*Wope asem aka akyere Onyankopon a, ka kyere mframa.*
(If you want to speak to God, speak to the winds.)

Among the Akan people of Ghana, the nature of God is a spirit. Like the wind, God is invisible, yet everywhere, and attainable to everyone.
CARRYING OUR SPIRIT WITH US:
GOLD COAST SPIRITUAL CONTINUITIES IN
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SURINAME AND NORTH AMERICA

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Master of Arts in the
Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By
Zawadi Iyanjura Barakile, B.A.

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
2005

Master’s Examination Committee:
Dr. Walter C. Rucker, Adviser
Dr. Leslie Alexander
Dr. William Theodore McDaniel

[Signature]
Adviser
Department of African American and African Studies
ABSTRACT

The study of Africanisms, defined as elements of culture found in the Americas that are traceable to an African origin, began in 1941 with Melville Herskovits' *The Myth of a Negro Past* which focused on significant African retentions and continuities in the United States, the Caribbean, and South America. Despite opposing views held by scholars such as E. Franklin Frazier, who argued that Blacks in America lost all elements of their African heritage during slavery, numerous studies followed documenting Africanisms. Many of the proponents of Africanisms however cite West Central Africa, particularly Bantu culture, as the primary origin of many aspects of African-American culture. Despite the data available from the Du Bois Institute Slave Trade Database showing a significant amount of importation from various locations in West Africa, the focus has largely centered on West Central Africa with some attention on West African regions—namely, Senegambia, Sierra Leone, and the Bight of Biafra. For the most part scholars have not addressed the cultural influences from the Gold Coast. This region has received some attention in the more general works on Africanisms by Herskovits, Sterling Stuckey, and Michael Gomez. Scholars such as David Barry Gaspar, Ray A. Kea, and Barbara Klamon Kopytoff have had a more narrow focus on the Gold Coast in their significant studies. This neglect in the relevant scholarship is nonetheless unfortunate since Gold Coast Africans comprised a significant portion of imports in the
Americas. Therefore, in an effort to fill this important void, this thesis will focus on Gold Coast Akan culture, examining seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Akan spiritual practices that exist as continuities in eighteenth-century slave societies in Suriname and North America.
Dedicated to my mother
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An Akan proverb states, *Hama behu soro a, efiri dua* (If the vine climber can see the sky, it is because he climbs on trunk of the tree). In other words, it is with the support of others that one can accomplish their achievements. While working through this project I began to truly understand the significance of this proverb, and so before I present this project I would like to thank the following people.

I am grateful to my advisor, Dr. Walter C. Rucker, who encouraged me to write a thesis after my first quarter at the Ohio State University. He graciously shared his knowledge, and provided me with a great deal of intellectual support and encouragement since our first meeting in the fall of 2003. *Meda wo ase piii!*

I would like to thank Dr. Leslie Alexander for her involvement in the project from early on. In addition to reading over sections and providing answers to my many, many questions, she was readily available for emotional support—a very important necessity when writing a thesis.

I owe a very special thanks to my friend, Alecia Anderson, who kindly volunteered her time, day after day, to critique my numerous drafts. Her input was invaluable, and I take full responsibility for any shortcomings. I also wish to take this time to thank Megan Lawther for her assistance and support. Although the names are too
numerous to mention I also wish to thank my friends who offered encouragement during the time I spent working on this thesis.

I am most grateful to my mother and father for offering their love and support, and for having faith in me and my goals.
VITA

December 6, 1980 ......................... Born – Raleigh, North Carolina

2003 ........................................... B.A., African Studies

........................................... B.A., Afro-American Studies

PUBLICATIONS

Book Review


FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: African American and African Studies
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ................................................................. ii
Dedication ............................................................... iv
Acknowledgments ...................................................... v
Vita ................................................................... vi
List of Tables ........................................................... ix

Introduction .............................................................. 1

Chapters:

1. Gold Coast ...................................................... 29
2. Suriname .......................................................... 57
3. North America .................................................. 96

Conclusion ............................................................. 137

Bibliography .......................................................... 142
LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Akan Day-Names</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Paramese and Akan Day-Names</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Stolen, shackled, starved, and tortured, the Fulani, the Wolof, and the Ewe, just to name a few of the many African peoples, were forced to migrate to the Americas and coerced into rebuilding their lives under new circumstances. Though the passage from their motherland, across the Atlantic Ocean, and into the American slave system was horrifying, Africans retained and transplanted certain aspects of the life they remembered in their homelands. Ranging from the tune a woman sung while carrying on a day’s work, to the manner in which a family buried their loved ones, an array of African cultures persisted in various forms throughout the Americas.

The “memories” of culture among people of African descent in the Americas, known as Africanisms, is both an extended and controversial topic debated by scholars. It commenced when Robert E. Park and E. Franklin Frazier questioned if African retentions existed in African-American culture. After research revealed several examples of Africanisms in both the secular and sacred ethos of African-Americans, scholars such as Melville Herskovits, and Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price—respectively promoting and refuting the idea of retentions—began focusing on the degree of Africa’s cultural diversity. Opponents of Africanisms used Africa’s diversity to claim that West Africa’s cultural heritage was too complex for any one culture to persist in the Americas. Mintz
and Price for instance claimed that ethnic randomization by slave traders, ship captains, and plantation owners prevented African cultural transmissions into the Americas. Sterling Stuckey, Margaret Washington, and other scholars promoting the existence of Africanisms, however, debated the extent of West Africa’s cultural diversity, while emphasizing African cultural influences. Although some scholars such as Philip Morgan still analyze these issues, the current scholarship primarily concentrates on the origin of specific African cultural influences in African-American culture.¹

Dealing with specific origins instead of generalizations, African cultural transmissions are described as continuities instead of retentions because the former confirms the power of African cultures and identities in the Americas. African continuities are direct transmissions of specific cultural elements that possess similar meanings and are used in similar contexts in the Diaspora as they were on the continent. Continuities are mainly deep-seeded cultural practices such as food ways, folklore, or spiritual beliefs. For instance, Anansi spider stories are important elements of the folk culture of Akan people in present-day Ghana. These same stories were told in the same manner in parts of the Americas during the eighteenth century and still exist throughout

the African Diaspora. African retentions, also thought of as “re-interpretations,” however are superficial African cultural practices in which the original meaning and context no longer hold true. Hair braiding is an example of an African retention. In many West African societies styles of hair braiding indicated a woman’s social status, age, and social group. However, in the United States, hair braiding is completely divorced from its context and serves as a form of fashion. In other words, while both retentions and continuities are representative of African cultural transmissions, the latter are far more significant.

Scholars engaged in the debate on African cultural retentions did not always acknowledge African culture. In 1919, Robert E. Park, a sociologist at the University of Chicago, was the first to deny any African influences in African-American culture. Park is therefore considered the father of the Annihilationist School, training others who argue that slavery eradicated African cultures.² E. Franklin Frazier, one of Park’s former students, was significant in advocating the annihilation of African cultures among Blacks in America. In *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939), Frazier answered the question of African elements existing in African-American culture with a definitive denial. Frazier argued that slavery fashioned a complete break between Black Americans and their African heritages, and he claimed that African-American culture evolved independently of any African influences. Frazier states:

Probably never before in history has a people been so nearly completely stripped of its social heritage as the Negroes who were brought to America....American slavery destroyed household gods and dissolved the bonds of sympathy and affection between men of the same blood and household....Through force of circumstances, they had to acquire new language, adopt new habits of labor, and take over, however imperfectly, the folkways of the American environment. Their children, who knew only the American environment, soon forgot the few memories that had been passed on to them and developed motivations and modes of behavior in harmony with the New World. Their children’s children have often recalled with skepticism the fragments of stories concerning Africa which have been preserved in their families. But, of the habits and customs as well as the hopes and fears that characterized the life of their forbearers in Africa, nothing remains.3

As a sociologist in the 1930s, Frazier was making a political statement for social integration by disassociating African Americans from the stereotypical image of Africans as barbaric and savage. With the goal of assimilation in mind, he contested anyone arguing for African cultural transmissions in African-American culture. He was intent on disproving any continuing relationship between Africa and African Americans.

Melville Herskovits—an anthropologist and an adversary to Frazier—demonstrated cultural links between Africa and Africans in the Diaspora in The Myth of the Negro Past (1941). Representing the Africanist School, Herskovits was attempting to discredit pervasive myths concerning African people by arguing that rich African cultures existed prior to colonial rule and that Africans retained elements of their cultures when transported to the New World. He states:

---

While Africanisms in material aspects of life are almost lacking, and in political organization are so warped that resemblances are discernible only on close analysis, African religious practices and magical beliefs are everywhere to be found in some measure as recognizable survivals, and are in every region more numerous than survivals in the other realms of culture.

Most of his analysis focused on South America and the Caribbean. Furthermore, Herskovits incorrectly presented West African cultures as monolithic and uniform. Nonetheless, Herskovits is credited with identifying the presence of Africanisms in African-American culture and disproving that “The Negro is thus a man without a past.”

His work ultimately brought the issue of Africanisms to the attention of the scholarly community.

Despite Herskovits’ research, scholars remained doubtful about the African influences in African-American culture and sought to disprove the idea. One particular argument advanced by members of the Creolization School, Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price in The Birth of African-American Culture (1976), posits that the diversity in African cultures, and the manner in which Africans were transported and enslaved in the Americas allowed for the creation of a new culture that was not essentially African. In essence, West Africa’s heterogeneous makeup, the nature of the slave trade, and enslavement prevented the transmission of African cultures in the Americas. According to Mintz and Price, the multitude and variety of African cultures in West and West Central Africa undermines any attempt by scholars to discuss a single, monolithic

---

4 Herskovits, Myth of the Negro Past, 111, 2.
“African” culture. They also pose that slave traders, ship captains, and plantation owners culturally randomized Africans which, in turn, produced “crowds” of enslaved Africans instead of “groups.” Moreover, because of Africa’s cultural diversity and the ethnic randomization caused by the slave trade, Mintz and Price claim that enslaved Africans were forced to create new cultures almost as soon as they boarded slave ships. According to Mintz and Price, the new culture was creole in nature. In this regard, while African culture may have been essential in the creation of African-American culture, it was neither a central component nor independent of European influences or new cultural developments in the Americas.5

Mintz and Price’s claim of “creolization” was undoubtedly in response to the previous scholarship arguing for African retentions in African-American culture, but it was especially directed at Herskovits’ assertion of cultural continuities between Africa and Diasporic communities. Mintz and Price were intent on showing a culturally diverse Africa and that Africans were brought to the Americas in a manner that prevented the existence of any significant African cultural elements. Mintz and Price also claim that scholars have not identified cultural similarities because they have only focused on showing commonalities in song, art, and religion. Mintz and Price state, “If the perceived similarities are real, there must exist underlying principles (which will often be

5 Mintz and Price, African-American Culture, 1-6, 38-41, 81-84.
unconscious) that are amenable to identification, description and confirmation.\(^6\)

Although they make a call for scholars to focus on values and meanings, what they describe as “deeper-level aspects,” Mintz and Price ironically concentrate solely on the various languages spoken as their underlying evidence of diversity among Africans. The number of languages in Africa however does not demonstrate the variety of cultures because West and West Central Africans are multilingual due to their regular interaction with people from diverse language groups. Furthermore, culture is characterized by both tangible and intangible factors, and because Mintz and Price do not go beyond the variety of languages to investigate the various levels of differences and similarities that define cultures, they do not acknowledge the opportunity for African cultural transmissions in African-American culture. Their claim nonetheless sparked a new debate in the study of African retentions in Black culture that focused on West Africa’s heterogeneity and ethnic randomization in the slave trade.

The rise of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and movements for colonial liberation in Africa nonetheless brought about another change in the scholarship regarding the roots of African-American culture. Black people began expressing a racial consciousness that acknowledged their African roots, thereby making it necessary for

\(^6\) Ibid., 10-11.
scholars to reexamine the role of African cultures in African-American society. What ultimately emerged were the recognition and the identification of African cultural retentions that persisted, even into the twentieth century.

Sterling Stuckey, one of the first to directly attack the claim that slaves lost their African heritage, affirms in “Through the Prism of Folklore” (1971), that an African connection existed in slaves’ songs and folktales. He states, “Folk tales, like the songs, indicate an African presence, should not astonish; for the telling of tales, closely related to the African griot’s vocation of providing oral histories of families and dynasties, was deeply rooted in West African tradition.” Comparable to the sense of pride that the griots instilled in people with their art of storytelling, the folktales of slaves provided hope for a better situation. Moreover, as Stuckey explains, storytelling was a pastime in West African cultures indicating personal experience, possibility, and conquest through relatively feeble characters such as a spider or a rabbit. For slaves the continuance of these stories in the Americas served as a form of resistance and a way of dealing with their harsh situations, thus exhibiting both their humanity and their Africanity.7

Still insistent of the theme of African influences in African-American society, Stuckey further developed his argument in Slave Culture (1987). He asserts that African influences constituted the primary avenue for the forging of Black unity in antebellum America and beyond. In addition, Stuckey identifies African cultures as the central organizing principle of slave cultures in North America, as well as the backdrop for

---

Black Nationalism. He moves beyond the African elements previously stressed by other historians such as music, dance, and language, and focuses on an expressive form known as the ring shout. Originating in various locales in Atlantic Africa, this counter-clockwise ancestral ring dance “was so powering in its elaboration of a religious vision that it contributed disproportionately to the circle in slavery.” The symbol of the circle and the counter-clockwise movement, Stuckey contends, was understood by many slaves because it was an essential part of many West African societies, thus making this African spiritual symbol a unifying factor in slave cultures.²

Despite the centrality of the ring shout, Stuckey also emphasizes West Africa’s cultural influences in the lives of African Americans. Again, he cites storytelling as a West African retention found throughout the African Diaspora, pointing out the striking similarities between themes and characters found in African and slave folktales. Stuckey also mentions West African survivals uncovered by Melville and Frances Herskovits in Rebel Destiny (1934), such as the role of the drum and the Anansi stories in Suriname. Burial rites and funeral practices are additional aspects of slave cultures that incorporated West African elements. Various West and West Central African religious practices were reflected in the burial mounds of slaves. Stuckey states, “Slaves found objects in North

² Stuckey, Slave Culture, 11.
America similar to the shells and close enough to the earthenware of West Africa to decorate the grave in an African manner,” thus, “the African character of slave burial ceremony was unmistakable.”

While Stuckey successfully makes his point regarding Africanisms in slave cultures, he also addresses the role of Christianity. He argues that although enslaved Blacks embraced Christianity, it was not without regard to their African beliefs. Stuckey states:

> On the contrary, the most acculturated slaves, like slaves generally, appropriated values from the larger environment and relied on African values that pointed the way to creative solutions to a variety of problems, cultural and political. To find, for example, some aspects of Christianity extremely useful and satisfying did not mean—certainly not for most slaves or slave preachers—that they ceased to be African anymore than those blacks who embraced aspects of Christianity in Africa ceased to be African.

Even with other influences, Stuckey contends that African cultures remained a central component in the lives of enslaved Blacks in the United States. The coexistence of African beliefs and Christianity, Stuckey asserts, should not cause one to assume that Christianity was the most powerful force in the lives of Blacks. Christianity was practiced by a minority of slaves, and even then it was balanced with African spiritual beliefs. The presence of spirituals and the religious dance known as the ring shout are

---

9 Ibid., 41-42.

10 Ibid., 48.
two prominent examples of the difference between European and Africanized variants of Christianity. In other words, while acknowledging the presence of Christianity in slave cultures, Stuckey contends that African cultural influences remained central.

Responding to Stuckey’s assessment of Christianity and African influences in slave cultures, Margaret Washington’s “A Peculiar People” (1988) provides a different look at the role of Christianity and Africanisms in African-American communities through the study of the Gullah people of the Sea Islands in South Carolina. Concentrating solely on the combination of peoples from the Upper Guinea and the Kongo-Angola areas, Washington argues that Gullah religion was a synthesis of Christianity and various African spiritual systems. Washington also reexamines Eugene Genovese’ idea of how Christianity was used to avert slave resistance by compelling Blacks to accept their enslavement. She maintains that Gullah people fused Christianity with African beliefs using it both as a functional and inspirational religion.\(^{11}\)

In looking at Christianity and African cultures among the Gullah people, Washington also reveals Africanisms. However, there is a distinction in her view:

> I do not argue for ‘survivals,’ a somewhat lifeless term implying passive existence. But I do argue for the presence of dynamic, creative, cultural trends of African provenance among the Gullahs, which they adapted to their concept of Christianity and integrated into New World black collective consciousness.

\(^{11}\) Creel, “A Peculiar People,” 1-14.
Washington’s findings suggesting specific links between Gullah religion and African societies in Upper Guinea and Kongo-Angola areas are minimal. Despite the lack of evidence, Washington demonstrates cultural practices such as the presence of a plantation slave “doctor,” the power of conjuration, the belief in the living dead, and the act of placing decorations both in and on top of graves as Bakongo influences in Gullah religion. In regards to the Upper Guinea region, a particular type of penance found on Bull’s Island in South Carolina, of picking up a quart of benne seed, rice, or corn—depending on the degree of the crime—can be traced directly to the Poro-Sande-Bundu secret societies of the Sierra Leone and Liberia regions. The Poro-Sande-Bundu practice of using high-low seats as a hierarchy also influenced the social organization of the Gullah community. In Poro-Sande societies, those holding seats in the inner circle represented a social and religious body that stopped quarrels and punished criminals, while those seats on the outside, considered high seats, were reserved for religious leaders. Among the Gullahs however, this organization of the community differed in that the low seats were for those who were disloyal to the community. “But the way Gullahs

12 The Poro and Sande were respectively, the mandatory male and female cultural societies of Sierra Leone, Liberia, and parts of Gambia. Washington explains, “These secret societies introduced all members into adulthood….Individuuls were educated to their life’s work, familiarized with tribal history and lore, and schooled in social conduct and behavior befitting their particular sex and station…. Regardless of biological age, a non-initiate was not considered an adult nor allowed to hold any position of importance,” Ibid., 47.
employed the use of the high-low degrees,” Washington explains, “was unique and reflected their ability to adapt a past tradition to the organization of their slave community.”

