
Diouf, Sylviane A. – *Dreams of Africa in Alabama. The Slave Ship Clotilda and the Story of the Last Africans Brought to America*

Sylvie KANDÉ



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafraicaines/13842>

DOI: 10.4000/etudesafraicaines.13842

ISSN: 1777-5353

Publisher

Éditions de l'EHESS

Printed version

Date of publication: 9 December 2008

Number of pages: 889-894

ISSN: 0008-0055

Electronic reference

Sylvie KANDÉ, « Diouf, Sylviane A. – *Dreams of Africa in Alabama. The Slave Ship Clotilda and the Story of the Last Africans Brought to America* », *Cahiers d'études africaines* [Online], 192 | 2008, Online since 11 December 2008, connection on 22 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafraicaines/13842> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesafraicaines.13842>

This text was automatically generated on 22 September 2020.

© Cahiers d'Études africaines

Diouf, Sylviane A. – *Dreams of Africa in Alabama. The Slave Ship Clotilda and the Story of the Last Africans Brought to America*

Sylvie KANDÉ

REFERENCES

DIOUF, Sylviane A. – *Dreams of Africa in Alabama. The Slave Ship Clotilda and the Story of the Last Africans Brought to America*. Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2007, 340 p., biblio., index.

- 1 In the introductory essay to his 1988 edited collection entitled *The Social Life of Things*, Arjun Appadurai observed that, “even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social contexts” (p. 5). Appadurai’s thesis could be fruitfully applied to slave ships as major components of the material culture of the slave trade. They are indeed “things-in-motion”—namely, commodities intended for the circulation of other commodities, among which commodified men and women figure prominently. They are also icons that loom large and circulate in the historical and literary imagination¹. To be sure, most slavers have not withstood the passage of time to become, in Marcus Wood’s terms, “site[s] for memory”². The few wrecks explored by archeologists have rarely yielded a significant amount of usable information³, with the exception of vessels such as the English *Henrietta Marie* (1700) and *Sea Horse* (1728), the Danish *Fredensborg* (1768), and the Portuguese *James Matthews* (1841).
- 2 Historian Sylviane Diouf’s book, *Dreams of Africa in Alabama* contributes to expand our understanding of slavers’ “paths and diversions”⁴ through a well-crafted and gripping

biography of the *Clotilda*, the last documented ship to import enslaved Africans into the United States. The “social life” of the schooner *Clotilda* began in 1855 in Mobile, a southern city described by the author as the “slave-trading emporium of Alabama”, (p. 13) where her rigging was announced by a local newspaper (p. 24). Built by William Foster, a famous ship carpenter, who happened to support the extension of slavery to Central America, she was bought for \$35,000 by a wealthy local businessman and slaveholder, Timothy Meaher. The “genealogy” of the *Clotilda*’s voyage to the coast of Africa in 1860 includes another illegal yet successful operation led in 1858, when the *Wanderer* left New York to collect four hundred slaves in the Congo River area and smuggled them back into the United States with almost complete impunity. Indeed, after being summarily altered to serve her real purpose—slave trading—and then disguised to avoid detection by an African Squadron in charge of repressing a commerce outlawed in the United States since 1808, the *Clotilda* crossed the Atlantic and landed in Ouidah, Dahomey. After a brief stay, she was on her way back to Mobile with one hundred and ten Africans on board. Minutely reconstituted by Diouf, the details of the intricate scheme devised by Meaher to unload the *Clotilda*’s human cargo reveal the complicities he enjoyed among the court officials in Alabama (p. 79) as well as the extent of his local clientele. Indeed within hours, Meaher managed to mobilize no less than three boats to haul the *Clotilda* and relocate the Africans. He also sold the *Clotilda*’s human cargo in a matter of weeks, except for the thirty-two slaves he kept for himself. On his order, the slaver, whose voyage had already attracted intense media coverage, was burnt and sunk in a bayou: although, as Diouf stresses, “her hull remained visible at low tide for three quarters of a century, as if to remind everyone of the Africans’ ordeal,” (p. 75) her owner not only escaped official investigation, but became a state hero of sorts (pp. 237, 249). The *Clotilda*’s “afterlife” has been marked by a series of debates regarding her actual location, and the authenticity of parts (allegedly taken from the wreck) that have been put up for sale on the Internet. The outcome of an underwater archeological investigation, carried out in the last decade of the 20th century, was disappointing. *Dreams of Africa in Alabama* must therefore be credited for establishing the historicity of the *Clotilda*’s 1860 slaving expedition, often omitted, disregarded as a hoax, or misrepresented in specialized literature.

