee in 1849 that all captives freed in Sierra Leone picked up English soon after their arrival since it was essential for communication with the authorities and with Africans speaking different languages. Even at home, he
reported, married couples like his own repactive parents spoke nothing but English when they had no African language in common. 43 Bright young-

sters, such as Ajayi Crowther, might have been exceptional in the speed with which they mastered both spoken and written English, but even older people learned quickly. Koelle met a man of fifty; only three years in the colony, who spoke passable English. Another man, a Fulbe from Kano, only three years in the colony, spoke English "surprisingly well." This was of course similar to the New World experience of slaves, as another man of the Fulbe Koelle interviewed could attest. His good English had been ac-
quired during the forty years he spent in Jamaica, where a slave ship had landed him in his late teens, before he came to Sierra Leone. 44

A more complex cultural transformation came in religion. As Chapter 2 recounted, Christianity had also been spreading since the 1480s in parts of coastal Africa, so some enslaved Africans were likely to have brought Chris-
tian beliefs and practices along with them. However, Muslims were far more numerous than Christians among enslaved Africans. Some like Ayuba persevered in their practices; others blended Islam with Christianity. The parents of Thomas Maxwell of Sierra Leone had both been raised Muslims in Bornu, but in Sierra Leone, while his father remained devoted to Islam, his mother became a Christian. 45

The speed with which large numbers of Africans in Sierra Leone vol-
untarily became Christians is an interesting complement to the situation in some New World colonies where plantation masters imposed Christian practices on their slaves because it suggests that many Africans in distress-
ing new surroundings profoundly desired the consolations of a new reli-
gion. In his great history of Sierra Leone, Christopher Fyle summarizes the mental and spiritual transformations Africans underwent in vivid biblical images:

Amid the babel of tongues English became not only a lingua franca but a Pentecostal interpreter, speaking a message many were ready to hear. For abandoned by their own gods who had failed to protect them in their home-
land, they came up from the hold of the slave ship like Jacob from the white,
cut off from their own life, ready to be re-born into a new. 46

Those who had been torn from their families and communities and had experienced the traumas of the Middle Passage certainly found themselves in need of spiritual consolation and, in the absence of the rituals of their ancestors, were as open to new religious practices as they were to new languages.

In Sierra Leone recepitives were generally put into the care of Anglican, Methodists, or Baptist missionary societies, whose dedicated missionaries had much success in creating new Christian communities in short order. But it would be a great oversimplification to imagine Africans passively allowing themselves to be indoctrinated by Europeans. For one thing, the preachers were not all Europeans. Given the extraordinarily high mortality among European missionaries and their small numbers, much of the pro-

cess of instruction and leadership was in the hands of Africans. Some were African-American settlers and their descendants, but both Anglicans and Methodists also employed newly converted liberated Africans. These lay leaders or "helpers" organized classes in which newly arrived Africans were given religious instruction in their own languages. Although under the pastor's supervision, the helpers' authority and influence in the congregations were often greater than that of the Europeans. In time, a number of Africans became teachers and catechists for the missionary societies. Some were ordained ministers, including Ajayi Crowther's shipmate, Jo-

seph Bartholomew; an Igbo receptive, Charles Knight; and a Yoruba speaker, Joseph Wright. After two years of training in London, the latter two were named assistant missionaries in 1844 and, following their ordi-
nation as full ministers in 1848, the pair had precedence over more junior missionaries in the colony, much to the chagrin of some of the subordinate Europeans. 47

In addition, African receptive's response to this evangelization was far from passive. Their traumas of enslavement and forced relocation, as Fyne suggests, made them very receptive to the message of salvation that mis-

ionaries and catechists preached. Nor did it take long for new congrega-
tions to gain significant control over their churches, sometimes by switching from one denomination to another. Others built their own churches and hired (and fired) their own ministers. As Chapter 2 has suggested, Africans were also quick to infuse European forms of Christianity with African re-
ligious sentiments. Many gravitated to the Methodists because they were more open than the Anglicans to appeals to the spirit. The process of con-
version was demonstrated by "seeking and finding," encountering salva-
tion through outward signs, such as visions and convulsions, rather than by passive acceptance of the preacher's message. Hymn singing was in-
fused with distinctly African musical forms accompanied by hand clapping and dancing. 48

