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Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links

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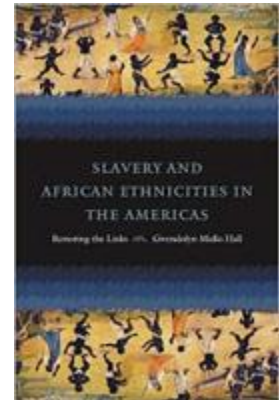
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Book Review

Gwendolyn Midlo Hall. *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. 248 pp, 24 illustrations, bibliography, index. \$19.95 paperback. ISBN 978-0-8078-5862-2.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archeology Newsletter by Patrick H. Morgan, S&ME, Inc., Charleston, SC



At first glance, the book Midlo Hall delivers the reader appears typical of a historical ethnic study but upon closer examination the book explores the intricacies of African ethnicity and the desirable qualities of each ethnicity employed that were so desirable for the institution itself. Midlo Hall looks at every angle of the slave trade with regards to ethnicity. Perhaps in a different study this may be an overload of information, but the greater picture established by the analysis of African ethnicity imported into Colonial and Antebellum America, Brazil, and the Caribbean creates a well crafted analysis of the African Diaspora.

In terms of her data sets, the author employs a series of internet accessible databases concerning the slave trade, both published by other scholars and herself. This publicly accessible data allows the reader to have access to the raw data that underpins the production of this and other similar works. The ability for the public, researchers and lay people alike, to access this data lies at the heart of Midlo Hall's desire for "a better-informed discussion of African cultural influences in various regions in the Americas" (p. 165).

The book is divided into seven chapters. The author's goal of the book may ultimately be to make "invisible Africans visible" (also the title of Chapter 2). At the very least it is one of several that the author must achieve for the book to be a successful example of ethnic studies. If Midlo Hall's goals for Chapters 1 and 2 are to introduce the reader to the intricacies of African ethnic groups and the study of the African Diaspora as a whole, she succeeds. Additionally she wades through the records found on both sides of the Atlantic to infer meaning from the tangled jargon and missing data.

Chapter 3 discusses the myths associated with the idea of a diverse African ethnic background and how the reality was that ethnic groups were clustered regionally in America. She summarily concludes, giving proper thought, that "although Africa is a huge continent with many different peoples, only some of them were involved in the Atlantic slave trade, and relatively few African ethnicities were brought to the Americas in significant numbers" (p. 57). She goes on to discuss the idea that slave ships were scooping up Africans wherever they could be found was false. In fact, she explains that in many cases, slaves were transported from few places along the coast to create a shorter stay on the slave ship for the enslaved. This ensured that more enslaved Africans had the potential to survive and thus protect the ultimate profits of investors.

In addition, Midlo Hall discusses the reasons for the clustering of ethnic groups in America. She establishes a chain of history for the Atlantic slave trade that begins with the Portuguese and their African holdings and that ultimately includes such as Britain, Spain, Holland and France. The clustering theory she presents is established solidly in documentary evidence. For example, Midlo Hall writes that specific crops in Africa needed specialists. In the case of rice, the areas where this crop prevailed in Africa are where slaves were acquired to establish and cultivate the crop in America. In South Carolina, for example, of the total 556 voyages to the colony, 44% came from the rice-cultivating regions of Senegambia and Upper Guinea. Other areas such as Georgia, Florida, Northeast Brazil and the Mississippi Delta have even higher percentages of voyages from Senegambia and Upper Guinea further illustrating Midlo Hall's reasoning for the clustering. Other reasons for the clustering had to do with socialization and the idea that the majority of slave owners wanted their slaves fractionalized, while not wholly untrue, was generally misconstrued.

While Chapter 3 focuses on the overall reasons for the clustering ethnic groups with the Transatlantic slave trade, Chapters 4-6, focus on specific locales in Africa that are notable epicenters of the African Diaspora. Chapter 4 looks at Greater Senegambia and Upper Guinea, the area where the rice cultivation specialty is highest. Because of the knowledge of rice cultivation, Senegambians were clustered more in the American colonies than anywhere else in the Americas.

Chapter 5 concentrates on Lower Guinea: Ivory Coast, Gold Coast, Slave Coast/Bight of Benin, while Chapter 6 takes a close examination of Lower Guinea: Bight of Biafra. In these chapters she tackles the difficult question in regard to the identity of African ethnicities in the Americas. In particular she uses the example of the Mina people to show the inconsistency of slavers, slave owners, record keepers and modern day scholars. She examines why the

reoccurring use of "Mina," an ethnic group whose name is used in a variety of ways over time is problematic. The author uses this example to "illustrate the pitfalls of seizing on obvious, nominal similarities to identify African ethnicities" (p. 114). Additionally she establishes how ethnic groups vary with relation to geographical locations such as the 'Gold Coast,' 'Ivory Coast,' i.e. that are named for the natural resource found in that region and how these monikers can add confusion to African ethnicity. She discusses the Igbo, an ethnicity in Africa that has been overlooked traditionally with regards to African ethnicities in the Americas. Here, Midlo Hall adequately discusses how Igbo women, in particular, because of low infant mortality rates were a highly valuable asset in the continuation of slavery. Within Chapter 7, Midlo Hall discusses the Bantulands of West Central Africa and Mozambique. She explains that the slave trade began quite early in this region and ended very late. The clustering of Africans in the Americas can be seen periodically. Africans from Angola are settled in the east coast of South America; the Kongo in the Caribbean and the U.S. coastal regions; and the Bantu, which are found in clusters in all parts of the Americas.

It is clear that Midlo Hall wants to reestablish the links that only remain in the remaining documentary evidence she and other scholars have sought to keep intact. With this work she accomplishes that goal. She is able to relate a documentary poor history by utilizing the document riches contained within the slave databases she has utilized. For matters concerning the American Archaeologist, especially where ethnic studies may arise, this book provides an invaluable resource. Despite the lack of recorded information with regards to slaves, slavery, and the documentation of their roots, this book is a very good example of how much information does exist and when utilized properly, can provide a wealth of knowledge concerning the African Diaspora.

Editor's note: Dr. Hall also maintains a searchable online database, entitled [Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy](#).