Responding to earlier claims from Mintz and Price, Joseph Holloway, an Africanist, was one of the first scholars to address the issue of African cultural homogeneity in the “The Origins of African-American Culture” (1990). Holloway’s aim, however, was not to show that African cultural influences were too diverse for any one culture to survive in the Americas. Instead, he contends that African-American culture has more West Central African influence as a result of demographic tendencies in the slave trade and because of the homogenous nature of West Central African culture. He states, “Although the West Africans arrived in North America in greater numbers, the Bantu of Central Africa had the largest homogenous culture among the imported Africans and the strongest impact on the development of African-American culture.”

Focusing much of his attention on South Carolina, Holloway begins his analysis by revising Herskovits’ construction of the cultural regions in West Africa into smaller, more specific zones, to illustrate distinct cultural groupings. Even though this new division of cultural zones shows West Africa with the largest imports, Holloway suggests that Africans living as far away as 200 miles from their ports of departure were also

---

13 Ibid, 1-14, 181.

involved in the slave trade, thereby complicating a regional cultural diversity. West Central Africans however had a homogenous culture, indicated by a common family of languages—those deriving from Bantu.\textsuperscript{15}

Further promoting the thesis pioneered by Lorenzo Turner, and later developed by Winifred Vass and Robert Farris Thompson, Holloway also asserts that because West Central Africans worked mainly as field laborers they were better able to retain their African identity. He claims:

Also, since the Bantus were predominately field hands or were used in capacities that required little or no contact with European-Americans, they were not confronted with the problem of acculturation, as the West African domestic servants and the artisans were. Coexisting in relative isolation from other groups, the Bantus were able to maintain a strong cultural vitality that laid the foundation for the development of African-American culture.\textsuperscript{16}

The occupation of West Central Africans as field workers, along with their cultural homogeneity, Holloway contends, influenced West African cultural groups of larger sizes in South Carolina and possibly other areas in the American South. As a result, other enslaved Africans adopted West Central African cultural elements which later developed into African-American culture.

Holloway fails to take into account other ways in which Africans could maintain their cultural practices, even when in regular contact with European-Americans. One

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 2-9.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 6-9.
major means of cultural preservation among enslaved Africans was through the labor they performed. Africans undoubtedly possessed specific skills that were a part of their culture. Plantation owners were often aware of the specializations of Africans from certain regions and enslaved specific groups for their knowledge of a particular skill. For example, Africans from the Senegambia region had knowledge of rice cultivation while Gold Coast Africans were skilled in agriculture, mining, and handicrafts. Africans enslaved in the Americans to perform specialized skills were essentially transmitting their culture, even in the midst of other influences, thus complicating Holloway’s argument.

Despite the increasing scholarship on specific African influences in African-American culture, some scholars remained unconvinced of the significance of African culture. Jon Butler, author of *Awash in a Sea of Faith* (1990), makes the argument that African spiritual systems in North America were totally destroyed. He states:

> Those who molded and imbibed slavery also produced the single most important religious transformation to occur in the American colonies before 1776: an African spiritual holocaust that forever destroyed traditional African religious systems as *systems* in North America and that left slaves remarkably bereft of traditional collective religious practice before 1760.\(^{17}\)

According to Butler, a member of the Neo-Annihilationist school, American slavery destroyed African religious systems. Although individual African spiritual forms and practices such as burial rites survived in slavery, the necessary elements that constitute a

---

spiritual system were not present prior to 1760. Therefore, any enslaved African wanting to engage in spiritual or religious activity was consequently forced to turn to Christianity. After the 1800s however, when family life and kinship ties redeveloped among enslaved Africans, the African spiritual elements that survived fused with Christianity to form a unique syncretic Creolized or African-American Christian practice.

While Butler’s claim is undoubtedly questionable, his evidence for an “African spiritual holocaust” is what makes his argument invalid. Realizing that little information about enslaved Africans’ religious practices was known during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Butler acknowledges anthropological literature asserting that religion was a ubiquitous part of West African societies. He then uses the absence of descriptions of African religious practices in the writings of plantation owners as evidence against its existence. Butler claims:

Slaveowners’ letters and diaries reveal much about the daily texture of life for plantation slaves before 1800—work habits, field banter, dress, marriage, sexual practices, and language. Yet these same studies have proved largely unrevealing about slave religious practices before 1800. The lack of reference to Christian practices is easy to understand, because by both contemporary and modern historians’ accounts slave Christianization did not advance significantly until well after 1760. But the lack of evidence about African practice remains more puzzling and, perhaps, more troubling.

While it is tenuous to assume that white plantation owners would give detailed accounts of the spiritual practices of enslaved Africans, it is also unreasonable to use their writings as evidence of an “African spiritual holocaust.” Among European Americans, any
religious practice other than Christianity may have been considered heathen and unworthy of description. Yet, Butler discounts references to slaves as "heathens" or "pagans" in writings because "planters did not elaborate on the meanings of the labels."¹⁸

Butler also disregards Stuckey's claim that festivals among enslaved Africans are indications of African spiritual systems. For instance, Stuckey asserts that the counter-clockwise processional during the Pinkster Festival had the same spiritual meaning as the ring shout.¹⁹ Butler however claims, "By mid-[eighteenth] century Africans in New England celebrated their own festival days, but their significance was secular rather than religious, and many if not all—perhaps a higher percentage there than elsewhere in the colonies—had become attached to Christian congregations."²⁰ Undoubtedly, Butler is mistaken in his line of reasoning. First, he ignores the fact that in most African spiritual systems there is no sharp division between the secular and the sacred. He is guilty of using Western concepts to define or rather discount African spiritual forms. Secondly, Butler assumes that African and Christian beliefs cannot exist at the same time or in the same place. In actuality, as Washington illustrates among the Gullah people, many African religious practices survived concurrently with Christianity. Butler's

---

¹⁸ Ibid., 154-155.

¹⁹ Stuckey, Slave Culture, 81-82.

²⁰ Butler, Awash in a Sea of Faith, 154.
misunderstanding of these two aspects of African religious practices apparently causes him to overlook several African spiritual continuities among slaves in British North America.

Notwithstanding efforts to undermine Africanisms in African-American culture, certain scholars are still committed to proving their existence. John Thornton's *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1680* (1992) invalidates claims made by scholars such as Mintz and Price and Holloway who assign ethnic identity to every distinct language and dialect and assert excessive cultural diversity in Atlantic Africa. Thornton claims that every West and West Central African linguistic group does not necessarily possess its own unique culture. He explains:

In the course of these interactions they [Africans] might exchange many cultural ideas even if they did not exchange language. Thus, they might share religious ideas or aesthetic principles to such a degree that they possessed a common religious or artistic heritage despite their linguistic diversity.  

In other words, in West and West Central Africa, language alone cannot serve as the sole indicator of culture. Furthermore, the multilingual nature of Africans in this region complicates the level of cultural diversity. Knowledge of various languages does not mean that a person takes on the culture of each language. However, scholars often ignore Atlantic Africa's multilingualism in order to exaggerate diversity. From this viewpoint Thornton concludes that Atlantic Africa is comprised of three cultural zones with seven

---

distinct sub zones: the Upper Guinea zone, which encompasses the north and south West Atlantic language families, as well as the Mande family; Lower Guinea, which is subdivided into the Kwa and Akan language families; and Angola zone, where two variations of Bantu are spoken, namely Kimbunda and Kikongo.

Thornton also addresses the idea of ethnic randomization in the slave trade and adequately undermines this notion with information regarding the patterns of the slaving voyages and tactics used by ship captains. He argues that ship captains, with the intent of reducing mortality rates, found it easier to acquire Africans in one place rather than in multiple areas. Supporting this idea, Thornton gives evidence of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century voyages that obtained Africans at one point. Thornton notes one exception though—the voyages of the Lower Guinea, which followed a two-stop pattern. While these routes were taken to both “round out” the cargo and buy gold, it proves that ethnic randomization was not the aim. Additionally, Thornton establishes that since such a strategy was not present in the trade, ethnic randomization engaged in by ship captains was impossible. He states, “Even if owners really did hope to randomize slaves, however, it might prove impossible to do this effectively. Of course, such a strategy would be immediately limited by the relative lack of diversity among arriving Africans.”

---

22 Ibid., 196.
In *Exchanging Our Country Marks* (1998), Michael Gomez advances Thornton’s claim of African cultural transmissions by suggesting the development of African cultural enclaves in the Americas. In addition to demonstrating more precisely the systematic organization of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Gomez also offers a new analysis on the diversity among African cultures. While Thornton contends that three culturally distinct zones and seven sub zones exist in Atlantic Africa, Gomez proposes that the region is comprised of six cultural regions: Senegambia, Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast, the Bight of Benin, the Bight of Biafra, and West Central Africa. Gomez states that within these zones, Africans shared cultural similarities that not only eased the process of hybridization between African groups, but also allowed for distinct cultural continuities in the Americas. The fact that cultural affinities existed within the six cultural regions, creates a basis for unity because over time Africans would realize the fact that they had similarities at various levels. In addition, Gomez reveals that enslaved Africans from each of the six regions possessed particular characteristics that were desirable to slave traders. For instance, Africans from the Gold Coast were desired for their physical strength and capacity to work, while those from Senegambia and Sierra Leone were
desired for their reputation as cotton and rice cultivators. The fact that planters knew of the expertise of certain African groups led to ethnic-clustering in the Americas and the transmission of African cultural elements.\(^\text{23}\)

While proving the existence of Africanisms in the Americas, Gomez also makes a connection between African and African-American cultures. Arguably, the most significant part of Gomez’s study is his link between African ethnicities and the creation of an African-American identity. Gomez proves that “the development of African-American society through 1830 was very much the product of contributions made by specific ethnic groups.” He conveys that enslavement forced Africans of different ethnic groups to recognize their Blackness as their common bond, the basis of African-American identity. Furthermore, Gomez asserts that “the creation of the African American collective involved movement in emphasis away from ethnicity and toward race as the primary criterion of inclusion.” While recognizing Blackness as the source of unity for African-Americans, Gomez regards the African origins as the critical elements in the development of Black culture. He discusses specific cultural links in African-American culture from Senegambia, the Bight of Benin, Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast, the Bight of Biafra, and West Central Africa. He also illustrates how political

institutions, philosophical perspectives, religions, and farming methods from particular African ethnicities, such as the Akan, the Fon, and the Igbo, persist in African-American culture.  

Douglas Chambers’ “Ethnicity in the Diaspora: the Slave-Trade and the Creation of African ‘Nations’ in the Americas” (2001) and “The Significance of Igbo in the Bight of Biafra Slave-Trade: Rejoinder to Northrup’s ‘Myth Igbo,’” (2002) are both examples of the latest trend in the study of Africanisms in African-American culture. Chambers focuses on specific African influences found in African-American culture, particularly the Igbo of the Bight of Biafra, but in his arguments for Igbo continuities he also makes a claim for all African continuities. Chambers does this by reassessing the process of creolization in the Americas. He contends that diasporic ethnogenesis occurred among enslaved Africans who identified with each other based on cultural similarities. Chambers states:

Since most Africans lived in small-scale polities, or mini-states, nationality in any one region was highly fragmented. Slavers manipulated this fragmentation to generate captives, and slaving aggregated people from broad culture-areas who normally would not have identified with each other. Their role as captives and forced migrants, or shared experiences of enslavement and displacement, and the necessity of leveling locatistic differences to unify disparate through related groups, may well have encouraged the creation of konies (culturally as well as strictly linguistic) in the diaspora.

---

24 Ibid., 291, 11.
That is to say, African captives of various social identities, but from the same region, unified on common cultural elements and developed into an ‘ethnie’—defined as “a named human population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of common culture, a link with a homeland and a sense of solidarity among at least some of its members.” The creation of the various ‘ethnies,’ a result of the different groups of people coming into contact with others in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, are known by identifying labels such as Coromantee, Igbo, or Yoruba. Ethnicity then denotes the common cultural elements that members of a particular ‘ethnie’ share as a group. Chambers’ argument of a ‘historical creolization’ illustrates both the agency among Africans in creating their own identities in the midst of enslavement, as well as the channels through which African cultures were transferred to the Americas.²⁵

Chambers also presents a new perspective on the idea of ethnic randomization with his analysis of the information derived from the Du Bois Institute Slave Trade Database. He states:

The evidence is mounting that the transatlantic slave-trade was much more patterned and much less random (and randomizing) than previously had been simply assumed, thereby resulting in a greater likelihood of historical influences of groups of Africans in the formation and conservation of particular cultural patterns in the Americas.²⁶

Like Thornton and Gomez, Chambers shows that ethnic randomization was not feasible and thus promotes the formation of ethnic enclaves among Africans in the Americas which allowed for African cultural continuities. Although Chambers proposes the idea of a historical creation of new ethnic identities among Africans as a consequence of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the continuities however should not be viewed as exact replicas of specific African social groups. Instead, one should recognize that Akan, Wolof, and Igbo cultures are each compilations of various cultural elements from African social groups that unified as a result of the slave trade. For this reason, as well as the patterned organization of the slave trade, Africa should not be viewed as too diverse for the transmission of aspects of African cultures.

GOLD COAST INFLUENCES IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN CULTURE

Despite the large amount of scholarship on Africanisms in African-American culture, for the most part scholars have not addressed the cultural influences from the Gold Coast. The focus has largely centered on West Central Africa with some attention

on West African regions—namely, Senegambia, Sierra Leone, and the Bight of Biafra. The Gold Coast has, however, received attention in the more general works on Africanisms by Herskovits, Stuckey, and Gomez. In addition, scholars such as David Barry Gaspar, Ray A. Kea, and Barbara Klamon Kopytoff have had a wider focus on the Gold Coast in their significant studies. Yet, there remains a small amount of scholarship dealing with the Gold Coast; a fact which is unfortunate since Gold Coast Africans comprised the fourth largest portion of human imports in the Americas.

In an effort to fill this important void, this thesis will focus on Gold Coast Akan culture, examining the transmission of Akan spiritual elements in slave societies in the Americas. It will illustrate that certain elements of African cultures survived the trans-Atlantic slave trade and influenced diasporic communities in the Americas. Specifically, the research for this project establishes the existence of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Akan spiritual practices as continuities in eighteenth-century slave societies in Suriname and North America.

The first chapter provides an overview of eighteenth-century Gold Coast society. In addition to a geographical and historical overview of the region, the chapter details the

---


prominent role of spirituality in both politics and the daily lives of Gold Coast Africans. The emphasis then shifts to the Americas in the second chapter, focusing on Suriname and the existence of Akan spiritual continuities. The examination of slave importation records and ethnographic data emphasizes the existence of Akan elements. The last chapter on North America analyzes the colonies of South Carolina and New York and the Gold Coast influences in these regions. Information regarding burial customs, as well as interviews with ex-slaves and their descendents prove the transmission of Akan spiritual elements in South Carolina. In the case of colonial New York, findings at the newly discovered African Burial Ground in addition to trial records from slave revolts and conspiracies attest to the persistence of Akan spiritual beliefs in this region as well.

*Carrying Our Spirit With Us* examines the transmission of cultural elements from the Gold Coast region to the Western Hemisphere, thus, it is necessary to use a model that addresses this complexity. The theoretical model used in this analysis is part of a new paradigm, identified by Kristin Mann in “Shifting Paradigms in the Study of the African Diaspora and of Atlantic History and Culture” (2001). Termed as “the Diasporic approach” this new school of thought centers on the specific historical context and requires one to first construct understandings of the cultural, historical, and socio-political backgrounds of enslaved Africans. Mann states, “So far as the African diaspora is concerned, what we know about the past now requires a model that begins in Africa, traces the movement of specific cohorts of peoples into the Americas and examines how,
in regionally temporally contexts, they drew on what they brought with them as well as borrowed from what they found in the Americas to forge new worlds for themselves.”

This approach would allow scholars to examine particular cultural influences in their historical context, traveling across the Atlantic and into the Americas, keeping things connected in time and viewing it as a continuous historical experience. Mann stresses however that continuities are not only traceable using this approach, but that “the Diasporic approach” also considers discontinuities. A new awareness of a single Atlantic world, essentially calls for the reconfiguration of the history of the African Diaspora.

As Mann explains, the Nigerian Hinterland Project, a major international collaborative research effort affiliated with the UNESCO Slave Route Project, uses “the Diasporic approach” in its analysis. Under the leadership of Paul Lovejoy, the aim of the Project is to trace both the cultural and historical influences of enslaved Africans who originated in the present-day “hinterland” of Nigeria. Lovejoy and other prominent scholars involved in the Project want to bring attention to the various ways enslaved Africans from this region influenced societies and cultures in the Diaspora. Previous scholarship has suggested that once enslaved in the Americas, Africans lost their culture, however organizers of the Nigerian Hinterland Project attempt to disprove this claim. Mann states, “The Project assumes that persons born in Africa carried with them into slavery not only their culture but also their history, and that if we understand the

---

experiences of slaves and the histories of the societies from which they came, then we will be able to trace these influences into the diaspora.”30 Thus, in order to enrich our concept of the culture and history of Atlantic World, the Project begins its examination in the hinterlands of the Bight of Benin and the Bight of Biafra, tracing movements to the African coast, and following the slave routes into the Americas. Likewise, when tracing Gold Coast spiritual practices from the continent to Suriname and North America, the Diasporic approach has the potential to more accurately identify African continuities and conceptualize Gold Coast cultural influences in Suriname and North America.