- 3 A study of the *Clotilda* as a cultural commodity, both intended for exchange and facilitating exchange in the business of slavery, *Dreams of Africa in Alabama* is also a groundbreaking analysis of the slave ship as a social space and a mobile community bound by water, to borrow Jane Webster’s concepts⁵, with an emphasis on the enslaved majority. The first section of Diouf’s essay describes the historical forces and individual agencies that brought together one hundred and ten people from various places in today’s Benin and Nigeria onto the last slave ship bound for the United States.

The shipmates’ experience of the Middle Passage is then reconstituted on the basis of a series of interviews conducted by several scholars, novelists and journalists until 1935, when 95-year-old Oluale Kossola aka Cudjo Lewis, the last and most famous of the *Clotilda*’s survivors, passed away. The author’s reference to other slave narratives (Equiano’s, Baquaqua’s and Cuguano’s most notably) and her own authoritative insights shed a useful light on their ordeal. A third section examines the array of strategies employed by the shipmates—both on the plantation where they were kept for almost five years and as freed-men and women in the post-abolition South—to preserve the sense of community they had developed on the *Clotilda*; an effort that materialized with the foundation of African Town circa 1867. The epilogue focuses on the various

attempts made by Africatown, a community that today boasts three thousand inhabitants, to preserve the legacy of the shipmates' experience in America.

- 4 A specialist of the cultural history of economic migrations from Africa to the West—as attested by her previous publications, most notably *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (1999) and *In Motion: The African-American Migration Experience* (2005)—Diouf has developed a methodology that incorporates the Foucauldian notion of history as a (transnational) “profusion of entangled events,” but examines both the patterns created by these successive entanglements in the *longue durée*, and in their local micro-manifestations. Material objects, such as the *Clotilda* slave ship and the bronze bust of Cudjo that was stolen in 2002 from the Mobile Union Missionary Baptist Church, are called upon to precisely “illuminate their human and social contexts”. Drawing from the vast amount of written and oral documentation she gathered in the United States and in Benin, Diouf delineates the specific impact of the trans-Atlantic slave trade on the lives and self-perception of marginalized African individuals, and the corrective effects of their personal decisions on the dynamics of macro-politics and economy. For instance, chapter two describes the political transition in mid-19th century Dahomey between King Ghezo and King Glèlè, and the kingdom's subsequent involvement with tolerated slave trading towards Cuba, and “illegal” slave trading towards other regions of the Americas (pp. 30-32). These West African and Caribbean events are then correlated with the project of reopening the international slave trade, an idea that gained ground in the South of the United States, and to which Meaher, Foster and their clique obviously subscribed. In turn, the Africans they brought to Mobile in 1860 were caught in a web of political and economic developments at the local, regional and national level—the Civil War, the Abolition of slavery, the Reconstruction era and the Jim Crow laws, the Alabama convict leasing system, the Great Depression, and the Great Migration, to name a few. Diouf convincingly demonstrates that, though severely impaired by their social status as slaves, and then as Negroes/Blacks, and culturally isolated both as “bozales” in a largely creolized African American community (pp. 109-110; 241-243) and as Yoruba-speakers hailing from a region (the Bight of Benin) that did not traditionally supply the United States with slaves, the *Clotilda*'s shipmates chose to become actors in American social history. They learned English, kept their American or Americanized name after emancipation, petitioned to acquire a citizenship that ironically was granted to them and to their former owner at the same time (p. 166), bought land, converted to Christianity, remarried, and registered to vote in spite of Meaher's renewed intimidations.

- 5 They simultaneously managed to preserve the social and emotional bounds they had established while on the *Clotilda*, and periodically reaffirmed their will to return to their homeland in a concrete or symbolic manner. In her reconstruction of the *Clotilda*'s voyage, Diouf points out the a-typicality of the shipmates' sex-ratio (50/50) and the percentage of children (50%) on a 19th century slaver (p. 65), hypothesizing that Meaher and Foster, aware of the risks involved with importing Africans half a century after the abolition of slave trade, had an acute interest in the slaves' longevity and reproduction.

Her observations regarding the *Clotilda*'s demographics suggest that the last known American slaving operation may have deliberately taken the ignominious form of child trafficking. It reminds us also that more research is needed on childrens' experience of trans-Atlantic slavery.