Additional information on the process of ethnogenesis in Sierra Leone comes from an official report at mid-century. In it the acting governor es-
timated that there were some twenty-one thousand African Christians in the colony, along with two thousand Muslims and at least twelve thousand "Pagans," according even these traditionalists the courtesy of a capital let-
ter. Some of the Muslims were indigenous to the region, but many were liberated Africans, especially Yoruba, who had adopted Islam before their entry into the Atlantic slave trade. The so-called "Pagans" similarly contin-
ued to follow religious traditions they remembered from their homelands, the very numerous Yoruba being conspicuous in following the worship of Shango, the god of thunder and other deities of the Yoruba pantheon. The acting governor believed that many inhabitants professing Christianity also continued to believe in the powers of traditional magic and witchcraft of their homelands. While conceding that decades of efforts had failed to con-
vert many receptive's, he preferred to emphasize how much had been done. 49
Especially for young Africans, the schools of Sierra Leone were an important agent of acculturation. Education was actively promoted by the missionaries and colonial officials, but it is impossible to ignore the very real enthusiasm with which liberated Africans embraced formal education in Western subjects. The schools had their beginnings among the colony's original black settlers from England and North America. Teachers, including some of African descent as well as European merchants and an occasional stranded sailor, were enlisted to meet the demand for schooling among both children and adults. Schools soon became an essential part of the settlements of liberated Africans. For a time schools were entirely in the hands of the missions, which spent great sums to keep up with the demand. Government subsidies helped, and even when the missions imposed modest fees in the 1830s to keep up with the costs, school enrollment continued growing in the prospering colony. In Fye's analysis, "Lack of schooling became a moral stigma: Europeans found their servants too busy writing to do housework. Schools overflown; children had to be turned away; new schools opened." By 1840 there were over eight thousand children in Sierra Leone's schools (a fifth of the colony's population), and the colony's literacy rate was higher than in many parts of Europe. In 1845 a grammar school was opened, and shortly afterwards the old seminary that Ajayi had attended in the late 1820s at Fourah Bay was revitalized and again became an important center for African education."

James Beale "Africanus" Horton, the son of Igbo recaptives, was one of the early graduates of Fourah Bay College and went on to study medicine at Edinburgh University. Horton had to study extra hard to make up for the shortcomings in his premedical studies, but his efforts were rewarded with certificates of honor in several medical exams and the prize in surgery. Horton completed his M.D. in 1859 with a thesis later published as The Medical Topography of the West Coast of Africa. Dr. Horton then served as a British Army physician for two decades, authoring many books and retiring at the rank of surgeon-major. A strong believer in the power of education, he left money in his will to endow a secondary school in the sciences. In 1863 he wrote: "The improvement of the West Coast of Africa...can never be properly accomplished except by the educated native portion of the community....[T]he more the educated portion of the inhabitants is increased, the more will the rise of the other portion be made evident." Generations of twentieth-century Africans strongly confirmed Dr. Horton's enthusiasm for Western education.

While Sierra Leone's freedom and schools have no counterparts in the slave systems of the New World, the process of creolization taking place on both sides of the Atlantic has many suggestive parallels. Language acquisition was a necessity. Religious changes, as any highly appealing new skills were acquired in formal and informal contexts. Such similar outcomes suggest that the element of coercion by slave owners and managers needs to be balanced by sufficient attention to how much enslaved Africans were themselves agents in the process of creolization, responding to new circumstances in ways that reflected their fundamental needs, both material and spiritual. But as important as the adoption of elements of European culture was, it was only one side of the larger acculturation process that was taking place.

AFRICANIZATION

The second cultural transformation at work in Sierra Leone, Africanization, had two distinct components. As has already been suggested, the slave trade that tore Africans from their homelands made them aware of their common identity with strangers from other parts of the continent with whom they were enslaved and transported as well as of the divide that separated them from Europeans in appearance, culture, and authority. However, "African" was not a primary identity for most first-generation emigrants. Interestingly, such identification with the entire African continent was most common among those who immersed themselves most deeply in European culture, some of whom, like Dr. Horton in Sierra Leone and others in Europe (see Chapter 6), added "Africanus" or "the African" to their names as a badge of black identity. However, for most of the pan-African category was merely the context in which they created and recreated identities at a subcontinental level. Just as people in Europe at this time rarely thought of themselves as Europeans (unless they happened to be in Africa or some other non-European place), most Africans away from their homelands redefined themselves in terms of group identities that were much broader than what they had conceived of at home but more meaningful than a generic African identity.