30 Ibid., 5.
CHAPTER 1

GOLD COAST

The region specified by early fifteenth-century Portuguese explorers as the Gold Coast was principally located in the present-day West African country of Ghana. Geographically defined, the Gold Coast encompassed a region between the Komoé River in the west and the Volta River in the east, and extended from the Atlantic coast to the Volta basins in the north. In order to gain a better understanding, the Gold Coast’s western border, marked by the Komoé River, is located in the eastern part of Côte d’Ivoire, near Ghana. The eastern border, constituted by the Volta River, runs through the eastern part of Ghana, not far from neighboring Togo. The Volta basins, located approximately at Ghana’s core, indicated the northern border of the Gold Coast, which extended to the coast of the Atlantic Ocean. Thus, while the Gold Coast did not encompass all of Ghana, it covered the majority of the southern portion of the country, with its western border extending into Côte d’Ivoire.\textsuperscript{31}

For many years the only scholarship on Gold Coast history referred to the Asante Empire and Britain’s immense involvement in the region. Generally, works on pre-colonial Gold Coast history focused on the trans-Atlantic slave trade and British rule.

Such works were essentially a result of the Eurocentric idea that Africa was a continent without a history. This is, despite the rich oral traditions of West Africans as well as the documented observations of various Europeans who traveled to the region beginning in the fifteenth century. For many years the only scholarship about the Gold Coast began with the trans-Atlantic slave trade or European colonization because scholars ignored other indications of Gold Coast history. Nonetheless, Africanists are realizing the importance of oral traditions in uncovering the history of the continent. The works of scholars such as R.S. Rattray, Ivor Wilks, Ray A. Kea, J.K. Fynn, and T.C. McCaskie have immensely contributed to the increased scholarship and better understanding of the pre-colonial history of the Gold Coast. 32

Much of the scholarship details the pre-colonial social and political situation of the Gold Coast. As Kea explains in Settlements, Trade, and Polities in the Seventeenth-Century Gold Coast (1982), the Gold Coast region can be discussed socially and politically because of the similarities that exist in the settlement order, the sociopolitical and military order, and the commercial order. Referring to the Gold Coast, Kea states:

The term is also used to designate a social formation, that is, a historically concrete society whose structure, organization, and historical development were conditioned by specific systems (modes) of material production. The region constituted the socioeconomic or socially organized space within which the society maintained itself and from which it extracted its means of existence.\textsuperscript{33}

Moreover, because of the distinct social formation of the Gold Coast, a social and spatial totality exists throughout the region. The Gold Coast therefore was not only a region that shared common economic and political structures, but also a distinct culture. The term used to define the distinctiveness of the Gold Coast is *Akan*. In *Forests of Gold* (1993), Ivor Wilks clarifies:

In the ethnographic literature the name ‘Akan’ is used to refer to the peoples of the forest country of what is now Ghana. The root of the word is *kan*, which has much the sense of the English “first and foremost.” The prestigious term *akanfo* seems originally to have had the connotation of “us,” the true people, as opposed to the derisory *noponofo*, “them,” the foreign people.\textsuperscript{34}

Often times, Akan is used interchangeably with the Gold Coast, to describe the language, religion, and people in the Gold Coast, as well as certain groups in the modern countries of Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire. Anthony Ephirim-Donkor explains in *African Spirituality: On Becoming Ancestors* (1997), “The Akan people are bound together by a common religion and belief in *Nana Nyame* (God), language, politics and ethos.”\textsuperscript{35} Consequently,

\textsuperscript{33} Kea, *Settlements, Trade, and Politics*, 1.

\textsuperscript{34} Wilks, *Forests of Gold*, 91.

a clear understanding of the Akan political system is important to the discussion of Gold Coast spiritual practices because the two overlapped in revealing and significant ways.

Prior to the eighteenth century, the Gold Coast had a number of small polities and a handful of expansionist kingdoms. In addition to the polities, the region also contained four principal linguistic groups: the Volta-Komoé, the Gur, the Central Togo (Ewe), and the Ga-Damne. The largest of these groups, in terms of both geographical range and numbers of speakers, was the Volta-Komoé, speakers of the Akan language. Although diversity existed among the various polities and language groups, there was some degree of homogeneity in regards to social structure, technology, and systems of social production. “In addition,” Kea affirms, “ties of kinship, and clientage, common corporate organization, common cosmogonic myths, and a common calendar as well as shared religious values served to link people, irrespective of linguistic differences and political boundaries, over a wide area.” Thus, while a particular cultural practice may be Ewe, Gã, or Akan, they are often identified as Gold Coast or Akan cultural practices because of the regional similarities that exist among the three groups.36

The social formations among the people of the Gold Coast also constituted a common bond. The two modes of production were the tributary mode and the subordinate slaveowning mode. The tributary mode involved two distinct classes: the peasants in the community, and the ruling class that controlled the political organization

---

36 Kea, Settlements, Trade, and Polities, 1-5.
and obtained tribute from rural communities in the form of agriculture goods. Peasants were given the right to farm based on their payment of tribute to the ruling class. The slaveowning mode of production however "was not based on control and ownership of land but on the juridical ownership of persons." Slaves were the property of the privileged classes, working either in agriculture or household roles. Their position exhibited another form of domination and subordination, similar to the tributary mode. Neither of these modes however was confined to a particular polity, language group, or geographical region. Instead, they both were present throughout the region, characterizing the region's socioeconomic system between the sixteenth and early eighteenth century.  

Regardless of the particular mode of social formation, urban centers or towns, existed throughout the Gold Coast region. Towns were especially important in the Gold Coast prior to 1700, before production changed from a simple reproduction that manufactured to maintain wealth, to expanded reproduction that created to increase wealth. The change in economics also marked by the Gold Coast's increased involvement in the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the importation of Brazilian gold in the late 1600s. Nonetheless, towns remained the focus of pre-capitalist social and economic relations before and after the eighteenth century. With the expansion of trade and production during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, towns were the centers of

---

37 Ibid, 2-5.
trade containing various levels of market production, and craft industries. There were settlements, however, on the outskirts of the towns in hamlets and villages that were linked to the towns commercially, culturally, politically, and militarily, but they were essentially dependent on their prospective ruling power located in the towns. Urban centers were also areas of social wealth, and subsequently they became the center of political power, military organization, and judicial authority.\textsuperscript{38}

There was, however, not just one ruling power or a settlement system present in one of the many urban centers. With the different polities in the region, various settlement systems existed within one town. Nonetheless, there was organization in the urban centers based on political and commercial hierarchy. Kea explains:

The political hierarchy was defined by a territorially based administrative system... Within this structure existed a hierarchy of political centers ranging from district capitals... to state capitals... The commercial hierarchy was defined by the geography of trade, that is, by the location of markers and arterial routes... Within this structure existed a hierarchy of marketing centers ranging from periodic local markets... to the great commercial towns and fairs.\textsuperscript{39}

Despite the hierarchy and organization in the urban centers, there was a great deal of conflict among the towns competing for commercial and political supremacy.

In addition to towns representing the centers of political and economic power, they were also the centers of religious ceremonies. Although particular names or

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 11, 6-7.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 14.
descriptions of specific religious ceremonies are not available, it is likely that they ranged from regular worship to celebrations recognizing certain deities. Even so, the structure of state political systems reveal the importance of spiritual practices in the Gold Coast. The various states had similar political structures with an office devoted to religion. Among the administration of the royal household, lands and settlements, taxation and trade, and military, there also existed an administration of religion.⁴⁰

While visible during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the role of spirituality in Gold Coast politics becomes more apparent during the eighteenth century with the rise of the Asante nation. Directly a result of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century political and military conflicts between city-states, and the pattern of state-building that took place during the late 1500s and early 1600s, the rise of the Asante nation began in the 1680s. It commenced nonetheless during the mid-1600s with the rise of the Akan state, Denkyira, which took control of the gold trade by waging wars. As a powerful state, Denkyira demanded that the small clans pay tribute and send a hostage to serve as a servant to the Denkyira king, Nana Boa Amponsem. Osei Tutu, the nephew of the king of the Oyoko clan, was sent as a domestic. Osei Tutu later became a prominent general in the Denkyira army, rebelled, and eventually defeated the Denkyira king with

⁴⁰Ibid., 13, 126.
an army of nearby communities under his control. As king of Kumasi and later those of Denkyira, Osei Tutu united the people under one nation, the Asante polity, with a spiritual symbol as the fundamental element.\(^{41}\)

The spiritual center of the Asante nation is the *Sika Dwo*, or the Golden Stool, believed to have descended out of the skies as a result of the prayers of Ṣkomfo Anɔkye, a friend and spiritual advisor of Osei Tutu. In Akan society, only a priest holds the title, Ṣkomfo. He or she serves as an intermediary between a particular deity or lesser god, and the people. One receives special training on the laws, taboos, songs and dances of the particular deity they serve as an intermediary. A priest also receives training on how to use herbs and roots as medicine. The preparation allows the priest to holistically serve the people. Moreover, the function of a priest, as Kofi Asare Opoku, scholar and specialist on West African religions explains in *West African Traditional Religion* (1978), “is not restricted to religious matters alone for almost every aspect of human life is a concern of his.” The significance of a priest serving as an advisor in various areas of life essentially explains the friendship between Ṣkomfo Anɔkye and Osei Tutu, as well as Ṣkomfo Anɔkye’s role in the creation of the Asante empire.\(^{42}\)


Various versions of the origins of the Golden Stool exist in Asante folklore, many of which denote Ṣokomfo Anokye as the bearer and the stool as the soul of the Asante nation. Two specific versions however epitomize the spiritual and unifying power of this mystical object. In *Asante and Its Neighbors 1700-1807* (1971), J.K. Fynn conveys one version:

Asante tradition says that on one Friday a great gathering of the Union chiefs was held at Kumasi. At that meeting, Okomfo Anokye brought down from the sky, amidst darkness and thunder, and in a thick cloud of white dust, a wooden stool adorned with gold which floated to the earth and alighted gently on Osei Tutu’s knees. Okomfo Anokye then announced that the Golden Stool contained the spirit of the whole Asante nation, and that its strength and bravery depended upon the safety of the stool.\(^{43}\)

Peter Sarpong explains in *Ghana in Retrospect* (1974):

Anokye called an assembly at Kumasi on a Friday which the chiefs of the other paramountcies attended. He then brought down the Golden Stool from the heavens. After that he collected clippings of the nails and hair of the chiefs and queen-mothers present, mixed them into a concoction and smeared the stool with the resultant substance. He then gave the rest of the mixture to the leaders to drink and told them that their souls were from then on in the stool.\(^{44}\)

In both accounts of the origin of the Golden Stool, it is depicted as a spiritual creation that represents the unification of the Asante nation. Presented to the Asante people by Ṣokomfo Anokye after the defeat of Denkyira, the Golden Stool proclaimed the political


unity of the Asante nation, and Osei Tutu as the king or Asantehene. It represents the
highest level of authority in the Asante nation. Wilks states, "The story of the Golden
Stool descending from the sky may be thought of as equivalent to Article I of an
unwritten constitution: 'The first and therefore paramount stool of the Asante Nation is
the Golden Stool. It is the source of all authority within the nation.'"45 With this
understanding, the Asante people believe that destruction of the sacred symbol would
signify the end of the Asante nation. Accordingly, the Golden Stool, a symbolic figure of
the Asante nation, also illustrates the significant overlap between politics and religion in
Gold Coast culture.46

Spirituality was not only visible in politics, but as early European explorers
witnessed, it encompassed a great part of the lives of the people in the Gold Coast.
Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century accounts from European explorers like Pieter de
Marees, Willem Bosman, and Ludewig Ferdinand Römer attest to the spiritual practices
of the Akan in the Gold Coast. Although some of these descriptions are masked with

45 Wilks, One Nation, Many Histories, 31.

46 Wilks, Forest of Gold, 114-115; McCaskie, State and Society, 127-129; Osei Kwadwo, An Outline of
ethnocentric ideas of Gold Coast spiritual practices as savage and pagan, some of these works offer a great deal of information for the study of Gold Coast spiritual continuities in the Americas. 47

The writings of Willem Bosman, an employee of the Dutch West India Company and chief Dutch factor at the Elmina castle, are viewed as the first authoritative and detailed account of Africa’s West Coast. Although de Marees’ late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century writings preceded Bosman’s, the fact that Bosman provides narratives of his fourteen years of observation renders it more reliable. Bosman supplies elaborate details, yet like other European explorers, his writings contain prejudiced descriptions of Gold Coast culture. 48

---

47 Pieter de Marees, a Dutch trader, provides one of the earliest European descriptions of several West African societies, though he focuses most of his attention on the Gold Coast region. In his account of his travels to the Gold Coast he mentions the spiritual beliefs of the people. His account however is not solely based on personal observation, but also oral and written accounts of European explorers who traveled before de Marees. Undoubtedly, the possibility for hearsay in de Marees’ report presents problems in terms of the value. Furthermore, the fact that his account may not be genuine creates doubt in terms of his observations. For instance, de Marees’ descriptions of the religious practices in the Gold Coast are very general, absence of ample detail. In his brief portrayal of the religious practices, de Marees describes the presence of shrines and priests, observations like the act of pouring libations, the offering of sacrifices to gods, and the reading of oracles. His accounts are however given in a vague manner. For example, de Marees states, “In their Market-place they have a square stand, about 4 foot square, with four Pillars rising 2 Cubits about the ground; it has a flat top made of reeds. All around it they hang straw wisps or Fetissoes. They put Millie with palm oil or water on it and give this to their God as food and drink, to sustain him lest he die of hunger or thirst; for the Birds of the sky which eat the grain and drink the water. When it is finished they smear the little Altar with Oil and replenish it with food and drink, thinking that in this way they do their God a great service and sacrifice.” Based on this description, what de Marees is describing could be the portrayal of an altar and the act of giving offerings in a number of West African societies. His lack of detail however does not prove useful in identifying specific Gold Coast spiritual practices. Nonetheless, as a source, de Marees’ account does provide evidence and for the most part it supports of the observations of other writers who provide in depth descriptions of Gold Coast culture. Pieter de Marees, Description and historical account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea (1602). Trans & ed., Albert van Dantzig & Adam Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 67.
In regards to spirituality, Bosman begins by proclaiming, "A'most all the Coast Negroes believe in one true God, to whom they attribute the Creation of the World and all things in it, though in a crude indigested Manner, they not being able to form a just idea of a Deity." He goes on to note that the people never call on God for help, nor make offerings to him. Instead, the Akan people call on fetiche or deities when in need of assistance.\footnote{Bosman, Description of the Coast of Guinea, 146.}

According to Opoku this particular account is associated with the current Akan belief that views God, or Onyame, as omnipotent, imperceptible, and therefore not associated with any particular place or object. Hence, no shrines or offerings are dedicated to Onyame, the Creator. Despite the absence of worship, shrines, and scarifies for Onyame, the Akan people view the Creator or the Supreme Ancestor, as omnipresent.\footnote{In Akan spirituality Onyame is viewed as the creator of all things in the world, including man. Literally translated Onyame reads, “The Supreme Being,” “God the Creator of All Things,” and “the Deity.” Unlike any spiritual beings, other names are given to Onyame to express the uniqueness of the Creator. For instance, Twedhampon translates to “The Dependable.” Am\o amee is “Giver of Sufficiency.” Totorbonsu is “The One who causes rain to fall abundantly.” See Opoku, West African Traditional Religion, 14-33.}

This is indicated in the proverb that reads: \textit{Wope asem aka akyere Onyankopon a, ka kyere mframa} (If you want to speak to God, speak to the wind).
Opoku explains, “God is compared with the wind, which is everywhere. Therefore, since God is everywhere, and can hear our supplications at any time, He is not to be identified with anything in particular or with any place.”

Bosman also explores the creation myth that exists among the Akan people of the Gold Coast. He acknowledges the three different stories people tell about the creation. One account attributes man’s creation to a great spider named Anansi. In another version of the creation of humanity, Onyame is the originator. The last story explains that people originated from holes and pits in a rock near the ocean, at Fort Accra. Although the prominent creation stories that exist in Ghana each note God as the creator, there is a long tradition of Anansi the Spider tales in Akan culture that make Bosman’s description credible.

According to one Akan legend, Kwaku Anansi—a trickster spider—went to Onyame and asked to buy his stories. Onyame laughed and told Anansi that others have tried to purchase the stories but failed. Anansi, certain he would obtain them, asked for the price. Onyame replied that the price for the stories was Onini the python, Osebo the leopard, and Mmiboro the hornet swarm. Anansi responded that he would bring Onyame all he requested. After returning home, Kwaku Anansi told his wife, Aso, about his

---


52 Variations in the spelling of the name of the great spider, Anansi exist such as, Ananse and Anansie.

meeting with Onyame. Aso instructed Anansi on how to secure the python, the leopard, and the hornet swarm by the use of deception. After following her directions, Anansi took each of the animals to Onyame. Surprised, yet remaining true to his word, Onyame, called the other gods to him, announcing that Anansi, unlike others seeking to buy his stories, paid the price. At that time Onyame gave his stories to Anansi, and pronounced that forever they should be known as Spider-stories. Thus, it is possible that Akan people would consider Kwaku Anansi the creator of humanity since he is the owner of all of Onyame’s stories. Moreover, it is possible that the Gâ people, who reside on the coastlands, believe that people emerged from a rock near the ocean, just as some could also attribute the creation to Onyame.  

