Before the Akaniba: The African Colonisation of Bermuda, 1616-1680

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Abstract

To a large extent, the demographic developments caused by the macro- Atlantic-wide human trafficking enterprise of the seventeenth century appeared in Bermuda: the dominance of Central Africans among African-born entrants and that of Lower Guinea populations during the eighteenth-century (the so-called Lower Guinea Shift). This discussion re-examines this first period in the African colonisation of Bermuda.

KEY WORDS: *Bermuda, Africans, Colonisation, Demography*

Introduction

For Bermuda, historians Heywood and Thornton (2007) have clearly demonstrated that like elsewhere in the western Atlantic colonial world, the island had Central Africans forming the earliest of enslaved arrivals. Heywood and Thornton have utilised the term of Ira Berlin in calling them the 'Charter' community of Africans, characterising them as 'foundational' and argued that they dominated the local African demography, from at least 1617 to the end of the seventeenth-century (Heywood & Thornton, 2007). These early Africans were essential to the cultural construction and continued sustainability of the Bermuda colony for their time.

The Charter Group in Bermuda: An Analysis of African Beginnings

The story of black presence began three years before, with the arrival of Captain Daniel Tucker as governor of Bermuda (*Bermuda under the Sommer Islands Company*, 2005, vol. I). Bermuda had just (1615) come under the management of the Somers' Island Company and he had just arrived on the island as the new governor with a Commission. That Commission, among other things, demanded he order a 'Mr Wilmott' to "go to the Savage Islands and trade there for things fit for England as for the Plantation, such as Cattle, Cassava, Sugar Canes, *Negroes to dive for pearls*, plants"[italics added] (*Bermuda under the Sommer Islands Company* 2005, vol. I, p. 5). It was the first reference by the Company of a need to find specialised black labour for its newly-acquired operations in Bermuda.

But it was, however, another captain, George Bargrave of the *Edwin*, who would make history when he left Bermuda in June 1616. He returned in August of that year with a variety of tropical items—sugar cane, figs, plantains, pineapples, and lignum vitae. But he also returned with "one Indian and a Negroe," the latter of which a later governor, Nathaniel Butler declared was "the first thes Ilands euer had" (Craven, 1990, p. 91; Packwood, 1975, p. 2; see also Butler, 2007, p. 11). If Bargrave had carried out what Tucker's Commission had commanded of Wilmott, as his other items seem to suggest he had, these two individuals were probably pearl divers and, thus, given the journey of about two months probably originated from the nearest pearling stations in the Americas: the La-Margarita/La Cumana operations off the coast of Venezuela (*Bermuda under the Sommer Islands Company*, vol. I, 2005; Andrews,

1978; Craven 1990; see also Heywood and Thornton, 2007; Jarvis, 2010; Maxwell, 1999; Packwood, 1975).

Unlike Virginia and eventually Bermuda, these colonial ventures ultimately failed. Thus, while other early English colonial forays into the Atlantic World brought in African captives, this black Venezuelan pearl diver inaugurated 400 years of continuous African presence in English North American (Bernhard, 1999; Heywood & Thornton, 2007). But he would not be, as much as we know about him, the first African-born person in Bermuda. That would happen within a year of his arrival.

The tide would turn from purchasing black labourers to re-kidnapping them from Iberian vessels, as part of the slow shift of the English charting from privateering and plundering the-then-united kingdom of Spain and Portugal, to illegally establishing colonies on their American territories. Before the end of the 1620s, at least four ships brought in Africans taken off trafficking vessels, and probably began in 1617 when a Captain Powell arrived with what were called "good store of Negroes" (Heywood & Thornton, 2007, p. 27).

Then came another group of 14 'Accidental Negroes,' of whom Governor Miles Kendall offered a strange and incomplete explanation for their presence, which partly accounts for the name: "14 negars flotinge on the sease" who "accidentally happened upon our Coast here" (*The Rich Papers*, 1984, p. 123). A pirate had re-kidnapped them and then, upon arrival in Bermuda, bartered 14 of them in exchange for supplies; then interim-Governor Miles Kendall took possession of them. It was this group that Kendall's successor Nathaniel Butler described to Somers Island investor Sir Nathaniel Rich as "accidentall Negroes" of whom "fortune cast upon my selfe by all due" and added "[i]f it were not for [them]… I wer not able to rayse one pound of tobacco this yeare for the defrayeing of any publicke worck" (*The Rich Papers*, 1984, p. 229)—a strong suggestion of the skills these 'Accidental Negroes' possessed .

The true nature of their arrival—a probable attack by Kirby of an Iberian vessel and their re-kidnap—offers yet another possible indication that they were individuals en route to the Americas, previously kidnapped or captured in Central Africa. Governor Nathaniel Butler 'confiscated' them from Kendall, who promptly and angrily took his case to the Somers' Island Company and his cousin, Sir Edwin Sandys (*The Rich Papers*, 1984, p. 229; Butler, 2007, pp. 196-7; see also Heywood and Thornton, 2007, p. 28).