What to call this new level of identity is a problem. Following the European model, it has become common to speak of African nations, which is one of the terms contemporaries also used. Although legitimate, the term has led to two conceptual problems. The first, on which there is a large literature mostly dealing with Europe, is whether nations are natural or artificial. In its simplest formulation the romantic tradition and its followers have seen a nation (and nation-state) evolving on the basis of a common language, culture, and historical experience. Other historians have pointed out that nations were artificial creations of a particular moment out of fairly diverse populations and cultures, which only developed standardized language and cultures once political boundaries and centralized governments were imposed. Because these romantic and dynamic conceptions of nation have such different assumptions the use of the term can be very ambivalent in its implications.

Students of African subnational identities, often called ethnic or tribal identities, have also adopted romantic and dynamic positions. Many twentieth-century African nationalists, like their nineteenth-century counterparts in Europe, saw modern ethnic identities as having existed for centuries, or even millennia. However, this idea has been challenged by historians who argue that modern tribal or ethnic identities were largely
created during the colonial era as the result of missionary education in newly standardized African language, by colonial policies seeking to gov-
ern Africans in homogenized units, by migrations out of local communities that gave Africans a greater awareness of themselves as members of larger cultural communities, and by the politics of anti-colonial African elites. While many scholars of the African diaspora have avoided the pitfalls of the romantic nationalist position, a number of recent scholars have tended to confute the "national" identities of the diaspora with ethnic/tribal iden-
tities of twentieth-century African states, suggesting a static transfer of cul-
tural practices from Africa rather than the dynamic process by which Af-
rican customs were not simply blended or borrowed but actually reshaped and redefined in new settings."
The activities and statements of liberated Africans in Sierra Leone pro-
vide a way to explore the development of these two levels of Africanization and to address, if not entirely resolve, some of the larger issues. The actions and identities of Africans in that colony strongly support the position that African "national" identities (for want of a better term) were new creations, often blending elements of several homeland cultures as they struggled to build meaningful communities in new circumstances.

The process of Afrikanization, like the process of creolization, for many had begun before the Middle Passage was over. Chapter 4 has shown that the expansion of internal trade promoted the use of some African trading languages (such as Hausa, Mandé, and Efik) beyond their homelands. The lives of some captives recounted earlier in this chapter illustrate how en-
slavement and the Middle Passage also spread some languages. Ajayi be-
came familiar with three new Yoruba dialects during his travels and formed close friendships with other Yoruba-speaking youths while awaiting the ship that would carry them away. Ali Eisami of Bormu would have learned Yoruba during his five-year residence among them, and Mbepe of Nvala would have learned Efik during his three years in Old Calabar. The only native Duala speaker in Sierra Leone told Koelle that many others in the colony could speak his language, having learned it as slaves of the Duala or while awaiting shipment into the Atlantic trade from the coastal town of the same name. Speaking the same language did not inevitably lead people to form common bonds, but it was an important building block of a new identity.

The need to construct larger African identities grew after the voyages were over. Although Koelle collected vocabularies in Sierra Leone from 160 different languages, some with several distinct dialects, the Sierra Leone partial census of 1848 lumped the speakers of almost all of them into just nineteen "tribes" or "nations." Rather than being identity groups trans-
ported from elsewhere in Africa, most of these "nations" were creations of the diaspora, and many of the "nations" named in the Sierra Leone census were also widely used in the Americas (although their membership might be differently constructed).