Conjuring and oath drinks are other spiritual practices Bosman comments on in his account of the Gold Coast. What differs in his explanation in comparison to de Marees’ however is Bosman’s use of Akan terms that denote these actions and his

---

elaborate description. For instance, when describing conjuring, Bosman states:

Fetiche or Bossum in the Negro Language, derives it self from their False God, which they call Bossum. Are they inclined to make Offerings to their Idols, or desire to be informed of something by them? They cry out, Let us make Fetiche; by which they express as much, as let us perform our Religious Worship, and see or hear what our God saith. 55

The word Bosman uses, Bossum, is probably a variation of the Akan word for a deity, abosom. 56

In Akan spirituality, the lesser god, abosom (or abosom for multiple gods) are Onyame’s intermediaries. As a creation of Onyame, the abosom derive their power from the Creator, yet they work independently healing and protecting those who ask for their assistance. The abosom were created to fulfill specific functions of Onyame, but they have limitations in terms of their power. Opoku explains further, “Their power is limited to the performance of specific functions and none of them enjoys the unlimited powers ascribed to God.” The abosom have powers that are not ascribed to humans and each abosom has his or her specialty in areas of competency and authority. For instance, Tano, the river god and god of thunder, is consulted in times of war. Bosompo is the god of the sea and sacrifices are given to him annually to assure an abundant supply of fish and safe returns for fishermen. The abosom are embodied in rivers, lakes, rocks,

55 Bosman, Description of the Coast of Guinea, 147-148.

56 Opoku, West African Traditional Religion, 54.
mountains, trees, and other elements of nature. Furthermore, people create shrines for the
abosom and give offerings to appease the spirits into providing direction, guidance,
blessings, prosperity, and protection from danger. In essence, the final recipient of the
offerings made to the abosom is Onyame, the supreme power in Akan cosmology. The
abosom nonetheless are Onyame’s liaisons, which makes their role very significant to the
Akan spirituality. As Bosman describes, people in the Gold Coast often call on the
abosom in times of need.\footnote{Ibid., 54, 54-72, 64-74.}

In terms of oath drinks, Bosman provides elaborate descriptions of the process
and the purpose for this ritual. He explains that oathing drinks, comprised of liquor and
many other ingredients, were created under the name of a particular deity with the
purpose that “every person entering into any obligation is obliged to drink this swearing
liquor.” Bosman also explains an oath he describes as “the most Solemn and Obligatory,
which is only used on important occasions.” This particular oath, carried out by a priest
involves dirt, oil, blood, bones, feathers, human hair and nails. Bosman explains:
They have a great Wooden Pipe filled with Earth, Oil, Blood, the Bones of dead Men and Beasts, Feathers, Hair; and, to be short all sorts of Excrementitious and filthy Trash, which they do not endeavor to mould into any Shape, but lay it in a confused heap in the Pipe. The Negroe who is to take an Oath before this Idol, is placed directly opposite of it...the Priest...calls the Fetiche by its Name, and recites at large the Contents of what he designs to bind by an Oath, and makes it his Petitionary Request that the Idol may punish him with death if he swears falsly...the Priest takes some of the mentioned Ingredients out of the Pipe; with which he touches the Swearer’s Head, Arms, Belly and Legs, and holding it above his Head, turns it three times round then he cuts off a bit of the Nail of one Finger in each Hand, of one Toe of each Foot, and some of the Hair of his Head, which he throws into the Pipe where the Idol is lodged; all which done the Oath is firmly Obligatory.  

The Akan people believed that if the person did not carry out their obligation or commitment they would be punished by death by the deity mentioned in the oath.

The role of priests is also detailed in Bosman’s account. Although his account does not denote any particular names, Bosman nonetheless explains the function of these spiritual advisors. He states:

When the Negroes design to begin a War, to drive a Bargain, to Travel or attempt any thing of Importance; their first Busines is to consult their False God by the Priest, concerning the Event of their Undertaking, who very seldom Prophecies III, but generally encourages them to hope for prosperous Success.

In other words, just as the abosom are the intermediaries to Onyame, priests are intercessors of the abosom. When people want to consult the abosom, they seek a priest. These spiritual advisors have a direct spiritual connection with a lesser god whom they

---

58 Bosman, *Description of the Coast of Guinea*, 149, 150-151.

59 Ibid., 151.
are able to consult at any time. Priests are sought after whenever one needs the guidance of the *abosom*, and as Bosman details, especially when making oaths, before going to war, or when nation or town encounters turmoil.

While there are various ways priests communicate with an *abosom*, Bosman specifies two methods in his account of Gold Coast culture. One approach involves the bundling and folding of twenty small pieces of leather in which “ingredients” of both success and failure are put in the middle. If the matter the person inquired about is to turn out successful, the pieces of leather will come together frequently, however if leather does not come together foreshadowing a disappointment, sacrifices can be offered to the spirit to change the outcome. The other method by which priests consult a deity is through reading the falling of nuts. The priests allow the nuts to fall and base their prediction on the manner in which they lay. Bosman explains this method as, “a sort of wild Nuts; which they pretend to fake up by guess and let fall again; after which the numbers falling even or odd.” Although Bosman considers the work of the priest as “sly and crafty, encouraged by the stupid credulity of the People,” he makes it clear that priests are highly regarded and never accused of fabrication.⁶⁰ Priests function as the intermediaries between the human and the spirit world, and serve an important role in Akan spirituality.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 153.
Particularly noteworthy is Bosman’s account of day gods and akra, or soul names, among the people in the Gold Coast. He states, “Each particular Person hath his peculiar False God, which he or she worships after their manner, on that Day of the Week on which he was born. This they call their Bossum.” In other words, the Akan people believe that when a person is born they are given an akra, or soul from Onyame. Seven abosom or deities are allotted a certain day of the week. These seven deities, the souls of Onyame, are: Asi, Adwo, Abena, Aku, Awuo, Afì, and Amen. Moreover, according to the particular day a person is born, a certain abosom is deemed their personal spirit.

Opoku explains:

To the Akan, akra is not only the soul of a person. It appears to be also a guardian spirit or protector which guards the person and gives him good or bad advice. In this role it is a separate entity from the person and it may fail to guide and protect him; hence the expression Ne kra apa n’akyi, his soul or akra has failed to guide him, or his soul has neglected him.

Opoku is referring to one of the seven abosom as the guiding spirit of a person. This spirit is essential to a person’s well-being which is why Akan people often give offerings to the abosom. For instance, on a person’s birth day one often makes sacrifices for the

---

61 Ibid.
62 Opoku, West African Traditional Religion, 96.
*abısom* and refrains from certain activities such as drinking palm wine before sunset.

Akan people make these acts of kindness as a way of saying thank you and asking for future prosperity.⁶³

Although it is not specified by Bosman, the first name a person from the Gold Coast takes correlates with the day he or she was born and that particular *abısom*. The *kradin*, or name, derives from the *abısom* of that particular day. It not only indicates the day a person was born, but one also receives the personality characteristics of the *abısom* corresponding to that day. Essentially, since the *abısom* are souls of Onyame, these are characteristics of God. Ephirim-Donkor explains:

In other words, the neonate is born with a God-soul, based on the quality of God in attendance on that day. These correspond with seven pairs of names assumed by children, namely, Adjowa, Adwowa; Abena, Alaba; Araba; Akua, Ekuwa; Yaa, Aba, Awo; Afua, Efua; Amma, Amba; Esi, Asi, Akosua for females. The male names are: Kojo, Kwadwo; Kobena, Kwabena, Ebo; Kweku, Kwaku; Yaw, Ywaw, Kwaw, Kow; Kofi, Kwafi; Kwame, Kwamena; Kwesi, Kwasi.⁶⁴

---

⁶³ Ibid., 94-96.

This particular practice was in existence in seventeenth and eighteenth century Gold Coast culture and is still present in modern Ghana. While these names are nowadays commonly referred to as day-names, they actually designate the names that souls were born on particular days (see Table 1.1).  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DAYS OF THE WEEK</th>
<th>AKAN DEITIES</th>
<th>AKAN SOUL NAMES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>MALE Pronounced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European</td>
<td>Akan</td>
<td>Male Pronounced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday</td>
<td>Kwasida</td>
<td>Ayisi or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Awusi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>Dwoda</td>
<td>Adwo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Quo-jo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>Benada</td>
<td>Bena</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Qua-be-na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Wukuda</td>
<td>Wuku</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Qua-cu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>Yawda</td>
<td>Yaw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ya-o</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>Fieda (Fida)</td>
<td>Afi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Quo-fi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturday</td>
<td>Memeneda</td>
<td>Ame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Qua-me</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.1 Akan Day-Names

---

65 Opoku, West African Traditional Religion, 96.
Bosman also very briefly mentions the belief of afterlife among the people in the Gold Coast, as well as their burial customs. He explains that although Gold Coast Africans fear death, “most believe that immediately after the Death of any Person he goes to another World, where he lives in the same Character as here, and makes use of all the Offerings of his Friends and Relations made here after his Death.” Specifically, Gold Coast Africans believe that a person’s spirit lives on in the afterworld and like an ṣbosom, an ancestor has the ability to influence certain matters on earth. The affairs an ancestor can affect are restrained however to those of their family and friends who make offerings in their name. J.B. Danquah explains, “They act as friends at court to intervene between man and the Supreme Being and to get prayers and petitions answered more quickly and effectively.” Moreover, Opoku contends that the act of pouring libations originated from this belief of the close relationship between ancestors and Onyame. Prayers and offerings are directed to the ancestors through libations, but the ultimate receiver is God. In essence, according to the Akan people, ancestors are the living-dead and are both actively present in the lives of their family and conduits for Onyame. As a result, ancestors are often remembered through shrines and offerings.

---

66 Bosman, *Description of the Coast of Guinea*, 156.
The reverence for ancestors can also be viewed in the burial practices of Gold Coast Africans. Bosman affirms in his writings the placement of earthenware images on the tops of graves at Axim, the site of a slave fortress on the coast of Ghana. Annually these images are washed when the people “renew the Funeral Ceremonies in as expensive a manner as the interment it self.” This act of remembrance illustrates the central position of the ancestors in the lives of Gold Coast Africans. Particularly, the placement of earthenware images on tops of graves demonstrates the belief among the Akan people, as with various West African cultures, that the dead go on a journey to the next world. The Akan people believe that the dead have to cross rivers before they arrive at their destination. “Hence,” as Opoku states, “the Akan have a custom of putting a calabash into the coffin so that the deceased may use it to drink water along the way.” Putting earthenware images on tops of graves instead of inside the coffins could indicate a variation of the practice that changed over time. Nonetheless, both acts illustrate the reverence for ancestors in Gold Coast culture.

Ludewig Ferdinand Rømer, an employee of the Danish West India and Guinea Company, sent to the Gold Coast as an assistant clerk, also wrote an account of his observations in 1756. Although more detailed than the de Marees’ 1602 description, Rømer’s account does not offer the depth of information in Bosman’s description.

---

68 Bosman, Description of the Coast of Guinea, 232.

69 Opoku, West African Traditional Religion, 134.
Interestingly, Rømer describes a great deal about Gā culture of the Gold Coast. In terms of religion, the Gā people have similar spiritual beliefs as the Akan. For instance, the Supreme Being, in Gā culture, known as Nyommo, is neither depicted in images, given shrines, nor directly consulted. Rømer also describes the belief in the existence of deities, who “were created at the time God created the first humans, and they were created for the purpose of teaching humans to live piously and virtuously. With God’s permission, they were to instruct people in [the difference between] good and evil.” As with Akan spirituality, priests in Gā culture serve as the mediums through which the deities send their messages, and whom the people consult when seeking answers to questions or solutions to problems. Instead of reading nuts or folding leather to communicate with a deity, the Gā priests actually become possessed with the spirit when sought for consultation. Rømer states, “The crone performs her conjuring [up of the spirits], urging the fetish to come to her. When the fetish is present, the bell rings. The crone becomes, or pretends to become, possessed. She stretches out her arms and legs, begins to giggle and foam at the mouth, and draws short breaths with a raised chest.”

---

Although the details of the creator, the deities, and the priest might be deemed as a generalized account of West African culture, what confirms Rømer’s description of Gâ practices as those specifically of the Gold Coast is his explanation of the trickster spirit, Nanni. Rømer explains:

A large black spider (Aranea), Nanni in the Negro language, on the orders of God created the first people (according to the idea of the Negroes, is). For this purpose, Nanni wove cloth (material), and God created people out of the cloth. Being industrious, Nanni wove cloth for [the fashioning of] a multitude of people, until she could do no more. Naturally, Nanni expected gratitude from the people for her trouble. But they ran away from her, and [instead] the fetish instructed them how to behave. Out of the little cloth left over, Nanni created yet another being. This one was smaller in size than the earlier one, and Nanni hatched [sic] him herself, giving him her own name. This is the hero whom all their tales relate, being about how he was able to live in the world without working, namely by swindling others, and how he was able to dupe the fetish. 71

Rømer does not specify if the being Nanni created is indeed Kwaku Anansi. He does however state that Nanni gave her creation her own name increasing the likelihood that Anansi and Nanni’s male creation are one and the same. Furthermore, as Rømer conveys, Nanni’s creation survived by deceiving others, an attribute shared by Kwaku Anansi, the trickster spirit of Akan culture. Despite the slight variation of the trickster folktale in Akan and Gâ culture, essentially Bosman and Rømer are describing the same character that represents a significant element in Gold Coast spiritual culture.

---

71 Ibid., 81.
Obviously, the presence of priests, the acts of conjuring and divination, and ideas about God, the creation, and life and death exist among various West African cultures, but there are a few elements in each society that distinguish them from the another. The presence of day-names, the practice of oathing drinks, references to Bossum, or abosom when conjuring, and mentions of a great spider named Anansi are of uniquely Gold Coast origin.

Undeniably, Gold Coast spiritual practices persisted in the cultures enslaved Africans created in the Americas. Realizing however, that other ethnic groups had cultural influences in the slave cultures of the Americas, it cannot be assumed that Akan cultural practices were prevalent in all areas. One must, in turn, look at the dispersal patterns of Gold Coast Africans to attain a clearer picture of where Akan cultural enclaves existed in the Americas during the eighteenth century. According to the Du Bois Institute Database, Barbados and the Guianas, present-day Suriname, are among the principal areas of concentration.

The importation of Gold Coast Africans in Barbados is important to this study because South Carolina began its history essentially as a colony of Barbados. The Du Bois Institute Database shows that between 1601-1700, 52.5% of Gold Coast Africans brought to the Americas disembarked in Barbados. Although this demographic fact says nothing about the percentage of Gold Coast Africans in Barbados, it does suggest

---

that Barbados had a significant amount of Africans from the Gold Coast. This becomes important when English settlers from Barbados established a colony in what is today Charleston, South Carolina, and needed to import slave labor.

The Du Bois Institute Database also notes a significant Gold Coast presence in the Guianas, which is present-day Suriname. Between 1601 and 1700, and 1701 and 1800, this region received respectively, 3.1%, and 11.7% of the Gold Coast Africans brought to the Americas. While these numbers do not seem large, 11.7% was actually the second largest importation in the eighteenth century. Despite the lack of demographic data specifying the percentage of Gold Coast Africans in the Guianas, one can assume as with Barbados, that the Guianas had a significant amount of Akan cultural influence.\(^{73}\)

The importation figures, combined with the political history of the Gold Coast, and the descriptions of Gold Coast spiritual practices from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century primary sources, provide a foundation for the exploration of Gold Coast spiritual continuities in Suriname and North America. The persistence of beliefs over time and space has proven itself with cultural retentions and continuities originating in the West Central Africa, Senegambia, and the Bight of Benin regions. Scholars like Margaret

---

\(^{73}\) Ibid.

Gold Coast Africans enslaved in the Americas were taken from their homelands, the grounds on which their spiritual forces were embodied. Ancestral shrines were no longer accessible, and neither were the shrines of the abosom. The highly esteemed spiritual advisors were present in the Americas, yet they were scattered amongst other enslaved Africans, enduring the same cruelties of enslavement as others. The absence of familiarity, however, did not entail the end of the spiritual beliefs among Gold Coast Africans. Instead of forgetting or abandoning such a central facet of their lifestyle, Gold Coast Africans carried their spirit with them. Visible throughout slave cultures in the Americas—particularly, in the names of slaves, folktales, burial practices, and acts of resistance, but also in other aspects of life—the spirituality of Gold Coast Africans undoubtedly survived.
CHAPTER 2

SURINAME

The so-called coastal Negroes and Bush Negroes of eighteenth-century Dutch Guiana, present-day Suriname, are a significant group to examine when dealing with the Gold Coast spiritual continuities. This set, also known as the Suriname Maroons, is comprised of three separate groups, namely the Saramacca, the Awka, and the Boni. They are descendants of runaway slaves imported from Africa who formed coherent and stable communities and lived in isolation in the interior of Dutch Guiana since the end of the seventeenth century. The Suriname Maroons were rediscovered by archeologists exploring the South American country of Suriname in the early twentieth century.

