James H. Sweet
Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion, in the African-Portuguese World, 1441-1770
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In Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441-1770, James H. Sweet, Professor of History at University of Wisconsin, Madison, explores the religious beliefs and cultural practices of African slaves in the African-Portuguese colonial world, focusing on Brazil, through the lens of resistance. Sweet argues that enslaved Africans in seventeenth-century Brazil, the majority of whom came from Central Africa, deployed a wide variety of “Angolan” ritual practices and beliefs, including divinations, ordeals, ritual burials, dietary restrictions, and cures, to address and make sense of the conditions of their enslavement in the Americas. Although Recreating Africa is just one of many books that examines African “survivals” in the new world, Sweet departs from previous literature on African slave communities by basing his analysis of slave survivals in Africa rather than in the Americas, following in the footsteps of historians and anthropologists such as Melville Herskovits, Lorenzo Turner, Bill Bascom, and John Thornton.

In the first part of his monograph, Sweet explores the mental and physical burdens of slavery, including “breaks in lineage, stolen childhood, death, disease, hunger, low fertility and physical abuse.” In chapter one, Sweet posits the demographic contours of the slave trade in the Portuguese colonial world between 1441 and 1770. He distinguishes between four distinct phases in the slave trade. The first phase (1441-1521) resulted in the forced transfer of roughly 156,000 Africans from Mauritania and the Upper Guinea Coast to Iberia and various Atlantic Islands. The second phase (1518-1580s) brought more than 150,000 persons from Senegambia and Upper Guinea to Portuguese territories in the Americas. In the third phase (1580s-1690s), Central Africans dominated the slave trade. More than 560,000 Africans arrived in São Tomé and Brazil from Central Africa during the seventeenth century. In the fourth phase (1690s-1770s), Africans from Mina contributed to the development of slave society in Brazil.

In chapter two, Sweet analyzes the structures of kinship, family, and households, which were greatly affected by the imbalance in the gender ratio of enslaved Africans. Because African forced laborers could not find partners for marriage, many Central Africans established bonds of kinship that were culturally acceptable even if the Catholic Church did not accept them. These included a variety of same-sex relationships employing flexible gender categories, of which the “quimbanda sodomites” were representative. If enslaved Africans, however, found ways of establishing meaningful bonds in the face of skewed gender ratios, they nonetheless faced many difficulties in cementing these relationships.

The challenges posed by disease, mortality rates, and slave masters form the body of chapter three. Even in the face of disease, physical and sexual abuse, and manumission—not all enslaved Africans broke down. Many African captives fought back and resisted when they could. While this resistance could take the form of violent outbreaks aimed towards the master, resistance also manifested itself in more subtle acts of rebellion, such as the breaking of tools and work slow-downs. The most important form of subtle rebellion took the form of African religion and spirituality—the subject of the second part of the book.

In the second part of his monograph, Sweet discusses the different ways that trafficked African captives used their cultural beliefs and practices to respond to the daily conditions.

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of their enslavement. In chapter four, Sweet shows how Islamic persons from the Jolof Confederation resisted enslavement by drawing upon their military experience. In this chapter, Sweet also shows how the Portuguese criminalized Islam and indigenous African “religions,” because Christianity was normative in the Portuguese colonial world. Nevertheless, this did not prevent Africans from practicing their indigenous “religions,” as it “was unlikely that any person would readily abandon the religious beliefs that gave structure and meaning to their everyday lives.”

The core of these indigenous religious beliefs are the subject of chapters six (divination), seven (curing), and eight (witchcraft), while chapter five places indigenous African “religions” in their scholarly context. In the face of hunger, disease, and abuse, enslaved Central Africans used divination, *calundú*, and witchcraft to create a sense of order in an unfamiliar world. Sweet’s analysis of these religious practices shows how African captives challenged and resisted their masters, carving out a small place for themselves in an unequal world. Diviners, for instance, used rituals from their homelands to create a communal equilibrium—balancing the demands of the master with the needs of the slaves. They played a judicial role, and had the ability to both find outsiders guilty of crimes and find slave suspects innocent of crimes. Curers fulfilled a medical role by deploying *calundú*, a ritual that relied on human possession, as a “medicine” to address the unfamiliar diseases and social illnesses Central Africans encountered in Brazil. Finally, enslaved Africans used witchcraft as a more obvious and outright form of political resistance through which they injured or outright killed their master and his family. While I have only outlined the heart of each chapter, Sweet paints a portrait of each religious practice with a multitude of examples pulled from the archives of the Inquisition.

In the final part of his monograph, Sweet analyzes the broader impacts of the social and cultural practices of African slaves on Brazilian society during the colonial period. He shows that the descendants of Central African slaves did not quickly embrace Christianity, but that a distinct Afro-Brazilian Catholicism did eventually emerge. In this section, Sweet successfully demonstrates that the religious beliefs and practices of African captives affected the lives of the white Portuguese settlers just as much as they affected those of Central Africans.

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While Sweet should be praised for rooting his analysis of African “religion” in Africa, this monograph is not without its shortcomings. He could have made more of an effort to address those aspects of Central African society that may have impacted the development of African “religion.” His discussion about continuities in African “religion” between Central Africa and Brazil does not address the fact that slavery was widespread in Central Africa. This leads us to wonder how the presence of slavery in Central African society may have transformed African “religions” that made their way to Brazil even before they had left the continent.

In chapter five, Sweet argues that the Kongoles were not Christians because they were actually “bi-religious,” living out their lives within two “parallel” cosmologies simultaneously. This argument, however, assumes that Christianity constitutes what historians find in the catechism, but there is not any discussion of how Christian beliefs were manifested in a Portuguese catechism as well as how they were expressed in the Kikongo catechism (1624) and the Kimbundu catechism (1642). A catechismal definition of Christianity also does not account for the fact that Christianity is always influenced by the social, cultural, and political context in which it is practiced. In staking out his position, Sweet leaves little room for the possibility of religious syncretism in his analysis of Central African religion.

Take the sacrament of baptism, for instance. Sweet discusses how Central African slaves “misinterpreted” the Christian meaning of the sacrament of baptism. Sweet correctly concludes that by equating baptism with the taking of salt, “Central Africans interpreted Christian rituals through their own cosmological lens.” Possessing a different understanding of Christianity than the Europeans, however, is not the same as not being Christian. The Central Africans’ misinterpretation of baptism did not preclude them from believing the sacrament possessed real spiritual power and was capable of repelling evil—however enslaved African may have understood the concept. The novel meaning that Central Africans instilled in the act of baptism is just one example of how they “Africanized” Christian concepts. In short, the difference in worldview between Central Africans and Europeans functions as an argument for the existence of not just one all-encompassing monolithic Christianity, but rather many frameworks of belief and practice, each possessing its own unique syncretistic nature but sharing a belief in the protective power of Jesus Christ.

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Finally, Sweet could have improved his monograph by including a methodological discussion about the documents that form the evidentiary mainstay of his monograph. He does not address how the intended purpose of the Catholic Inquisition and the role of torture in the creation of its documents may have distorted the information contained in these highly biased and challenging archival materials. This discussion ought to be a central part of the book, because the Inquisition records are the only serious data on the religious life of enslaved Africans available to Sweet.

These issues notwithstanding, *Recreating Africa* is an impressive addition to the literature on African religions, Brazil, Angola, and the Afro-Atlantic World more generally.