Some particular examples will make the process of identity development clearer. The largest of the African "nations" in Sierra Leone had a linguistic base. The census identified over a third of those counted as "Akoo," or Aku. These were Agyi’s people, like him victims of the wars that ravaged what is now southwestern Nigeria in the nineteenth century. Today most speakers of this language would identify themselves as Yoruba, but in this period that name was common only for residents of the northern kingdom of Oyo, although missionaries had begun using it for other dialects as well. Koelle was against using "Yoruba" as the name for all of the dozen dialects he catalogued, preferring "Aku," the name by which they were called in Sierra Leone. As he knew, the fact of the matter was the speakers of these dialects had no common name for themselves in their homeland because they had no common identity. "Aku" was simply a word that occurred in a greeting common to them all.

Next most numerous in Sierra Leone were the Igbo, or "Ebo," as the census spelled the name. At home the Igbo speakers inhabited hundreds of autonomous villages and village groups spread over a large area. Their political disunity and geographical dispersal, as Koelle discovered, had fos-
tered linguistic and cultural fragmentation. He collected examples of five dialects of Igbo and listed a total of fifteen "countries" whose people were called Igbo in Sierra Leone, but stressed that, like the Yoruba, Igbo speakers in their homeland shared no national name and knew "only the names of their respective districts or countries." "In speaking to some of them re-
garding this name [Igbo]," Koelle wrote, "I learned that they never had heard it till they came to Sierra Leone." The Niger explorer William Baikie also emphasized the great dialectical and cultural differences "between dif-
ferent parts of this extensive country" and pointed out how such diverse homeland roots produced a common identity only in the diaspora: "In Igbo each person has, as a sailor would say, from the particular district where he was born, but when away from home all are Igbo." Some other "nations" in Sierra Leone shared a common language. Speak-
ners of the various dialects of Efik ("Calabar" in Sierra Leone), Hausa, Falbe, Akan ("Kromantee") of the Gold Coast, or Wolof came to use language as a way of distinguishing themselves from other Africans in Sierra Leone, even though no such national consciousness or political unity existed in their homelands. However, several other "nations" in Sierra Leone had nei-	her political unity in their homelands nor a common language in the di-
aspora. The third largest group in the 1848 census were the "Paapah" (or "Pope") from the hinterland of the western Slave Coast—people whom Koelle reported spoke five different languages. Other such polyglot nations were the Mandingo (five Mandé or Mandinka languages), the Bini (the Edo of the kingdom of Benin, plus speakers of six or seven neighboring lan-
guages), the "Moko" of Cameroon (sixteen different languages), the "Kongo" (eighteen distinct languages scattered over a vast area of West Central Africa), and the "Mozambique" of southeastern Africa (six lan-
guages). John Thornton has tried to argue that such regional clusters al-
ready possessed a large measure of cultural unity. The evidence is really too
thin to prove or disprove such an assertion. Thornton’s assumption that lan-
guage is a surrogate for culture is akin to the circular reasoning of romantic
nationalists, but it may well duplicate the thoughts of the members of these
nations-in-formation. However, as a careful reading of the events leading
to the creation of Germany and Italy in the nineteenth century makes evi-
dent, the territories and peoples who were included in each new state were
not preordained. The fact that African “nations” developed out of different
memberships in the diaspora further directs one’s attention to the dynamics
of the particular events, not to static assumptions of national destiny.62
In Sierra Leone, it is clear that these new African “nations” were jointly
created by the British authorities overseeing the resettlement of the tens
of thousands of recaptives rescued from the Atlantic slave trade and by the
recaptives themselves. At first officials encouraged the formation of villages
on an ethnic or linguistic basis, as linguistic names like Kissy Town, Busa
Town, and Congo Town suggest. Like early neighborhoods of “Irish” or
“Italian” immigrants in eastern American cities, these appeared more ho-
mogeneous to outsiders than to the disparate individuals who inhabited
them. Some of these early villages show clearly how slender ties could
become the basis of new unity. The liberated Africans’ Pa Demba’s Town
in 1813 had in common only a knowledge of Portuguese. The Vai, Man-
dinka, Wolof, and Susu (Mende) settlers who founded the village of Hog-
brook shared only a loose regional connection. In the face of growing num-
ers of recaptives arriving in the 1820s, Sierra Leone authorities abandoned
efforts to create settlements defined by language or region. Instead, Africans
liberated about the same time from ships captured on different parts of the
coast might be settled together, despite the fact that they spoke dozens of
mutually unintelligible languages. Newly arrived Africans were still put
under the care of residents who spoke their own language or something