Suriname exists on the northeastern tip of the continent between Guyana to the northwest, and French Guiana on the east. While the Atlantic Ocean serves as the northern boarder to Suriname, as many as a dozen streams and rivers crisscross the country. Geographically, a swampy plain exists along Suriname’s coast, with broad savannas and forests in the interior, and densely populated rainforests and mountains in the south.75

---

Suriname is one of the smallest countries in South America, but because of its geographical makeup and history of colonization, it is also a unique area for the study of culture. Melville J. Herskovits and Frances S. Herskovits describe in *Rebel Destiny* (1934):

> The importance of the Bush Negroes for the student of Negro cultures, then, is that they live and think today as did their ancestors who established themselves in the bush, which is to say that they live and think much as the Negroes who were brought to other parts of the New World, and who became the ancestors of the New World Negroes of the present day.\(^{76}\)

While scholar Richard Price suggests that Bantu-speaking slaves from West Central Africa made up the single most important group of imports into Suriname during every period of the colony’s history, a detailed look at the country’s description suggests a more significant population—the Akan people of the Gold Coast.\(^{77}\)

During the seventeenth century, as a result of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, various European interests such as Spain, France, Britain and the Netherlands, began searching for land on which to settle and build plantation colonies for economic gain. The Guiana coast, which includes the modern countries of Guyana, Suriname, French Guiana, and portions of Brazil and Venezuela, served as a site of particular interest for French, English, and Dutch settlers during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Settlement and commerce in local products such as wood, dyes, oil, and balsam were of

---

\(^{76}\) Herskovits and Herskovits, *Rebel Destiny*, xii.

interests to the Europeans, as well as the selling of people. While various colonization attempts took place by separate European nations, Johannes Menne Postma describes in *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600-1815* (1990), that they were often met with failure as a result of “the hostile physical environment or the opposition of the indigenous population, the Caribs and the Arawaks.” In the mid-1600s however, European nations became successful in establishing settlements in the Guiana region. In 1648 the Dutch gained legal possession of the river valleys in present-day Guyana. Around the same time the French gained a settlement that later became the colony of French Guiana. Yet, the most prosperous settlement in the Guiana region was controlled by the English beginning in 1651. As the most flourishing area on the Guiana coast, the English encountered several colonial attacks, the most detrimental coming from the Dutch, which resulted in the loss of Suriname in 1667.\(^78\)

\(^78\) Johannes Menne Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade 1600-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 174, 175, 174-177, 176-177. Postma does not give a date the French obtained the settlement. He only states, “The Dutch were not alone in establishing plantation settlements in Guiana. The French had pioneered a settlement on the Cayenne River, which was subsequently developed into the colony of French Guiana,” 175. Postma explains, “The First Anglo-Dutch War (1652-4), proved to be quite unsettling for the Guiana region. Virtually every settle changed hands at least once, and when the war was finally ended with the Treaty of Breda in 1667 the Dutch had achieved hegemony in the region. Only the French regained possession of their colony; the English lost all their colonies in the region. Because England received titled to New York (New Amsterdam) by the same treaty, the impression was left tat Surinam and New York were simply exchanged. At the same time the exchange appears to have been beneficial to the Dutch, because Surinam held far greater promise for economic exploitation, both in agricultural production and the slave trade,” 176-177.
Considering the economic loss, the English were reluctant to abandon Suriname to the Dutch until the Dutch army and the king of England forced them to leave. Due to the physical damage and the deportation, as well as regular conflicts with the local Caribs, the Suriname colony was close to ruin. Postma describes:

In fact, not a single slave ship arrived in the colony during the period 1678-81. As might be expected under these conditions, the settler population of Suriname was in serious decline... That same year Governor Heinsius reported that the white population had declined to 500, where they once had been 1,500. In addition, a number of slaves may have used the upheaval to run away from their plantations, and joined the Caribs or fled into the wilderness.

Despite this period of instability, the Dutch colony of Suriname was able to regain its strength in the early eighteenth century after suffering attempts by the French to conquer the region.79

Plantations in the colony increased from 80 in 1684 to 128 in 1704. Sugar was the chief export crop of the colony, but other commodities such as wood products, dyes, indigo, and cotton also added to the colony’s commerce. In the 1720s coffee became a major export item, with cocoa serving as a profitable crop by the 1750s.80 Cocoa, in addition to other export items definitely revived Suriname’s economy and reputation. In

---

79 Ibid., 178-179; In 1688 when Cornelis Aerseen van Sommelsdijck, governor of the Dutch Guiana, died, the French demanded the colony’s surrender. The Suriname military were able to defend themselves and fight off the French, but in 1712 the French attacked again, this time with greater force. Suriname was again able to drive the French off, but this time by paying a hefty ransom of cash, slaves and sugar. At this point, realizing their vulnerability, the colony of Suriname made considerable efforts to improve their position, Ibid., 182; Price, The Guiana Maroons, 16-17.

80 Ibid., 17.
the introduction to *Stedman’s Suriname* (1992), Richard Price and Sally Price state, “By the mid-eighteenth century, [Suriname] was said to be producing more revenue and consuming more imported manufactured goods, per capita, than any other Caribbean colony.”

Undoubtedly, slaves were used to grow the crops on Suriname’s plantations, and the colony’s association with the Dutch West India Company (or West-Indische Compagnie, hereafter referred to as WIC) provided the colony with an ample supply of slaves. For instance, in 1703 a conflict took place between Suriname planters and the WIC regarding their monopoly over the trade in African slaves and the high cost involved. After explaining that the increase in prices was a result of the war with France, the WIC directors promised Suriname planters “to deliver 1,500 to 1,600 slaves to Suriname annually, and more if demanded if the planters would only promise to pay for them.” High mortality rates and slaves running away to join maroon societies were major reasons Suriname required such a large amount of slaves. In addition, Suriname planters alone required over 1,000 imports of Africans per year. The origin and quantity of these enslaved Africans is significant nonetheless to this study on Gold Coast spiritual continuities.

---


82 Ibid., 184.
For the most part, the WIC had a monopoly over the Dutch colony of Suriname. Before taking into consideration their import patterns, it is important to first focus on the importation patterns of the English who occupied the colony of Suriname from 1651 to 1667. A minimal amount of demographic information for the English colony of Suriname exists, but conclusions regarding the slave importation rates can be made based on the colony’s history. This English settlement in Suriname was made by “one-hundred pioneers sent out by Lord Willoughby from Barbados.” After settling in the region, it is likely that the colonists almost immediately requested slave imports. Familiar with the economic benefits of the enslavement of Africans in Barbados, it is certain that the English settlers in Suriname viewed the institution of slavery as a necessity to promote the colony’s economy through the practice production of cash crops. Likewise, it is reasonable to believe that Barbados supplied Suriname with a substantial amount of slaves as early as the seventeenth century due to the presence of English settlers from Barbados.  

---

As previously stated, the Du Bois Institute Database shows that between 1601-1700, 52.5% of Gold Coast Africans brought to the Americas disembarked in Barbados populating the colony with a significant amount of Akan-speaking people. The early English trading company, Company of Royal Adventurers, founded in 1663, had its most successful settlements on the Gold Coast at Koromatin and smaller outposts. Although the company was short lived due to war with the Dutch, K.G. Davies explains in *The Royal African Company* (1970):

> During the years before the outbreak of the war the company had made a promising start in the slave trade. Although the records are much less complete than for the later Royal African Company, we know that in the seven months beginning in August 1663 there were delivered at Barbados 3,075 negroes.

Although the Royal Adventurers had settlements on James Island near The Gambia, and possibly near Sierra Leone, since its most successful settlement was on the Gold Coast it is likely that most of the enslaved Africans imported into Barbados were Gold Coast Africans.

A definite presence of Gold Coast Africans imported to Suriname from 1651-1667 comes from Dutch records. According to Postma, since the beginnings of the WIC in 1621, “the Dutch were supplying other slave markets, such as Dutch settlements on the

---


Guiana coasts and in the Antilles, and periodically French and English colonies. Early records of the Dutch slave trade, though incomplete, show that between 1658 and 1674 the WIC imported 4,964 Africans into Suriname. Considering that in “1612 the Dutch established their first trading station (also known as ‘factory’ in those days) at Mori on the Gold Coast” and “by 1621 the Dutch were the principal traders on the Gold Coast,” little doubt remains regarding the large presence of Gold Coast Africans in Suriname between 1651 and 1667 when the English occupied the colony.

The WIC was principally the sole supplier of slaves to Suriname from 1667 until 1735. The Company supplied the colony with slaves directly from Africa and possibly via their slave depots at Curaçao. Understanding that the Du Bois Institute Database is groundbreaking in detailing information regarding the slave trade, it is also incomplete in some of its figures. Therefore attaining the importation records of slaves into Curaçao during the seventeenth century, or even the slaves imported into Suriname, is not feasible. While no records in the Database exist regarding the importations directly into Suriname,

---

86 Postma, 34.

87 Ibid., 35.


from the information that is available on the slave imports into the Dutch Caribbean, the Gold Coast ranks third in terms of imports, following West Central Africa and the Bight of Benin.  

Again making the link between Barbados and Suriname, Monica Schuler explains in “Akan Slave Rebellions in the British Caribbean” (1970), “It is known that the planters of Barbados during the seventeenth century tended to buy all their slaves from the Royal African Company, and most of these slaves would thus have come from the Gold Coast.” Although the Royal African Company was not founded until 1672, when the Suriname was in Dutch possession, during this time it was not unreasonable for settlers in Suriname to buy their slaves from another colonial power, in this case the English in Barbados. Moreover, as Philip Curtin explains in The Atlantic Slave Trade (1969), “The Dutch carried a high proportion of the seventeenth-century slave trade, and they remained an important source of supply into the eighteenth. But many, if not most, of the slaves they carried were destined for other peoples' colonies.” Involvement in the re-export trade, particularly in Barbados and Jamaica, was crucial to the settlers in Suriname and should not go unnoticed.

---

90 Elits, et al., Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.


Although the Dutch acquired the major trading factory and slave dungeon on the Gold Coast, El Mina Castle, from the Portuguese in 1637, Richard Price implies that during the seventeenth century, the Dutch focused on the trade in gold rather than humans. He suggests that the slave trade among the Dutch did not become significant until the early eighteenth-century when the Gold Coast was transforming into a major slave exporter. It was not until the 1720s that the WIC became wholeheartedly involved in the trade, with slaves from the Gold Coast, soon becoming a rival to the Slave Coast. Prince explains that before the early eighteenth century, the Dutch focused on commodities, excluding humans, and therefore did not supply Suriname with an ample supply of Gold Coast Africans.\footnote{Price, \textit{The Guiana Maroons}, 14.}

While the focus of the WIC may not have been human cargo, evidence from Postma reveals that as early as 1670, WIC was in fact heavily involved in trading for slaves. In this manner one must question Price’s downward revision of the number of slaves coming to Suriname from the Gold Coast during the colony’s early years. Moreover, according to Albert van Dantzig:

\begin{quote}
The Dutch and the English preferred slaves from the Gold Coast whom they considered to be the best farmers and good domestic servants; the French preferred the slaves from Dahomey; and the Spanish were mainly interested in Yorubas from Western Nigeria. The Portuguese got their slaves from the Congo-Angola region.\footnote{Quoted in Charles J. Wooding, \textit{Evolving Culture: A Cross-Cultural Study of Suriname, West Africa and the Caribbean} (Washington, DC: University Press of America, Inc., 1981), 11.}
\end{quote}
While the English as well as the Dutch preferred Gold Coast Africans, they did import other Africans. Charles J. Wooding states in *Evolving Culture* (1981), that in addition to Gold Coast Africans:

The Dutch took a considerable number of slaves from Togo and especially Dahomey, where the king traded with all European nations without preference... The Congo-Angola region, an area of the Bantu speaking tribes, also greatly contributed to the composition of the negro population in Suriname. Others brought to Suriname belonged to the Mandingo speaking tribes from Senegambia, the Grain Coast, and the Ivory Coast, and a relatively small number of slaves from Yoruba, Ibo and Calabari in Nigeria were also imported.  

Nonetheless, considering that the Dutch had a slave fort on the Gold Coast, they could ship large numbers of slaves from the Gold Coast without having to obtain Africans from other regions beginning as early as the seventeenth century and continuing well into the eighteenth century.

Significant importation records do not exist detailing the Gold Coast cultural influence in Suriname because of incomplete importation records. Nonetheless, an examination of eighteenth-century Suriname culture confirms the strong presence of Gold Coast spiritual continuities. Due to a number of factors such as language, there is a limited amount of scholarship available about Suriname slave culture.  

The *Narrative* of a British solider, John Gabriel Stedman, who volunteered to go to Suriname in 1772 to

---

95 Ibid., 12.

96 There is a limited amount of scholarship written on the colonial history of Suriname in English.
suppress an insurrection between the maroons and the colonists, serves as the only primary source available in English about Suriname and its people.\textsuperscript{97} As for other scholarship, other prominent names in this area of research are Melville and Frances Herskovits, Charles Boxer, and Charles Wooding.\textsuperscript{98} In addition to pulling from Stedman’s \textit{Narrative}, each of these scholars pays particular attention to the Suriname Maroons. They have lived in almost complete isolation from outside influences and a close examination reveals that their culture is closely linked with the Gold Coast.

Unfortunately, Stedman’s five-year account of the Suriname colony beginning in 1772 offers few details regarding Suriname culture and Gold Coast continuities. Price and Price describe Stedman’s \textit{Narrative} as “one of the richest, most vivid accounts ever written of flourishing slave society.” They also admit however that “others began using versions of his [Stedman] work for the antislavery cause as soon as they appeared.”\textsuperscript{99} In other words, for readers, the account describes less about eighteenth-century Suriname, and more about the slave system. Stedman’s \textit{Narrative} is more an account of his moral development while in Suriname since a large portion of the \textit{Narrative} details Stedman’s marriage to a young mulatto woman. Although anthropologists Price and Price claim that

\textsuperscript{97} Price and Price, ed. \textit{Stedman’s Surinam}, Richard Price and Sally Price, ed. \textit{Narrative of a Five Years Expedition Against the Revolting Negroes of Surinam transcribed for the first time from the original 1790 manuscript / John Gabriel Stedman; edited, and with an introduction and notes, by Richard Price & Sally Price} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

\textsuperscript{98} Herskovits and Frances S. Herskovits, \textit{Rebel Destiny}, Boxer, \textit{Dutch in Brazil}, Wooding, \textit{Evolving Culture}.

\textsuperscript{99} Price and Price, \textit{Stedman’s Surinam}, xiii.
the *Narrative* is a valuable tool for understanding Suriname’s slave society, aside from the personal details of Stedman’s romantic encounters in Suriname, it offers little information detailing the lives of enslaved Africans, and just a few insights regarding the existence of Gold Coast spiritual continuities.

In addition to a description of funeral rites that could easily detail the practice of any West African society including the reverence of ancestors, drumming, and dancing, one of the most prominent forms of Gold Coast continuities noted in Stedman’s *Narrative* is the presence of Akan day-names among the inhabitants of Suriname. Interestingly, Stedman does not mention the names of many inhabitants of Suriname. However, of the names he does mention, besides that of his love, Joanna, Stedman reveals the name of his personal military assistant, a “black boy” named “Quacoo.”

Another name Stedman mentions in his account is Graman Quacy—a Sunday-born male. Graman Quacy was a popular figure in Suriname both among the maroons and the Europeans. Price and Price detail in their editors’ notes that Graman Quacy, a native of West Africa born around 1690, was enslaved and brought to Suriname as a child. By 1730, Quacy “had discovered the medicinal properties of the tree that Linnaeus named in his honor Quassia amara (called in Suriname “Quassiehout” or “Kwasi-bita”).” Graman Quacy was also known as a curer and diviner among enslaved Africans, Native Americans, and European colonists in Suriname. Furthermore, Quacy was an

---

100 Ibid., 58.
intermediary in dealing with maroons, often times assisting in negotiations. Interestingly, Graman Quacy was not working for the benefit of the Suriname Maroons. He served as a spy against them, and led a sizable military expedition against the maroons. This ultimately resulted in Quacy getting his right ear cut off by a maroon chief, but he also won a letter of manumission from the Dutch for his efforts. Nonetheless, the Saramacca Maroons, a subset group of the Suriname Maroons, presently have a high regard for Graman Quacy.  

Graman Quacy’s high status among the maroons, despite his role as an infiltrator, most likely goes back to the high regard of herbalists and priests in Gold Coast society. Men and women with a unique understanding of herbs for medicinal use were viewed as specialists. They often times knew how to use roots, leaves, barks, and herbs not only for medicinal use, but also destructive purposes. While such specialists exist throughout West Africa, a particular link throughout eighteenth-century slave culture in the Americas perhaps further connects this particular wisdom to the Gold Coast.

Slave rebellions in various parts of the Caribbean and South America provide the evidence that Graman Quacy’s medicinal knowledge is a Gold Coast spiritual continuity. As Schuler explains, “The records of slave rebellions from the Virgin Islands to Suriname, from the seventeenth through the nineteenth century, show that the rebel slaves par excellence were the Akan and Ga/Adangme speaking peoples who originated in the

---

101 Ibid., 339-340.
areas of modern Ghana.”

Since Akan rebels were often identified by their day-names, the similarity between the day-name for a male born on Sunday (Kwesi) and Quacy, suggests a Gold Coast connection, but the evidence for this connection is stronger. Gold Coast Africans were also distinguished by their belief in obeah, described by Schuler as “a supernatural force given to man to protect and heal him (the term also refers to the charms which derive their power from this force).” Obeah is a common term and practice in regions in the Americas that imported a large number of Gold Coast Africans. Direct links to the practice of obeah and the Gold Coast are further conveyed by Walter C. Rucker in *The River Flows On*. Suggesting that the word “Obeah” likely derives from an Akan word, “Obiaifo” which denotes sorcery, Rucker explains:

The “fo” suffix is added to all proper names in the Akan family of languages. By dropping the suffix, the resulting word is “Obayi” which was linguistically and phonetically transformed into “Obeah,” “Obia” and “Obi” throughout the Americas. Another possibility is that “Obeah derives from the Twi word “Obeye,” which refers to a spiritual being inhabiting a diviner....Either etymology would place the linguistic origins of the word in the Gold Coast.