- 6 The cargo's average age may partially explain why Diouf takes issue with studies that systematically ascribe to Africans crossing the Atlantic a range of emotions that are well encapsulated in Stephanie Smallwood's striking concept of "salt-water terror". Without denying the terrifying aspect of each new phase of the whole process of deportation for its victims, Diouf insists on the shipmates' ability to adjust to their mobile environment, to gather intelligence on the direction, length and purpose of the trip, and to look for opportunities that could reverse their fortune. For her, shame had to be the predominant feeling among people raised in accordance with an exacting code of honor (a notion discussed at length by John Iliffe in his 2005 essay entitled *Honor in African History*) when they were publicly stripped naked prior to boarding. This shame was not alleviated by the rags given to them upon arrival, as their imposed nakedness was then misconstrued in European and American imagination as an evidence of African primitiveness. "Decades later, the men and women who had boarded the *Clotilda* still spoke of the profound humiliation they felt when their clothes were torn off," writes Diouf who quotes Cudjo Lewis confiding "I so shame! We come in de 'Merica soil naked and de people say we naked savage'... Dey doan know de [canoe men] snatch our clothes 'way from us'" (p. 61).
- 7 Along with shame, concern for family and friends and nostalgia for home prevailed among the deported Africans. They certainly perceived such a sudden and compulsory kinlessness—the prerequisite, as research on domestic slavery indicates, for enslavement in the societies where they came from—as the unambiguous sign of their imminent debasement. Diouf astutely proposes that the ship community, as an alternative initiation society, provides a metaphor for lost kin, and delays the deported individuals' self-perception as slaves (pp. 70-71). She adds that "The solidarity, dedication, and mutual support of the shipmates did not end with the journey, but remained strong, sometimes through several generations in the Americas" (p. 68).
- 8 The existence of such a bond among the people of the *Clotilda* is evidenced by their rule of mutual protection from physical abuse on the plantation (pp. 99-102); their preference for "endogamy" (Kossola/Cudjo Lewis and Gumpa/Peter Lee among others, married a shipmate); and Cudjo's daring attempt, as the group's spokesperson, to obtain from Meaher, their ex-owner, reparation for their deportation and five years of unpaid labor under the form of a land grant (pp. 153-154). As a community, they also persistently made plans to "go back home" until at least the 1870s, and possibly until they heard of the 1894 French conquest of Dahomey. Diouf sees "their failure at emigrating [as] part of a wider pattern" (p. 149). Indeed, many Africans and African-Americans alike tried to save every penny, as the *Clotilda*'s shipmates did initially, to pay for their fare back home; some even wrote to the American Colonization Society, as the *Clotilda*'s shipmates did in 1873, to propose their services as missionaries to Liberia. But as Diouf suggests, "perhaps they were impeded mainly because they lacked the funds, and because the necessary information and infrastructure to facilitate or simply make possible their voyage was not in place" (p. 150). Meanwhile, they continued speaking Yoruba among themselves, tattooed their children, and gave them African names to double those they received through baptism. Most importantly they instilled in them a faith in self-sufficiency and reserve, as well as pride in their origins: those values are apparently still cherished by some of their descendants (pp. 239-240).
- 9 The foundation of African Town represents the shipmates' attempt to reconcile their everlasting dream of Return with the pragmatic choice they ended up making of

integrating American society, and more specifically its Southern culture, provided that it was on their own terms. This process began with the “reinvention of tradition”, since the shipmates avoided clinging “to customs that would have made them stand out more than they already did,” according to Diouf (p. 156). A town leader (rather than a king) was elected on the basis of his former social status but without consideration of his ethnicity—ironically, Gumpa, a Fon in the midst of a majority of Yoruba, was related to the royal family in Dahomey. Then new laws were passed and judges nominated. Over the years, adjacent plots of land were acquired, and residents built homes in the local style for their extended yet monogamous families, as well as all the institutions they needed for self-sufficiency, namely a church, a school and a graveyard. Cut off from the African continent, self-segregated, and somewhat enigmatic to its neighbors, African Town could be compared to a Maroon settlement, although it was highly visible and vulnerable to white supremacy. It qualified also as a “Black town” (90 to 95% percent black inhabitants, black founders, black control) though differing from other such communities because of its African majority (p. 156).