close to it, but to communicate with their neighbors they needed English
or another common language.63
Within these artificial communities African settlers regularly took steps
to create their own solidarity by forming beneficial societies, often called
“companies,” whose fellow members accorded each other the kinds of mu-
tual aid customary in kinship-based villages elsewhere in Africa. Many of
these companies had a common linguistic core (to which some outsiders
attached themselves), but others were based on different principles. One
Sierra Leonean (himself descended from African Americans from Nova Sco-
tia) reported that soon after a new shipload of people “of different tribes
or nations” was settled in a village they formed a club “including the whole
of their shipmates, without distinction of nation, for the purpose of mutual
assistance.” This club of all shipmates, he indicated, was called the Big
Company, which he distinguished from the Little Company, a separate eth-
nically based club that, in addition to other activities, helped preserve the
festivals, dances, music, and other customs of their homelands. Inevitably,
these transplanted “traditional” cultural events were composites of the
more varied versions in the homeland communities with new features or
understandings added based on life in Sierra Leone. As might be expected,
the largest ethnic companies in the villages were formed by Yoruba speak-
ers, who even had a “king” to whom Yoruba from villages all over Sierra
Leone pledged allegiance. Perhaps in imitation of the numerous and well-
organized Yoruba, other “national” groups, such as the Nupe, Igbo, Man-
dinka, and Susu, also chose kings and other officers, although none of them
achieved the Aku’s degree of solidarity. However, it is instructive that this
solidarity did not persist among the many Yoruba who left Sierra Leone
and returned to their homeland, where decades of civil warfare had led to
the formation of several new kingdoms. As Fye puts it, “only in Sierra
Leone were all the children of Odogwu, the Yoruba ancest-god, united.”
Nor were companies all dedicated to preserving homeland customs. Some
Sierra Leonans formed multiethnic Christian companies dedicated to
warring off the attraction of “pagan” practices among their members. Other
Christian congregations developed a strong ethnic base.64
These new “nations” drew upon shared languages and customs, but they
were formed in Sierra Leone under circumstances conceivable only outside
their homelands. They not only made use of institutions, such as written
constitutions (in English), that had no counterpart in their homelands, but
they also borrowed freely from the other emerging nations around them.
Sometimes members showed their awareness of the new structures that
held them together, as “when a group of Bassa described themselves as of
the Bassa Society, not nation.” Finally, national identities were not ethnically
homogeneous. One reigning “king” of the Aku in Sierra Leone, who went
by the name John Macaulay, was apparently Hausa in origin. The members
of numerous languages in Sierra Leone with a dozen or fewer native speak-
ers had little choice but to affiliate with larger groups that did not represent
their actual origins.65
To be sure, these new nations were not created out of nothing. In their
struggle to rebuild their lives and communities, Africans naturally drew
upon everything they knew and loved from home, but they also adapted
old ways to new circumstances, adopted new customs and beliefs, and en-
larged the circle of their contacts and understandings. The most important
point is the dynamic nature of what was happening, not the static “sur-
vival” of bits and pieces from home. To focus on the relics (the survivals)
rather than on the dynamics by which African individuals and communities
survived by reinventing themselves is to miss the point. To use a scriptural
image Sierra Leonean recaptives would have understood, they were pour-
ing old wine into new wineskins as well as new wine into old skins. Sierra
Leone showed a marvelous blend of creolization and Africanization, some-
times existing in harmony, sometimes in conflict, and sometimes running
along parallel lines of development.
The same capacity for inventing new “national” identities in Sierra Leone
also manifested itself in the development of inter-“national” organizations
and alliances. In the village of Waterloo, for example, the leaders of the
major ethnic groups organized a sort of United Nations of Africa to mediate
disputes. Known as the “Seventeen Nations,” it represented the village's seventeen largest ethnic groups, as they had evolved in the colony. The Seventeen Nations had been formed to settle interethnic disputes following a “war” involving three of the nations during Christmas week in 1843. The “war” was reportedly set off by the unauthorized bathing practice of a “Calabar” woman, which offended “Aku” sensibilities. However, in the conflict the vastly outnumbered “Calabar” were joined by the “Igbo” people, perhaps out of some sense of common regional origins, but just as likely growing out of “Igbo” rivalry with the numerically dominant Yoruba speakers. Such rivalry prefigures the ethnic politics of twentieth-century Nigeria, but in precolonial times the Yoruba and Igbo homelands were too isolated from each other for rivalry to have taken place. Such rivalries and identities were first born in the diaspora.8