The numerous court records for slave revolts in the Caribbean and South America which mention slaves with Akan day-names and the practice of obeah is perhaps the strongest evidence proving that it is a Gold Coast continuity. As early as the seventeenth

---


103 Ibid.

century, Akan-speaking Africans were prevalent in the Caribbean due to planters' preferences, the presence of British slave traders on the Gold Coast, and large availability of war captives. With the highest demand for slaves of any British colony in the Americas and a preference of Akan-speaking Africans, Jamaica imported the largest amount of Gold Coast Africans during the eighteenth century. Curtin reports, "while Jamaica only took about a quarter of the total British slaves delivered in the New World, it brought about 80 per cent of those from the Gold Coast."105 While most of the Gold Coast Africans imported into Jamaica remained on the island, some were re-exported to neighboring colonies fueling future Akan revolts. Even so, Jamaica is the place where the greatest number of Akan led revolts took place.106

A common element in the slave insurrections led by Gold Coast Africans in Jamaica was the presence of an obeah practitioner. The 1760 Jamaican slave rebellion serves as an example. An obeah doctor was discovered and planter Edward Long provides details of his appearance and function in The History of Jamaica (1774). He tells:


He was an old Coromantin, who, with others of his profession, had been a chief in counseling and instigating the credulous herd, to whom these priests administered a powder, which, being rubbed on their bodies, was to make them invulnerable: they persuaded them into a belief that Tacky, their generalissimo in the woods, could not possibly be hurt by the white men, for that he caught all the bullets fired at him in his hand, and hurled them back with destruction to his foes. This old imposter was caught whilst he was tricked up with all his feathers, teeth, and other implements of magic, and in this attire suffered military execution by hanging. ¹⁰⁷

In addition to the description of the obeah man, the account also affirms a Gold Coast connection. The term “Coromantin,” also seen as “Koromantine” and “Caramantee” refers to an English trading post and a commercial village located on the Gold Coast, respectively Kromantine and Fort Kromantine. Africans exported from this region during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were identified by European slave traders and ship captains as “Kromantine.” ¹⁰⁸

Obeah practitioners were significant to slave uprisings because of their special knowledge and connection with the world. They were also a fundamental part of maroon societies. They were frequently called upon for advice as a man who visited the Leeward Maroons during the 1730s observed. He stated, “They were very superstitious having


during their State of Actual Rebellion a Person who they called Obea Man whom they
greatly revered, his Words Carried the Force of an Oracle with them, being Consulted on
every Occasion."^{109}

Queen Nanny, the early eighteenth-century cultural, spiritual, and military leader
of the Windward Maroons also possessed the abilities of an obeah practitioner. Though it
is not definite, Queen Nanny is believed to have come from the Gold Coast, hence the
formation of her name by two Akan-Twi words: nana, a term used to denote a chief or
respected elder; and ni, which literally translates to mean "first mother."^{110} Queen
Nanny’s role among the Windward Maroons as a military leader during the First Maroon
War, 1724-1739, denotes her position as an obeah woman. At the height of the Maroon
War when her army was near starvation and about to surrender, Queen Nanny received a
message in a dream from her ancestors telling her not to give up. When she awoke she
found pumpkins seeds in her pocket, which she planted on the hillside. Within a week
the seeds produced a fruitful crop that supplied her army with the necessary food and

---

^{109} Quoted in Barbara Klamon Kopytoff, “The Early Political Development of Jamaican Maroon Societies,”

^{110} David Dalby, “Ashanti Survivals in the Language and Traditions of the Windward Maroons of Jamaica,
Nanny Leader of the Windward Jamaican Maroons” (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2000), 24; Rucker,
encouragement. Queen Nanny was also known for her ability to protect and heal wounded soldiers with charms and herbs, and most widely recognized for her power to catch bullets and propel them back to her enemy.\textsuperscript{111}

The practice of obeah did not just occur in Jamaica, but throughout the Caribbean. It is a practice that has been documented in Jamaica, Haiti, Grenada, Martinique, Antigua, St. Lucia, St. Croix, Barbados, as well as the Bahamas. Interestingly, Akan slaves were involved in most conspiracies in these colonies. For instance, in the 1736 conspiracy in Antigua, three men, Caesar Matthew, Quawcoo Hunt, and John Obia, were identified as obeah practitioners. After betraying the plot to court officials and revealing Quawcoo as obeah man, a fellow slave, Quamina, pleaded, “By God, if you had not Caught me I would not have told you now. I am afraid of this Obey Man now, he is a Bloody fellow, I knew him in Cormantee Country.”\textsuperscript{112} Similarly, the 1759 slave conspiracy in St. Croix was commanded by a slave named Sam Hector, also known by

\textsuperscript{111} Gotlieb, \textit{The Mother of Us All}, 43-54; Rucker, \textit{The River Flows On}, 39.

his Akan day-name, Kwaw. Although he was not identified as an obeah doctor, the fact that he bound his conspirators by an oath that involved swallowing blood and graveyard dirt suggests his role as an obeah practitioner.\textsuperscript{113}

The act of taking a loyalty oath was an essential part to Akan led rebellions, and in most cases the oath was prepared and administered by obeah doctors. In the 1736 Antigua conspiracy, John Obia, an obeah doctor identified by his last name, took part in administering a loyalty oath to conspirators involving liquor, graveyard dirt, and blood. In the 1760 Jamaican rebellion, obeah doctors administered an oath comprised of “a quantity of rum, with which some gun-powder dirt taken from a grave had been mingled, blood was put, drawn in succession from the arm of each confederate.”\textsuperscript{114} The oath was intended to create a bond among the conspirators and prevent any confessions. Often times however, as in the case of the 1736 Antigua conspiracy, the vow of secrecy was betrayed and the plot was discovered.\textsuperscript{115}

Oaths were essential to Akan led rebellions in the Americas because of their importance in Gold Coast culture. As mentioned earlier, Bosman observed the practice in eighteenth-century Gold Coast society. Loyalty oaths were a common institution in


\textsuperscript{114} Quoted in Joseph Williams, \textit{Voodooos and Obeahs: Phases of West India Witchcraft}, (New York: Dial Press Inc., 1932), 163.

Akan society used by every person in both private and political situations. Fynn explains that oaths served one main purpose, “to remind the people of the inseparable link between them and their dead ancestors who protected them.”  

The blood and the graveyard dirt used in the loyalty oaths in the Americas are symbolic of the bond between the conspirators and their ancestors. In *Africans in America* (1994), Michael Mullin explains the significance of blood in Gold Coast culture. Among the Akan he states, blood “signifies nationality: it is public, it fixes one’s legal and political existence, and it is used in oath rites to bind groups. No matter how widely scattered, rite participants remained brothers—‘all of one blood.’”  

Regarding graveyard dirt, David Barry Gaspar explains in *Bondsmen and Rebels* (1985) that “for the Coromantees, taking the oath with grave dirt signified that the world of the living was intertwined with that of the dead, that they were united with the ancestors, by whom they swore to be true to their obligations and sanctions.”  

Understanding the significance of blood and graveyard dirt among Gold Coast Africans, not only explains its regular use in slave conspiracies, it also illustrates a connection between Graman Quacy, obeah doctors, oaths and the Gold Coast.

---


Despite the connection between obeah doctors and the Gold Coast, Douglass Chambers and a team of anthropologists, Jerome Handler and Kenneth Bilby, have questioned the Gold Coast origin of obeah, proposing that it came from the Igbo of the Bight of Biafra.\textsuperscript{119} They do not focus on the main areas in which indication of the practice of obeah and conjuring are the strongest and correlate those areas with the largest importation of Africans, which would prove a strong Gold Coast connection. Instead, Handler and Bilby approach obeah as a lexical item to find its origin. They begin by searching for how and where the term first came into use. Referencing the \textit{Journals of the Assembly of Jamaica}, the Oxford English dictionary cites Jamaica and 1760 as the earliest ascription, an apparent connection with the 1760 Jamaican slave rebellion in which the Jamaican Assembly made the practice of obeah a felony. Deeper investigation however led to a much earlier mention of the term in a Barbadian source. In “On the Early Use and Origin of the Term ‘Obeah’ in Barbados and the Anglophone Caribbean,” Handler and Bilby report:

Obeah is mentioned in several letters written from Barbados between November 1710 and September 1712 by Thomas Walduck, an English army officer stationed on the island, to a correspondent in London. Walduck writes ‘that one Negro can bewitch another (Obia as they call it)’ and ‘that one (Obia) Witchnegro can cure another is believed here as our country folk doe in English’; ‘I have knowne’, he also writes, ‘upon Negros complaining that they are bewitched, an Obia Negro hath taken out of their eyes bones, shells out of their thighs.’

The manner in which the army officer writes about obeah not only suggests that the term was commonly used before his letter was written in the early eighteenth century, but it also explains both the positive and negative dimensions of the practice.

Both references to obeah in the Oxford English Dictionary and Walduck’s letter are also located in areas that imported a large number of Africans from the Gold Coast in both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It must be noted however that Barbados and Jamaica also imported a large number of Africans from the Bight of Biafra. The high amount of importation from this region supports Chambers, and Handler and Bilby’s contention that the correct etymology and the origin of the term obeah can be found among the Igbo of the Bight of Biafra. They assert that the term obeah, also written as obia, derives from the Igbo term dibia, meaning healer or divine priest. In addition to the likely historical derivation of the word, Chambers, as well as Handler and Bilby also make this assertion because the Igbo term dibia, is the only word that does not have a socially negative or malicious meaning. As previously mentioned, the Akan-Twi words

---

120 Handler and Bilby, “The Early Use and Origin of the Term ‘Obeah,’” 88.

121 Ibid., 87-88.
possibly transformed to obeah or obia, “Obayifo” and “Obeye,” both convey witchcraft in the Akan spiritual world. However, when described by Chambers, the functions of dibia practitioners in Igboland closely resemble those of Akan obeah practitioners in the Americas. He explains:

In historical Igboland, the dibia or obea was the person, usually a man, who could communicate directly with the spirits....such ‘doctors’ provide the most common link between the visible and the invisible worlds....dibia combined their sacred knowledge of the spirit-world with a practical pharmacological knowledge....Not only were 'Oboe doctors, or Dibbeah' able to 'cure diseases by charms'; they told 'fortetell things to come, and discover secrets’ as well.\textsuperscript{122}

While the argument for the Igbo origin of the word obeah seems plausible, there is a strong possibility that it could have derived from Akan-Twi words. Furthermore, since the description of the beliefs and practices associated with obeah mirror those of Akan obeah practitioners, Handler and Bilby may be correct in suggesting that the practice of obeah may have “multiple origins in African ethnic groups.” The presence of obeah in areas such as Suriname that imported a large number of Gold Coast Africans, as opposed to the Bight of Biafra, suggests that the origin of the word and the practice has Akan roots.\textsuperscript{123}

\textsuperscript{122} Chambers, “Igbo Exiles in the Diaspora,” 88.

\textsuperscript{123} Handler and Bilby, “The Early Use and Origin of the Term ‘Obeah,’” 91, 87-100.
Stedman's *Narrative* does not offer a great deal of information regarding Gold Coast spiritual continuities in eighteenth-century Suriname, but it does demonstrate the existence of some tangible elements such as in the case with obeah and Graman Quacy. This essentially allowed scholars to see the presence of West African continuities, allowing for further research on Suriname culture. Melville and Frances Herskovits' *Rebel Destiny* (1934) contains a wealth of information regarding Gold Coast spiritual continuities in Suriname. Among the three groups of Suriname Maroons, namely the Saramacca found in central Suriname along the upper Suriname River, the Awka located along the Marowyne River, and the Boni situated in the interior of French Guiana, near the Dutch border, Herskovits and Herskovits focus exclusively on the Saramacca group. According to Herskovits and Herskovits, the Saramacca "has had the least contact with outside influences, and it is the Saramacca language which differs most from the spoken by the Negroes of the coastal region." The authors provide an account of Saramaccan beliefs and practices revealing Gold Coast spiritual continuities regarding the concept of Onyame and the lesser deities, the concept of man, Akan day-names, healing practices, and Anansi spider tales.\(^{124}\)

Throughout *Rebel Destiny*, Herskovits and Herskovits reference the various names the Saramaccan Maroons call their creator, some of which are distinctively Akan. For instance, when traveling though a village known as Gankwe, the authors were

stopped by a Gankwe elder and told not to go further. Shortly realizing that rituals for a death were taking place, Herskovits and Herskovits describe, “Very loud and very fast the drums now sounded—it was the rhythm to Kediampo, the Sky God—and a moment later the grave diggers appeared.” In another instance, they refer to the Sky God as Nyankompon who created obeah after he brought the earth and water into being.” Both these names that refer to the Sky God among the Saramaccan Maroons are etymological variations of the names for the supreme being in the Akan spiritual system. As described earlier, the Akan have various names for the Sky God because they believe that the spirit has various attributes. Tweduampon, meaning “The Dependable,” is one of many names the Akan have for God. Phonetically, Tweduampon is pronounced, tre-dee-am-pon, which presents an interestingly similarity with the Saramaccan word for Sky God, Kediampo.

A more direct continuity exists when dealing with the Saramaccan word for Sky God, Nyankompon. In addition to Tweduampon, Onyame, and Nyame, the Akan also refer to God as Nana Onyankopon, translating to “The Grandfather” and “Nyame who

\[125\] Ibid, 12.

\[126\] Ibid., 25.

\[127\] Opoku, West African Traditional Religion, 15.
alone is the Great One.” Although Herskovits and Herskovits do not provide a literal translation for Nyankompon, the interpretation of Sky God illustrates its connection to the Gold Coast.  

In addition to the name for God, evidence of an important deity in Akan spirituality is present in Saramaccan culture. Herskovits and Herskovits first mention, Asaase, the great Earth Mother, when trying to identify a dance being performed in their presence. They soon realize that it is in fact not a dance for Asaase, but one performed for a death. Later, they received an explanation from a Saramaccan woman that the Earth Mother is Asaase. The earth deity in Akan spirituality has an identical name, Asaase. Kofi Asare Opoku explains, “All over Africa the Earth is regarded as a spirit, and in Akan society, she ranks after God is the second deity to be offered a drink at libations. She is known as Asase Yaa in Asante and other Akan areas and Asase Efu among the Fante.”

Gold Coast Africans enslaved in Suriname, undoubtedly aware of the importance of the Earth Goddess, brought with them and continued honoring the deity, Asaase.  

128 Ibid.
129 Ibid., 56.
130 Herskovits and Herskovits, Rebel Destiny, 9.
Rebel Destiny also illustrates the Gold Coast spiritual continuity that exists in Suriname regarding the Akan concept of man. Although the full process of man's makeup is not very detailed, Herskovits and Herskovits explain the essential aspect of man—his soul. In their interactions with the Saramaccan Maroons, the akra or soul is mentioned in numerous instances. In each situation however, Herskovits and Herskovits convey the sensitivity and the importance of the soul. For instance, they explain:

Others came forward to congratulate the dancer, while another had taken her place in the dance, only to be brought to herself again when her dancing had become so abandoned that they was danger of falling or tripping. For it is always a bad thing for one's akra—soul—to fall from exhaustion or even to trip while dancing, and it would have been especially dangerous to have fallen with the spirit of the dead so close.

Another situation in which the authors comment on the akra is when a woman goes into labor. They describe:

When the woman felt the first labor-pains, she prayed to the gods, and to her personal spirits. On the great Sky God she called, and the Earth Mother; on her ak'a, her soul; on the Yorka, the ancestors; and then she prayed to her personal gods, and particularly to whatever snake gods she might have, for some of these were known to be jealous of a coming child.

---

131 Opoku states, "The traditional Akan thought on man is that he is made up of okra, sunsum, ntoro and mogya. Of these components, the okra, or soul, is of fundamental importance." Opoku, West African Traditional Religion, 94; Herskovits and Herskovits, Rebel Destiny, 96.

132 Herskovits and Herskovits, Rebel Destiny, 9-10.

133 Ibid., 220.
In both of these cases, the *akra* is depicted as a valued entity to be protected from particular stimulus, and to be called upon when in need of assistance. According to the Akan concept of man, the significance that the Saramaccan Maroons give to the *akra* is appropriate. Referring to the Akan name for soul, ṣкра, Opoku explains, "It is the part of God in every man which makes him a living being, for its departure from the body signifies death... To the Akan, ṣкра is not only the soul of a person. It appears to be a guardian spirit or protector which guards the person and gives him good or bad advice."134 Understanding how the Akan view the soul, and reading how the Saramaccan Maroons pertain to their soul, one should be able to grasp the continuities that exist.

Herskovits and Herskovits’ chapter long discussion of the presence of *obia* provides more evidence of Gold Coast continuities among the Saramaccan Maroons. As mentioned earlier, direct links exist between the practice of obeah, Gold Coast culture, and its use in various slave insurrections in the Caribbean. One significant fact about the use of obeah among the Saramacca Maroons is that it does not hold any negative connotations. *Obia* among the Suriname Maroons is not used as a form of sorcery. In

---

the Caribbean obeah was used in slave rebellions which can be seen as a positive use, but it was also used for negative purposes and viewed as a secretive practice.¹³⁵ The opposite applies in Suriname. The authors clarify:

In the life of the Bush Negro, however, obia is everywhere, and its name the commonest bywords, for among the Suriname Negroes obia is not black magic, or witchcraft, or sorcery. Black magic in the Suriname bush is wisi, and wisi is never confounded in the Bush Negroes mind with obia.¹³⁶

In essence, obia is viewed as a spiritual force among the Suriname Maroons. It was created by the Sky God to assist man in dealing with the earth. Obia is believed to provide people with the knowledge of herbs that cure and prevent sickness. Anyone is able to learn the teachings of obia, but like with any priest or priestess in Gold Coast, this person is viewed as a spiritual being in touch with the supernatural forces.