However, the most infamous, notable and prominent in the histories of these privateering/piratical adventures occurred in 1619 through the English captain Daniel Ellffryth on his ship the *Treasurer*. Ellffryth was in the company of a vessel called by a man named Youpe, described by Governor Butler as "a Dutchman, who had bin abroad in thes partes" (*The Rich Papers*, 2004, pp. 188-9). Heywood and Thornton have identified 'Youpe' as John Colyn Jope, a captain of the *White Lion*, one of 'two English ships' operating under a Dutch letter of marquee—the other ship, of course, being the *Treasurer*. Both of these vessels, acting in concern, pounced on a Portuguese slaver, *São João Bautista*, which had apparently departed from Angola in 1619. Ellffryth brought 19 'Negroes' to Bermuda as a result of that encounter. The rest, on Jope's ship, were the "twenty and odd Negroes" who became those "traditionally described as the founders of African presence in English America" (Heywood and Thornton, 2007, pp. 5-7).

It is perhaps becoming obvious that privateers based in Bermuda were specifically preying on slave ships—or as Butler put it, taking advantage of what "fortune cast upon" them—plausibly as part of this bid to find tropical agriculturalists; if this was not their intention, they recognised and exploited this aspect of their expertise upon their arrival in the colony. English planters, as historians have well discussed, recognised their skills in tobacco cultivation and curing, even though tobacco was an American and not African, plant (Heywood and Thornton, 2007; Jarvis, 2010; Packwood, 1975). The man who was expert in growing and curing it arrived in 1617 on the *Hopewell*, a privateer ship captained by John Powell and hence occasioned this oft-quoted statement by Robert Rich, then the local factor and manager of the Rich Interests in Bermuda in 1618: "procure mee a neger whose name is Francisco. Hee is one [of] the general; his judgement in the cureing of tobackoe is such that I had rather have him than all of the other negers that bee here" (*The Rich Papers,* 1984, p. 59). He mentioned that Francisco was on 'the Generall:' public land on the Island of St. George's sequestered by the Somers Island Company for larger colonial

use and not private exploitation. This is especially clear in the full statement made by Governor Butler about them in connection with the Kendall 'Accidentals,' and is especially interesting as a clue to what else African colonists were doing for the island plantation during this period:

> If it were not for the accidentall Negroes (a fortune cast upon my selfe by all due), I wer not able to rayse one pound of Tobacco this yeare for the defrayeinge of any publicke worck. Cap: Kendall pretendeth an interest by waye of gyft of 14 of them and I have give waye unto it until I heare from the Company. But the truth is, that it wer fitter that he wer rewarded (if he deserved any) some other waye. For thes Slaves are the most proper and cheape instruments for this plantation that can be, and not safe to be any wher but under the Governours eye (*The Rich Papers*, 1984, p. 229).

Vernon Ives, in a footnote, adds that the "lack of men in the 'generall' pool for the public was still troublesome," and noted that Butler's predecessor, Governor Daniel Tucker had attracted considerable abuse for the drafting of colonists for public works projects. "Butler proposes to use slaves," Ives states, and Butler clearly did before transferring them from the 'Generall' to private work—in fact he had suggested that that was the public works was their appropriate and best employment (*The Rich Papers*, 1984, p. 229).

The most significant contribution Africans made to the cause of Bermuda colonisation occurred in agriculture. This is unsurprising as these West Central Africans brought with their experience tropical colonisation, knowledge in tropical agriculture. The most cited is tobacco cultivation, but it is not clear, at least in the early stages of black settlement, how many blacks were skilled in tobacco cultivation—an American plantation activity. Returning to Francisco, one recalls the statement by Robert Rich made about him (*The Rich Papers*, 1984). Butler himself had made the point that not all of the enslaved Africans in 1621 knew how to cultivate tobacco (*The Rich Papers*, 1984, p. 233). It is not impossible to believe that this plant was not widely cultivated at this point or at least in the regions where these other kidnapped Africans had lived (Jarvis, *In the Eye of All Trade*, 2010).

Nonetheless, the broader contribution of Africans to agriculture, beyond this, was probably crucial at the beginning of the colonial enterprise, especially in the production of staples. Long before Bermuda's colonisation, as early as 1516, yams and plantains had arrived in Santo Domingo. Eugenio Fernández Mendéz, however, had given Fray Tomás de Berlanga credit for their introduction (Mendez, 1971). The Portuguese encountered yams and plantains during their 15th Century travels in West Africa: two out of a number of crops they saw growing there:

> As the Portuguese made their way southward along the African littoral, they encountered diverse agricultural agropastoral food systems. Along the coast of Upper Guinea, they found rice, millet, sorghum, the cow pea, and abundant livestock herds. Toward the equator, root crops (yams, plantains, and taro) pigeon pea, and the Bambara groundnut (*Viga subterranean*) dominated indigenous food systems. (Carney and Rosomoff, 2009, pp. 15-18, and 47)