Recaptives in Sierra Leone obviously had much greater freedom than Africans who became slaves in the Americas, yet the process of Africanization proceeded along remarkably similar lines. At greater remove from their homelands and with less freedom of movement, the development of a pan-African identity probably proceeded faster among what historian Irna Berlin has called the “plantation generations” in the Americas than it did in Sierra Leone. The development of a “national” identity, but in a regional core also paralleled what happened in Sierra Leone. As Berlin puts it, “rather than transporting a primordial nationality or ethnicity to the New World, ... Igbo or Angolans who searched out their countrymen in the Americas may have made more of those connections in the New World than they did in the Old precisely because of their violent separation from their homeland.” Not only were such national identities greatly enhanced, but they were also highly diverse in membership, especially as they transcended the first generation. Historian Philip Morgan has pointed out that music, dance, and other aspects of African-American culture regularly blended styles from various places in Africa under the name of a single African nation and that individuals regularly adopted the identity of a nation to which they had no historic claim. The product might be a blend of music, dance, and other aspects of African-American culture regularly blended styles from various places in Africa under the name of a single African nation and that individuals regularly adopted the identity of a nation to which they had no historic claim. The product might be a blend of a music, dance, and other aspects of African-American culture regularly blended styles from various places in Africa under the name of a single African nation and that individuals regularly adopted the identity of a nation to which they had no historic claim. The product might be a blend or synthesis of something entirely new. Customs from one part of Africa might be adopted by people from another part, as in Jamaica, where Angolan immigrants used personal names originally from the Gold Coast. If, as Irna Berlin puts it, “identity was more a garment that might be worn or discarded, rather than a skin which never changed its spots,” the names of African nations in the Americas could also be quite plastic. Thus the same cluster of Yoruba-speaking people called Aku in Sierra Leone were known as Lucumi in Jamaica and Cuba and as Nagô in Brazil and São Tomé and Príncipe. The names Calabar and Moko became confused in the Americas, where Moko was sometimes used for all Enk speakers and Calabar might be employed to include all who passed through Old Calabar on their way to the sea. In the Americas Igbo was also often used in a broader sense, in some places including Enk speakers, just as Calabar sometimes included Igbo speakers. Koele’s informants included a dozen individuals who stated they were sold from Calabar, not a single one of which was a native speaker of Enk or any Igbo dialect. Each of the twelve spoke a distinct language, and Koele assigned these languages to four different language families.9

CONCLUSION

How much did the Africans who encountered Europe as victims of the slave trade have in common with the princes, kings, and merchants who dealt with Europeans as equals? Subordination and sufferings, abuse and alienation from homelands set the captive exiles apart, but when the enslaved Africans' inner experiences are considered, one can discern some remarkable parallels. Even though the process of enslavement, alienation from home, and transportation across the ocean was a traumatic one, African exiles showed great capacity for adjusting to new situations and learning new skills. Like their elite brothers and sisters of the coastal ports, they mastered new languages, internalized new religions, acquired new skills, and created new social networks. The process in the Americas took place over generations, but change was most rapid in the first generation. As Herbert Klein points out: “In all slave societies where statistics on origins are available, it appears that Africans were represented in the skilled occupations in numbers equal to their share of the population. They became carpenters, stonemasons, blacksmiths, and even artists in as equal a ratio to their numbers as did the creole slaves.”