Another Gold Coast influence that can be seen in Suriname culture is the use of the title Komfo. Herskovits and Herskovits explain that the word means priest, and as mentioned earlier, among the Akan a priest is called Ṫkomfo. The existence of this variant of Ṫkomfo suggests not only the presence of Gold Coast Africans in Suriname, but also the enslavement of Akan priests and priestesses in Suriname as well as other locales in the Americas. As a result of state building, the Asante nation fought many

¹³⁵ Hedrick and Stephens, It's A Natural Fact: Obeah in the Bahamas, 5.

¹³⁶ Herskovits and Herskovits, Rebel Destiny, 307.
wars and had an abundant supply of war captives, some of whom were probably priests and priestesses. The presence of priests in the trans-Atlantic slave trade further explains the presence of obeah because priests also had the special understanding of plants and roots and their medicinal properties. Schuler explains in more detail, “The role of the obeah man in Akan slave rebellions, for instance, is very like the role of priests and magicians in Ashanti military campaigns.”137 The priests proposed the best days for advancing and attacking, traveled with soldiers in battle, but also provided them with charms and amulets for protection.138 Charms and amulets consist of plants, along with other items, and the creation of these items required special knowledge from Onyame.

One of the most prominent and momentous spiritual continuities recorded by Herskovits and Herskovits in Suriname culture is the existence of Anansi tales. Undoubtedly a Gold Coast spiritual concept, Anansi tales are widely told among the Suriname Maroons. The trickster-spider is considered as the owner of all stories in Suriname, as he is in the Gold Coast. In a chapter dedicated to Anansi, Herskovits and Herskovits provide numerous stories told to them by Saramaccan maroons. While the stories they recorded focus on Anansi’s cunning and explain how certain things in the world came into being, the Saramaccan maroons have a different way of telling the stories that perhaps represents continuity in the way Anansi stories were told in the Gold

138 Ibid.
Coast. Herskovits and Herskovits explain the process and importance in telling Anansi stories:

What really mattered, however, was the way in which the intervals in the story-telling were dramatized. After the speaker had started his tale and carried it to some incident where he paused for a moment, he would be interrupted by a call from someone in his audience “Kri, kra!” His answer would come promptly, “What have you to say?” “I myself was there,” would be the response, and this would draw its question. “What did you see?” At this point, the person who had interrupted would begin a song, and its chorus would be taken up by all who were listening. And when it was ended, the leader of the song would shout, “Go on with your story, my man!”[139]

Minutes after the story teller resumed the story, another person would shout out, generating the same response followed by a song. The telling of Anansi stories was in fact a communal activity, requiring the participation of many as were many West African spiritual cultural practices.

Richard Price, a scholar who has written a great deal on the culture of Suriname Maroons, does not write about Suriname Maroons to illustrate Gold Coast continuities. Instead, his work is geared towards detailing how these descendants of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century slaves created their own culture in Suriname. Despite this effort, a great deal of Price’s research findings details the existence of Gold Coast spiritual practices in the culture of the Suriname Maroons. In his book, Saramaka Social Structure (1974), Price uses his research to provide a better understanding of the

[139] Herskovits and Herskovits, Rebel Destiny 105, 103.
Saramaccan Maroon society through a comparison with other societies. Particular areas of concentration are kinship and locality, emigration, residence, marriage, fosterage, inheritance and succession, land tenure, and lineage. Of these areas of focus, his description of kinship and locality reveal Gold Coast spiritual continuities. The matrilineal structure of the Saramacca society, in addition to ideas about the importance of the father in a child’s life, runs parallel to Akan spiritual beliefs regarding the concept of man.

In Saramaccan society, women are viewed as essential to the well-being of the family and the community. Price explains, “Women, it is said, are like hearthstones, men like axe handles. Once placed in a house, a set of clay hearthstones may never be moved; they endure. But an axe handle is made to ravel, and once worn out from use, it is discarded on the spot; it leaves no traces.” In other words, while a man depletes and is replaced, a woman endures and has no substitute. The stature of a woman is also represented by the matrilineal descent system that defines Saramaccan society. Regardless of a particular descent category, Saramaccans are categorized as “the people of one bêê ("womb" or "belly").” There is no avoiding the woman when classifying one’s descent or defining their lineage.\(^{140}\)

Despite the focus on the woman when defining descent in Saramaccan society, Price explains that both the mother and father have equal importance in raising a child. The biological father is necessary for both the physical and social well-being of every child beginning at conception. Price states:

Even in the absence of marriage paternity is almost always acknowledged early in pregnancy with the father taking on support of the woman, and nurturing the fetus by repeated sexual intercourse. In such a case, the brief conjugal relationship may end permanently with the payment of standard gifts to the mother after the birth, but the bond between father and child continues to be unaffected.

In an extreme case when the father is unavailable to the child, the Saramaccan Maroons perform special rites to substitute for his absence. Even with the special rites, no replacement for the father is provided for the child. Instead, the child goes through life with a significant irregularity.¹⁴¹

Insistent on finding dissimilarities among the Saramaccan Maroons and the Akan people of the Gold Coast, Price suggests that the “tenacious Saramacca insistence on the identity of biological and social paternity” contrasts with the beliefs of the Akan because when a child is born out of adultery the child is considered to belong to its mother’s legal husband, instead of being a social anomaly as among the Saramaccans. It should however be clarified that belonging to someone and developing physically and socially are not one in the same. Akan societies, just like Saramaccan, were matrilineal with the

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 51.
mother holding an important role in both the familial and communal setting. The father is also important however. Anthony Ephirim-Donkor explains:

> It is believed that all children are born because of their fathers, and children who do not come under the aegis of their fathers may die, be taken ill, or simply lead a delinquent life. So while parturition is biologically impossible for father, their inalienable spiritual rights are affirmed in the lives of their offspring.\(^{142}\)

This practice among the Akan is similar to Price's description of the importance of males in Saramaccan society, however he does not make the correlation. It is true in Akan societies, that a fatherless child is given a father, usually the mother's brother, father, or another male relative. However, this substitute cannot provide the same spiritual and psychological control of the child as the biological father.\(^{143}\) In this regard, the Saramaccan matrilineal societal structure and the idea regarding paternity, both which define the concept of a human, are continuities from the Gold Coast.

In addition to the Suriname Maroons, there is another group in Suriname that has some of the same Gold Coast spiritual influences. Charles J. Wooding’s *Evolving Culture* (1981) examines the Para region located in Suriname. He looks at the social structure of this society, focusing particularly on the contributions of the three principal West African groups that were enslaved in this region: the Fante-Akan, the Ewe-Fon, and


\(^{143}\) Ibid., 49-50.
the Western Bantu. Understanding that three West African cultural influences exist in this region, Wooding pays particular attention in distinguishing the origin of certain cultural practices among the Paramese.

One of the most visible features of Gold Coast culture is the telling of Anansi stories. However, while people in other regions of Suriname tell them for entertainment in the community, Wooding specifies that Anansi tales are told as part of funeral rites. They are told on the night of the eighth day of mourning. Wooding describes, “On that night, often till early in the morning, stories called anansi-tori, are told (Akan: anansi = spider; tori = story, and riddles, lai-tori, asked. The anansi-tori and lai-tori often take the form of games.” Anansi stories still serve as a form of entertainment for people in the Para region, but formally, they take place in different setting.  

The Paramese concept of the soul is another Gold Coast spiritual influence in this society. The name of the creator in the Para region, Anana Keduaman Keduampon, meaning “God the Creator of heaven and earth,” is a combination of terms used by the Akan people when referring to “the Creator Nana or Anana, Twiaduman and Twiaduampon.” Terms of the Akan people are also used in the Para region when referring to the soul, kra or akra. Interestingly, a particular rite that is performed among the people of the Para region when a soul has been weakened is also found among the Akan peoples. The rite involves a priest asking a person’s soul, or kra a series of

---

144 Wooding, Evolving Culture, 52.
questions. After the questioning a special bath is given, shortly followed by the offering of food and gifts. Among the Akan, Wooding explains, “The Ashanti call the *kra-njanjan*, the *kra*-dinner, *akraduane* or *kra*-food, the *kra-komtji* (*kra*-cup) and the basin in which the purification water is made *kra-yawa* or *kra*-basin, bowl.” One final Gold Coast influence that Wooding notes among the people of the Para region are the presence of names that distinguish seven different kinds of souls. In the chart that follows is a list of Akan day-names as well as those that exist in the Para region of Suriname (see Table 2.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Days of the Week</th>
<th>Akan Day-Names</th>
<th>Paramese Day-Names</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sunday</td>
<td>Kwasi</td>
<td>Akosua</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>Kwadwo</td>
<td>Adwoa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>Kwabena</td>
<td>Abenna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Kwaku</td>
<td>Akua</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>Yaw</td>
<td>Yaa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>Kofi</td>
<td>Afua</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturday</td>
<td>Kwame</td>
<td>Amma</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.1 Paramese and Akan Day-Names
Perhaps the only difference in both cultures is that among the Paramese, soul names are only uttered during the purification rites for the soul. Regardless of when they are used in the Para region, they still denote the day a person’s soul was born, serving the same purposes of day-names among the Akan of the Gold Coast.\footnote{Ibid, 67, 71-72.}

*Kra-dins or soul names, Anansi tales, and beliefs regarding the concept of man are unquestionably a few of the cultural elements that enslaved Gold Coast Africans carried with them to the Americas. For many Gold Coast Africans these and other cultural elements were forgotten because of the process of acculturation in certain regions. Explaining the difference, Mullin states, “Regional differences began immediately as new Negroes came ashore and, in the Caribbean, organized with shipmates and countrymen and later were placed as inmates on plantations. These moves set in motion an assimilation that remained African at its core.”\footnote{Mullin, *Africa in America*, 271.}

The African culture that persisted was however determined by the amount of Africans imported into a particular region. Jamaica, Barbados, and Antigua for instance had a large importation of Gold Coast Africans which is why there is an abundance of Gold Coast continuities in these areas.

---

\footnote{Ibid, 67, 71-72.}

\footnote{Mullin, *Africa in America*, 271.}
Africans in the eighteenth-century Dutch colony of Suriname definitely had an abundance of Gold Coast continuities. The high mortality rate among slaves required an annual importation of at least 1,000 Africans to keep the economy successful. The new imports allowed for the renewal of Gold Coast spiritual practices. Moreover, the maroon communities that existed in isolation, as well as the closed system in the Para region, allowed for the preservation of Gold Coast practices.

Due to this isolation it is not erroneous to examine the culture of Suriname Maroons based mainly on twentieth-century research to determine the Gold Coast continuities that existed in the colony during the eighteenth century. There are certainly problems associated with using anthropological and ethnographic data. Anthropologists for instance use twentieth-century culture to interpret pre-twentieth century culture. Many also assume that culture is static, and do not allow for changes. When looking at the Suriname Maroons, these shortcomings present minimal problems. Considering that there is not much information documenting their cultural practices, any twentieth-century data showing the existence of Gold Coast spiritual continuities confirms their permanence and significance. At the very least, twentieth-century anthropological data does not provide insight into all the Gold Coast spiritual continuities that existed during the eighteenth century. Nonetheless, it does provide an example of African cultural transmissions in the New World.
CHAPTER 3

NORTH AMERICA

In combination, the uniformity among Gold Coast Africans in both language and culture along with the regional preference among planters for Akan-speakers account for the important Gold Coast spiritual continuities in African-American culture. The dramatic increase in Gold Coast exports during late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries also influenced the cultural transmission. Unfortunately, the Gold Coast has been overshadowed by West Central Africa when discussing continuities in North America because Akan-speakers were imported in smaller numbers. Also, Gold Coast continuities are less of a focus in North America because the importation of Akan-speaking people was minimal when compared to other areas such as Suriname, Antigua, or Jamaica. Michael Gomez explains:

Although there were slightly fewer Akan in North America than Africans from the various ethnic groups of Senegambia and Sierra Leone, their presence was potentially more influential in that slaves imported from the Gold Coast, which was territorially smaller and easier to define, tended to be linguistically and culturally closer to one another than those of Sierra Leone, where there were numerous groups covering a vast area.\(^{147}\)

That is to say, the cultural influence of Gold Coast Africans cannot be determined by their import numbers. The cultural commonalities among Africans in the Gold Coast region allowed Akan-speakers to influence slave cultures in North America despite their marginal numbers.

The colony of South Carolina, the focus of a significant amount of research on Africanisms from West Central Africa, actually has a history that suggests a strong Gold Coast influence. South Carolina began its history essentially as a colony of Barbados. In the 1670s, colonists from Barbados in search of more land, joined English settlers who established a colony in what is today Charleston. Obviously familiar with the economic benefits of the enslavement of Africans in Barbados, it is certain that the English settlers in South Carolina viewed the institution of slavery as a necessity to promote the colony's economy by growing cash crops. Likewise, it is a fact that Barbados supplied South Carolina with a substantial number of slaves, at least in the early decades, due to the presence of English settlers from Barbados.148

Margaret Washington addresses the importance of Gold Coast Africans in the development of slave culture in South Carolina. She states, “Gold Coast Africans were apparently the first black Carolinians. They were preferred by West Indian adventurers

who initially settled Carolina and brought about 1,000 slaves with them.” Washington goes on to explain that planters in the colony of South Carolina preferred Akan-speakers from the Gold Coast because of their work habits, efficiency, and strength. However, given that Gold Coast Africans sold at a premium and were also desired by West Indian sugar producers, by 1740 the colony was engulfed with their second choice—Kongo-Angolans. As Washington explains however, this does not eliminate Akan cultural contributions to South Carolina’s slave culture. She states, “Early African cultural influences of Akan-Ashanti and Bantu were present.” And, even though Kongo-Angolan Africans had a dominance over any other group in South Carolina by 1740, Washington notes that between 1740 and the eve of the Revolutionary War, when over 50,000 Africans were imported into the colony, Kongo-Angolan Africans were no longer desired because Gold Coast and Senegambian Africans were considered premium. However, by the early-nineteenth century, South Carolina merchants renewed their desire for Kongo-Angolan Africans making them the majority in the South Carolina. Nonetheless, Akan culture remained significant in terms of the development of slave culture.149

According to the Du Bois Institute Database, Washington’s claim of a Gold Coast presence in South Carolina is valid. 52.5% of Gold Coast Africans brought to the Americas disembarked in Barbados. This fact suggests that Barbados not only had a

149 Washington, “A Peculiar People,” 30-34.
significant amount of Africans from the Gold Coast, but also had more elements of Akan culture than any other American destination before the nineteenth century. Consequently, any importation of slaves from Barbados to South Carolina was certain to have a considerable amount of Gold Coast Africans to not only develop the colony, but also develop South Carolina’s slave culture.\textsuperscript{150}

The demographic data the Du Bois Institute Database provides for Gold Coast imports into South Carolina after 1700 shows a significant Gold Coast presence. Between 1701 and 1800, South Carolina received 13.3\% of Gold Coast Africans brought to British North America. Compared to West Central Africa and Senegambia, where the average of enslaved Africans brought to South Carolina was about 25\% for each region, 13.3\% from the Gold Coast seems small. Nevertheless, after the Revolutionary War, between 1776 and 1800, there was a definite shift in the nature of the slave trade that resulted in South Carolina receiving 38.2\% of Gold Coast imports. While the Database shows that another shift occurred after 1801 with West Central Africans as the majority of imports into South Carolina, the fact that Gold Coast Africans were the largest group of enslaved Africans from 1776 to 1800 must have had significant implications on slave culture beginning in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{151}

\textsuperscript{150} David Eltis, Stephen Behrendt, David Richardson and Herbert Klein, eds., \textit{The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid.
Although Akan culture is clearly central to slave culture in South Carolina, most if not all the research on Africanisms in this region is linked to the Kongo-Angola region of West Central Africa. This is particularly true for death rituals and burial practices, one of the most prominent forms of African culture that survived the Middle Passage and continued throughout the antebellum period in North America. Herskovits notes, "For the problem of New World survivals, funeral rites is of paramount importance, for whatever else has been lost of aboriginal custom, the attitudes toward the dead have survived."^152 A rational reason for this prominent survival of burial practices among enslaved Africans in North America is the widespread belief among West Africans of the important role of ancestors in the lives of the living. Slaves believed that the dead returned to Africa for a better life, hence the idea of a burial as a celebration marking one's return. In other words, death was not only the termination of life, but also the gateway into another world, and because of this, slaves took great pride in burial

---

traditions. Moreover, although certain African ideas and customs gradually disappeared among enslaved Africans in North America, burial rites and practices, for the most part, remained intact because transition was highly cherished by Africans.\textsuperscript{153}

Undoubtedly, burial rituals and practices serve as a reflection of slave culture, and as Herskovits stated, mortuary patterns are one of the strongest Africanisms present in North America. The valuable information this topic holds about the lives of African Americans has resulted in the study of burial practices as a common theme among a variety of scholars such as Newbell Niles Puckett, Margaret Washington, and Robert Farris Thompson. The works of each of these scholars has in some way, if not entirely, focused on South Carolina, as the basis for their research on burial practices. Furthermore, when noting the various similarities in African burial practices, Puckett, Washington, Thompson, as well as other scholars, often cite West Central Africa, principally Kongo and Angola, as the basis for most African continuities.\textsuperscript{154}


As early as 1926 in *Folk Beliefs of the South Negro*, Newbell Niles Puckett almost exclusively associates burial customs in South Carolina with those in parts of the Kongo. Puckett begins by describing various decorations placed on graves by African-Americans in South Carolina such as: the cup and saucer used in the last illness, medicine bottles turned upside down with the corks loosened, and broken crockery. Puckett equates the grave decorations of southern African-Americans with Kongo culture by stating, "In parts of the Congo the natives mark the final resting-place of their friends by ornamenting their graves with articles rendered useless by being cracked or perforated with holes."\(^{155}\)

Art historian, Robert Farris Thompson elaborates on Puckett’s research dealing with similarities between Kongo and African-American graveyards in *Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds* (1981) and *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (1983). In addition to the use of the last objects touched or used by the dead, which Thompson explains keeps the dead from coming back to the living-world, he mentions the adornment of the image of a white chicken on many tombs in Kongo and the southern United States. In South Carolina, images of white chickens are found at many gravesites, and a modern tomb dated 1967 is adorned by numerous pressed-glass chickens. This practice, Thompson describes, "both honors the dead and

---

\(^{155}\) Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, 105.
situates their spirit properly." The Kongo seashell imagery, believed to enclose the soul’s immortal presence, is another decoration that illuminates graves in South Carolina. Other Kongo influences, Thompson notes, that are found on the graves in South Carolina are the planting of trees, which signify the spirit, as the roots literally journey to the other world, the use of lamps, which light the way to the other world, and other items representing the voyage to the other world such as airplanes, headlights, and pipes.