Carney and Rosomoff added: "Most of these African food staples were entirely new to the Portuguese. The subsistence staples were all loaded on slave ships, along with the transplanted Amerindian domesticates, as provisions for the enslaved Africans the vessels carried" (Carney and Rosomoff, 2009, pp. 15-18 and 47). It seems that some of the items noted by Carney and Rosomoff were growing in Bermuda, and possibly introduced by or after the *Edwin's* journey to the 'Savage Islands' (Butler, 2007). The *Edwin*, as noted, *did* return with plantains among his other 'West Indy' plants among the *Edwin's* cargo, along with the alleged pearl divers (Butler, 2007). Although mentioned earlier in his *Historye,* Butler described the variety of agricultural products existing in Bermuda, at least by the time of his tenure:

> Now besides these natural products of the earth, providence and work have, since the settlement of the plantation, brought several other types of seeds and plants which the soil had eagerly welcomed and fostered. As a result, *there are at present* [i.e., no later than 1622] a great abundance

> of fig trees, wild olives, a profusion of mulberry trees, fine tobacco, and a supply of corn (that is, Indian corn, for the European species of grain crops have not as yet proved successful since the rough ground is over-run with grass). Besides these there are many other profitable roots, such as an endless quantity of white, red, and orange-coloured potatoes [i.e., sweet potatoes and yams] sugar cane, indigo, parsnips, very large radishes, the Americans bread-fruit, cassava, Indian pumpkin, water melons, musk melons, and the delicate pineapple, and in short, whatever else of this sort may be wanted to satisfy either necessity or pleasure. (Butler, 2007, p. 26)

Perhaps this was why Bermuda had avoided the horrid starving times that beset the Virginia colony during this period; that there was an advantage in to having men and women from Africa fully knowledgeable in the 'work' of how to grow them; and this might provide a context for Butler's other statement, mentioned above, about his skilled African captives, worth quoting again: "For thes Slaves are the most proper and cheape instruments for this plantation that can be, and not safe to be any wher but under the Governours eye" (*The Rich Papers*, 1984, p. 229).

He was, again, arguing about the retention of "thes Slaves" on the 'Generall' employed, as noted earlier, in various public works projects that the English colonists tried to avoid doing. But one of those public works projects was the construction of the State House, in 1621 and it is worth quoting one transcribed version in full:

> When Paget's Fort had been improved, the Governor began to build a fine new house of cut stone in the town; he constructed this with a flat roof, like the ones he had seen in similar countries, and he built the roof of stone as well, hoping to set an example and encouragement for others to do the same. This type of construction seemed most appropriate for the nature and climate of the islands, because of the tightness against the violent downpours of rain, and for strength against the wind and sudden hurricanes, as well as for coolness, due to the thickness of the walls and the shape of the roof. Most of all, it was best to use stone for the construction so as to save and conserve timber, which had been used wastefully until now and would soon become very scarce and of poor quality. Yet timber would continue to be the necessary material for all sorts of things, such as carriages for mounting guns and for building boats. (Butler, 2007, p. 26)

Butler's linguistic skills—French, Italian, Spanish, and Latin—if not his education, certainly reflect some experience with the Mediterranean as another transcribed version of his *Historye* notes: "to erect a new fayre house of hewen stone at the towne, the which he makes with a flatt roofe, after the fashion *which he had seene in other countries in paralell with this*…"[italics added] (Craven, 1990, p. 104). It is strongly tempting to wonder if his corps of African labourers on the 'Generall' were especially helpful due to possible earlier experience with adapting Mediterranean styles to Atlantic architectural construction in West Central Africa: or even if the idea originated with them (Heywood and Thornton, 2007).

There had been nearly two centuries of such construction in the Angola-Kongo region. Long before the State House the *manikongo* (monarch of Kongo) Nzinga a Nkuwu, in 1485, had requested Portuguese carpenters and stonemasons to "build a 'house of prayer' as these were in Portugal"—the latter country very roughly parallel to Bermuda. His successor Affonso I "restricted stonemasonry and carpentry to churches and the houses of a few Kongolese nobles." (Heywood and Thornton 2007, pp. 60, 61). By the 1600s Kongolese architects had long since incorporated Portugal's Mediterranean architectural elements into Kongo's African-Atlantic architectural heritage. "In 1584 Mbanza Mbamba, a modest country town and parish seat, had a spotless church with a well-painted retable behind it"(Heywood and Thornton, 2007, p. 66).

Conclusion

African arrivals into Bermuda during the 1600s were fundamental to the success of the fledgling colony. Long involved in the Atlantic World as contributors, they brought centuries of experience to the island. If sustainability is viewed as providing support and viability to Bermuda's agricultural and cultural heritage, one historical instance

emerges in the African contribution to a sustainable and viable Bermuda colonial project: the provision of necessary foodstuffs to stave off threats of a 'Starving Time;' effective colonisation and agricultural management of tropical/sub-tropical spaces, and introducing an over-a-century-old African Atlantic experience to Bermudian colonial activity. Such valuable *and* valued African contributions would continue to contribute to the success of the Bermuda colonial project long after the late seventeenth century, when human trafficking intensified in Lower Guinea and those populations increased their contribution to the demography of the island.

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