Both creolization and Africanization were faster and deeper among the Africans whom Europeans estranged from their homelands than among those who encountered Europeans coming to their coasts to trade. Enslaved Africans brought some occupational skills, such as blacksmithing and farming, with them to the Americas, just as they brought cultural skills and traditions. In the mix of Africans from various places and African Americans in slave societies in the Americas, particular languages, religions, and folkways did not long survive unchanged, but influenced speech patterns, belief systems, and musical, grooming, and eating patterns in the Americas. Rather than isolated “survivals” of a particular part of Africa, one sees a dynamic process of reinventing African cultural norms and identities. In the absence of close kinship networks and village ties of the homelands, “national” identities assumed an importance they did not have in Africa and acquired a membership that was often at variance with actual origins. For Africans, as for other immigrants, the Americas were not a museum in which to display ancestral traditions, but a canvas on which identities might be blended and reinvented. The past did not tyrannize the present; the living breathed new life into forms from the past. Such “nations” might endure for decades or fade away, but they existed and were meaningful only in the context of a larger and even newer identity. The forced immigrants discovered themselves as Africans in the Americas and their children as African Americans. Under less brutal and often quite comfortable circumstances, African immigrants and visitors were
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experiencing similar transformations of culture and identity in Europe. As we will see in the next chapter, there too the discovery of the foreign involved a rediscovery of self.

Notes


5. Ibid., pp. 10, 12.


8. “A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawasu Greeneinavi, an African Prince, as Related by Himself,” in Passages of the Black Atlantic: Five Slave Narratives from the Enlightenment, 1772–1815, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and William L. Andrews (Washington, DC: Civitas, 1998), pp. 31–40, quotations pp. 37 and 40. The original narrative was published in 1773, but most readers will find this reprint more accessible. Some parts of Greeneinavi’s story are so improbable that it might make more sense if he had misunderstood what was told him in an unfamiliar language and was simply the victim of a merchant turned kidnapper. However, his fears were real enough and convinced him that it would be better to live as a slave than risk being “treated very ill, or, possibly, murdered.”


15. Equiano, Narrative, pp. 42–43, 55–56. Equiano’s account may incorporate details from voyages other than his own, since he may have been more than six times at the time of his passage.


17. Barbier, Description, in Donnan, Documents, 1290.


21. PP 1859, xxxvi (2569), enclosure in no. 147, Commander Hunt to Commodore Wise, 6 November 1858, p. 205, citing the testimony of knowledgeable headmen. Technically, the Regius Corvi was not recruiting slaves but rather indentured laborers for the Indian Ocean colony of Reuvin, but, because it obtained such recruits by purchasing them from their African owners and then declaring them free, most observers have seen this as a continuation of the slave trade in disguise.

22. Quoted in Ellis, Rise of African Slavery, p. 229. Jofel was a state, but the term was also used as an ethnic designation; Jofel were Wolof speaking. For the meaning of Barfaa in this period, see Philip D. Curtin, Economic Change in Precolonial Africa: Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975), pp. 178–80.


A short and unusual autobiography, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawasaw Groniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself*, was published circa 1770 in the English city of Bath. It quickly went through several more editions. James Albert (the former Prince Ukawasaw Groniosaw) had told his life’s story to an Englishwoman of Leominster, who arranged for its publication. In the first part Groniosaw tells of his childhood in the kingdom of Bornu, his enslavement by a false companion and transport to Barbados, his life as a servant in New York City, his religious conversion, and his military service in the West Indies. The second part records his adventures in Europe, where he moved from the West Indies. Although his first experience in Europe was to be defrauded of his savings by an English landlady, most of his recollections are of aid and kindness from good people. After working for a year as a butler in Amsterdam, Groniosaw returned to England to marry a poor English weaver named Betty, whose debts he paid off. The happy couple had children, losing one to smallpox, and, like the majority of English people at the time, lived near the edge of poverty.

Two themes in Groniosaw’s life may surprise modern readers. The first is his positive view of race relations. Some people who treated him badly may have had prejudice in their hearts, but not once does Groniosaw suggest that his color or place of origin was at the root of his misfortunes. In contrast, he often tells of Europeans who treated him well: his Dutch master in New York who “was very good to me” and whose wife sent him to school, the “gracious worthy Gentleman” who employed him in Amsterdam and was also “very good to me,” the “agreeable young woman” in that Dutch city whose savings and hand in marriage he refused in order to marry the indebted English widow Betty (his “blessed partner”), the Quaker gentleman (his “worthy friend”) who rescued him from acute poverty and helped him find regular work—even the Dutch sea captain who bought him in Africa (thus, Groniosaw believed, rescuing him from being