- 10 The thorny issue of the relation African Town entertained with the rest of the African American community harks back to the days of slavery. The planters’ divisive policies and the myths they purposefully spread about Africa guaranteed that “salt-water slaves” such as Cudjo and his companions would be at best ignored by their “creole” co-workers, and often treated with contempt and hostility. Noah, a former slave on the Meaher plantation remembered for instance the hands’ amazement at the “ongodly way dat those Affikins found [to wear the coarse European clothes given to them,]” unaware that women may have attempted to wear them as *pagnes* (p. 85). In the binary universe of the plantation, the fear inspired by the *Clotilda*’s shipmates, who had a justified reputation of people who “wouldn’t stand a lick from white or black,” (p. 100) did not help their integration either. Additionally, as they defined “whiteness” based on the individual’s place of origin, religion or behaviour, they did not particularly identify with African Americans; nor could they conceive of “the linkage between color and servitude, because they saw ‘whites’ [that is mulattos] working in the field [...]” writes Diouf in one of the most captivating passages of the book (p. 111).
- 11 The Afro-centered logic and impeccable unity of the founders of African Town only increased its residents’ mysterious and slightly threatening aura. Though they had to endure the same oppressive conditions and developed the same forms of resistance as other Blacks, their status as land-and home-owners, self-employed or semi-skilled workers also set them apart (p. 159). However, intermarriages and friendships brought constantly African Americans into their midst, and they attempted to bridge the gap with their neighbors with events such as gigantic free picnics organized by their church members. Their reputé of moral rectitude may have caused the downfall of Cudjo’s and Abile’s eldest son. As violence escalated between African Town’s second generation and their neighbors, Cudjo, Jr. committed a murder, was sent to the state penitentiary, but released after six months thanks to a petition signed by Meaher’ son and other black and white Mobilians. “A man of excellent character” (p. 199) and possibly also a police informer, he was nevertheless killed by the sheriff two years later. His death inaugurated a catastrophic fifteen-year period for Cudjo who lost his wife and six children in a row. The cover picture, in which Cudjo poses around 1927 with two great-grand-daughters, is thus a palimpsest that evokes his heartrending tragedy.

- 12 Diouf's *Dreams of Africa in Alabama*, a sophisticated contribution to "Slave Route Studies" with their stress on African continuities, exemplifies the new scholarship on African Diaspora at its best. It is an accurate rendition of the *Clotilda's* shipmates' "Odyssey without Return" that corrects countless mistakes made by previous writers on their origins, voyage and various other aspects of their lives, partly because of mutual borrowings or outright plagiarism (pp.245-249). Moreover, it reconstitutes the enslaved Africans' perceptions of their ordeal and its aftermath, de-emphasizing their otherness, while preserving the complexity of their relationship to both their place of origin and their place of residence.
- 13 Highly recommended reading as we are celebrating the bicentennial of the official abolition of slave trade by Great Britain and the United States, *Dreams of Africa in Alabama*—co-winner of the 2007 Wesley-Logan Prize in African Diaspora History of the American Historical Association—offers also an invaluable window onto the hotly debated issue of "communautarisme". It demonstrates eloquently that the shipmates' secluded town inscribed in the Southern landscape their undying connection to Africa and irrepressible will to survive as Africans in America. Today, Africatown's fifth generation is determined to preserve this heritage, obtain official recognition of its historical significance, and derive new revenues from it, against wide-spread neglect and vandalism, internal feuds, and industrial encroachment.
-

NOTES

1. See for instance the fortune of *The Stowage Plan of the Liverpool Ship Brooks* (1789); Joseph Mallord William Turner's painting entitled *Slave Ship. Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon coming on* (1840); Amiri Baraka's play *The Slave Ship* (1969) and Stephan Spielberg's movie *Amistad* (1997).
2. Marcus WOOD, *Blind Memory: Visual Representation of Slavery in England and America 1780-1865* (New York: Routledge), 2000, p. 17—quoted by Jane Webster, "Looking for the material culture of the Middle Passage", *Journal for Maritime Research*, December 2005, <www.jmr.nmm.ac.uk/server/show/ConJmrArticle.209/viewPage/3>.
3. Route de l'esclave, Réseau thématique: Archéologie sous-marine, "La mémoire engloutie du triangle de la traite", <www.archeonavale.org/slaveroute/index.html>.
4. Two terms coined by Appadurai.
5. Jane WEBSTER, "Looking for the Material Culture of the Middle Passage", *Journal of Maritime Research*, December 2005, 2.