Based on the research of Thompson and others there is little doubt that gravesite decorations in South Carolina are continuities of West Central Africa. Nonetheless, with Africans from the Gold Coast constituting a significant part of the slave population in Barbados and South Carolina, it is valid to question if these practices have any association with Akan culture. Thompson even alludes to this in his article "African Influences on the Art of the United States" (1969), by stating, "The fusion of slaves from the Gold Coast, the Congo-Angola area, and other parts of the Guinea Coast in Southern slavery could mean the reinforcement of the African notion that the funeral is the climax of life and that the dead should be honored by having their possessions placed upon the

156 Thompson, Flash of the Spirit, 134.


top of their graves." This is definitely plausible, coming particularly from Akan culture, since the early eighteenth-century writings of Willem Bosman affirm the placement of earthenware images on the tops of graves at Axim, a site on the coast of Ghana. Along those same lines, art historian, Roy Sieber notes the importance of terracotta images, wooden utensils, and earthenware as gravesite decorations among Kwahu of Ghana. This material, coupled with the slave importation data, provides a substantial amount of evidence, using Mann’s “Diasporic approach,” for a new direction in the research of African burial survivals in South Carolina slave culture—one that focuses on Akan influences.

This approach would require scholars to trace the Akan Diaspora from Ghana to Barbados and, finally, South Carolina. In addition to the similarities in Gold Coast burial practices described above, like laying earthenware and pottery on gravesites, scholars using this method might discover the cultural origin and perhaps the meaning of body orientations and the use of items found on gravesites. For instance, the Akan, like various West African cultures believe that the dead go on a journey to the next world. This belief could explain the variation in burial orientations, because as archeologist Peter Ucko notes, it is common practice among the Asante of Ghana to bury the body

159 Thompson, “African Influence on the Art,” 150.

160 Ibid, 149.

161 Willem Bosman, A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea, Divided into the Gold, the Slave, and the Ivory Coasts (London: J. Knapton, D. Midwinter. B. Lintot, G. Strahan, J. Rand, E. Bell, 1721), 232; Thompson, Flash of the Spirit, 132-142.
lying on the side, but mandatory that the deceased is faced away from the village. Being positioned facing away from the village assists the spirit in finding its way to the next world without being distracted.\(^{162}\)

The Akan particularly believe that the dead have to cross rivers before they arrive at their destination. “Hence,” as Kofi Asare Opoku states, “the Akan have a custom of putting a calabash into the coffin so that the deceased may use it to drink water along the way. They also give him some money so that he can buy food to eat.”\(^{163}\) In addition to food and money as gifts placed in the coffin of the deceased, Peter Sarpong elaborates to include cloth and toilet articles.\(^{164}\) Furthermore, anthropologist Jerome Handler and archeologist Frederick Lange authors of *Plantation Slavery in Barbados* (1978), state in their findings that after gathering information on burial practices of some sixty to seventy West African cultures, “the literature mentioned only one broad group, the Ashanti and related Gold Coast peoples, that used tobacco pipes as grave goods.”\(^{165}\) Knowing that pipes are a popular gravesite decoration in South Carolina, and a number of items that

\(^{162}\) Jamieson, “Material Culture and Social Death,” 52.


can be considered "gifts" adorn the graves, it is not impossible to rule out this practice as an Akan cultural retention or continuity because with different African ethnic groups present in South Carolina, there is room for cultural syncretization.¹⁶⁶

Locating the particular areas from which African-American mortuary patterns originated may seem both challenging and unnecessary, however there are some scholars who believe that identifying the culture of origin of African continuities and retentions is significant to the study of slave culture. Unfortunately, scholars have not yet used "the Diasporic approach" to trace Gold Coast burial practices from the continent to Barbados, and finally, to South Carolina. Thompson is a proponent of "the Diasporic approach," looking particularly at the Kongo-Angola region in his research on burial practices and his research has undoubtedly led to significant findings. But, perhaps the research should not be limited to West Central Africa and Kongo-Angolan cultures when looking at burial practices in South Carolina. As mentioned, South Carolina began its history fundamentally as a colony of Barbados which imported a substantial amount of Gold Coast Africans in the seventeenth century. The colony had a regular importation of Gold

Coast Africans with the majority entering between 1776 and 1800. With these facts alone, this area is certain to have lingering remnants of Akan culture visible in burial practices.\textsuperscript{167}

The Akan cultural influence in South Carolina does not stop with burial practices. Early twentieth-century research by Guy B. Johnson and the Georgia Writers’ Project confirms the existence of Anansi tales among African Americans in coastal region of South Carolina and Georgia. The Project involved interviewing individuals who were slaves, the children of slaves, and the grandchildren of Africans. It recorded the beliefs and customs of a group of people who “have lived in a physical and cultural isolation which is conducive to the survival of many old customs and thoughtways, both African and European.”\textsuperscript{168} Among various African continuities documented was existence of spider stories, known as “An Nancy stories.”

Interestingly, the stories were not widely mentioned because of a particular connotation they had. Among the coastal African Americans in South Carolina and Georgia, Anansi stories did not explain how Anansi the Spider became the owner of Onyame’s stories or tell why Anansi is deemed the creator like the stories told in the Gold Coast. Instead, from the interviewees it is understood that the stories were considered “wicked.” They were not to be told around women, as they were stories men

\textsuperscript{167} Eltis, et al., \textit{Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade}.

\textsuperscript{168} Georgia Writers’ Project, \textit{Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Coastal Negroes} (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1940), v.
told amongst themselves. When an interviewer asked Celia Small of Wilmington Island, Georgia if she knew of any spider stories, Ms. Small replied, “Yes’m, muh granma she speak ub em many time an say dey’s wicked. She say dey talk bout um mung duh mens. Spiduh stories mus be bad. Caahn git duh mens tuh tell um tuh dis day. Dey jis say dey ain know nuttn bout um. Dey ain want tuh tell um tuh duh ladies.” From a male’s prospective, Gene Tattnall, also of Wilmington Island, offered, “Doze spiduh stories ain nuttn but duhly jokes. Dat’s all de is. Yuh call a duhly joke ‘An Nancy story.’ Ain no stories tuh tell duh ladies.”169 Unfortunately, not much more information other than that ‘An Nancy’ stories were considered wicked and told only among men can be gathered from the interviews.

The fact that spider stories were considered ‘An Nancy stories,’ a derivation of Anansi, confirms that these stories are from the Gold Coast. Considering that Anansi was a trickster character, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the stories that exist in the coastal region of South Carolina and Georgia are continuities of Anansi the Spider stories from the Gold Coast. Among the people in this area the stories were undoubtedly considered wicked, and Kwaku Anansi, the trickster spider of the Gold Coast, was undeniably mischievous. Although the manner of his trickery in the Gold Coast was not against one particular gender as this theme appears to have existed in the stories in coastal South Carolina and Georgia. Deception is nonetheless present in both versions.

169 Ibid., 107-108.
Additionally, in spite of the fact that the spider stories are reserved for men in the coastal region, they still served as a form of entertainment just as they did for people in the Gold Coast.

The strength in the spirit of Kwaku Anansi spider stories that existed in South Carolina and Georgia can also be seen in the practice of obeah. As mentioned earlier, obeah men and women played significant roles in numerous Akan slave revolts throughout the Americas. Their knowledge of medicinal herbs was not only used in slave rebellions, but also to help heal ailments throughout the slave community and avert evil forces. In the Americas, however, obeah doctors, also known as conjurers, were given a negative connotation by slave owners and white people because these men and women often times took part in rebellious activities. In Slave Counterpoint, Philip Morgan describes the plot of an alleged slave conspiracy near Cooper River in 1749. Reportedly, at a meeting among the conspirators met, one slave said, “let the fire kindle as fast as it will, he will Engage by his obias to stifle and put it out.”170 Essentially, obeah practitioners used supernatural forces obtained from Onyame to help the slave community. Assistance ranged from healing and protecting against illnesses to locating a missing property or revealing a thief or liar. In some cases a practitioner’s work assisted slaves with insurrections or other activities directed against slave masters. For enslaved peoples, assistance with these types of activities were beneficial to the slave community,

and for this reason obeah practitioners were viewed as evil and wicked by European Americans.\textsuperscript{171} Jerome Handler and Kenneth Bilby explain:

For whites, ‘Obeah’ became a catch-all term for a range of supernatural-related ideas and behaviours that were not of European origin and which they heavily criticized and condemned.\ldots Although Obeah could also have negative or antisocial dimensions in the form of witchcraft or sorcery, the entirely negative view of Obeah that whites largely promulgated during the period of slavery (probably exacerbated by the fact that it was sometimes directed against them), and that has endured until the present, has distorted the social role that Obeah played in the lives of enslaved persons, whether of African or New World birth.\textsuperscript{172}

These negative impressions that European Americans white people held toward obeah practitioners undoubtedly caused men and women who were highly revered in the Gold Coast, to be feared and discredited as malicious by their own community members in the Americas.

Remnants of the negative association with obeah practitioners are evident in early twentieth-century interviews of ex-slaves conducted by Federal Writers’ Project. When asked about conjure and conjure doctors many people would deny any belief in any knowledge of the practice. For instance, when asked about conjure doctors, eighty-seven year old Anson Harp of South Carolina stated, “There was a conjurer in our neighborhood who could make you do what he wanted, sometime she had folks


killed.” When asked the same question, ninety-nine year old Slyvia Durant responded, “Oh, my God, some people believe in dat thing call conjuring, but I didn’ never believe in nothing like dat. Never did understand nothing like dat. Hear say people could make you leave home and all dat, but I never couldn’ see into it. Never didn’ believe in it’. Ms. Durant later goes on to explain the types of items people use on themselves and around their houses to keep people from harming them with conjure. Although she stated that she was not a believer in the power of conjure, interestingly she tells of a silver dollar she keeps in a trunk in her house to protect her from any conjurer. Not everyone however tells of the negative dimensions of a conjure doctor or obeah practitioner. Isabella Dorroh explained:

Doctors used to have home-made medicine. Old Dr. Brown made medicine from a root herb to cure rheumatism. He called it ‘rhue’. He lived in what is now called Gravetown. His old house has been torn down. He made hot teas from barks for fevers. He made a liquid salve to rub on for rheumatism.

Ms. Dorroh’s recollection of the positive attributes of conjure doctors proves that the practitioners were not only involved in witchcraft or sorcery, but also aided slave communities. Moreover, the descriptions of obeah doctors attest to the Gold Coast spiritual continuity of obeah doctors in South Carolina.


174 Ibid., 2:346.

175 Ibid., 2:328.
Certainly, the existence of Gold Coast spiritual continuities in North America goes beyond South Carolina. Another area that had a high importation of Akan-speaking Africans, and that has a considerable amount of evidence demonstrating Gold Coast cultural continuities during the eighteenth-century is New York. The British colony of New York was originally a Dutch colony known as New Netherlands. Around 1625 the WIC purchased Manhattan Island from the Native Americas and established a trading post. There were few Africans in the colony from its beginnings because the Dutch focused on serving as a trading post. Demands from colonists for assistance a decade later however resulted in the New Netherlands receiving their first slave ship in 1635. During the late 1650s, with the expansion of commerce and the introduction of institutionalized slavery, the colony became a large importer of Africans.176

Obtaining slave labor was not difficult for the Dutch colony because of its close association with the WIC. Dutch trading stations in West Central Africa assured the colony a steady influx of slave labor. This supply increased between 1637 and 1647 when the Dutch began conquering Portuguese trading posts at El Mina, Principle, Angola and Sao Tome through military conquest. The acquisition not only guaranteed a steady a supply of labor, but it also introduced a new source—the Gold Coast. When the Portuguese recaptured their trading stations in Angola and Brazil in 1648 and 1658,

respectively, the Dutch had to rely on El Mina for slave labor. Walter C. Rucker explains, "In New Amsterdam, and later New York City, this reorientation of the slave trade and the importation of Akan-speakers from the Gold Coast would have profound implications for the history of slavery and the development of African American culture in the region."  

Even after the Dutch lost their dominant position in Africa and the Americas to the English in 1664, Gold Coast Africans continued to impact the area later renamed New York. By 1664, Africans already comprised 20 percent of the city’s population of 1,875. The British continued to import a significant amount of African labor with the commissioning of the Royal African Company in 1672. Gold Coast Africans comprised a significant part of this labor since the English managed to claim numerous forts in region, with the exception of El Mina, beginning with Cape Coast Castle in 1664. The forts, strategically situated on the coast, allowed the English to export approximately 320 enslaved Gold Coast Africans per month between 1690 and 1730. Although the Company focused on trade from West Africa to the Caribbean, they also promoted the resale of enslaved Africans in New York.  


Jamaica, an important center of re-export trade in the Caribbean, redirected enslaved Africans to Spanish colonies as a result of the *asiento*, or trading license, but a considerable amount went to British mainland colonies. The import numbers were much smaller than in the Spanish colonies, but South Carolina, Rhode Island, Maryland, and New York also received slaves. Even though the preference of Gold Coast Africans among Jamaican planters reduced their numbers in the re-export trade, Barbados and Antigua had a large amount of Gold Coast Africans. When combined with the Dutch import patterns this allowed for a continued Gold Coast culture influence among slaves in New York.\textsuperscript{179}

Two historical events, the 1712 slave revolt and the 1741 slave conspiracy, best represent the presence of Gold Coast spiritual continuities in New York City during the eighteenth century. As viewed by earlier examples, slave rebellions are perhaps one of the best indicators of the existence of African continuities. Trial records provide insight into slave culture at a vital time when slaves were decisively planning their freedom. Although trial testimonies can often be misleading because of pressure from court officials, this is more of a concern when determining if there was an actual plot. Facts about people, as well as trial testimonies from conspirators and witnesses confirm the

existence of various Africanisms in slave cultures, and both the 1712 slave revolt and 1741 slave conspiracy illustrate the undeniable presence of Gold Coast spiritual elements.

The 1712 New York slave revolt took place on Sunday night, April 6, when a group of slaves and “Spanish Indians” set fire to slave owner Peter Van Tilburgh’s outhouse. As white residents came out of their houses and gathered in the street, the armed group of about thirty shot, stabbed, beat, and attacked both onlookers and those attempting to stop the fire. The group managed to kill nine white people and injured seven others before a cannon was fired, scattering the insurgents. Fear of being caught and prosecuted resulted in six of the slaves committing suicide. The others, who faced charges ranging from murder to conspiracy, were executed, with the exception of seven granted amnesty.180

Details of the 1712 uprising are limited, but they provide information revealing the involvement of Akan-speakers and the use of Gold Coast spiritual elements in the attack. The Boston News-Letter, the only newspaper in British North America at the time, reported in the April 7-14, 1712 edition:

Some Cormentine Negroes to the number of 25 or 30 and 2 or 3 Spanish Indians having conspired to murder all the Christians here, and by that means thinking to obtain their Freedom, about two a clock this morning put their bloody design in Execution, and setting fire to a House, they stood prepar’d with Arms to kill every body that approach’d to put it out, and accordingly barbarously murdered [persons] that were running to the fire....Upon which the Town was soon Alarm’d, which occasion’d the Murders flying into the Woods, where several parties are set after them, and have take some (who are committed and hope to take the rest before night. This has put us into no small Consternation the whole Town being under Arms.\textsuperscript{181}

Another account offered by Governor Hunter in a letter sent to the Lords of Trade on the June 23, 1712 reads:

I must now give your Lordships an account of the bloody conspiracy of some of the slaves of this place, to destroy as many of the Inhabitants as they could, It was put in execution in this manner, when they had resolved to revenge themselves...they agreed to meet in the orchard of Mr. Crook the middle of the Town, some provided with fire arms, some with swords and others with knives and hatchets...when about three an twenty of them were got togeather, one [C]offee and negroe slave to on Vantilburg set fire to an out house of his Masters...the people began to flock to it upon the approach of severall the slaves fired and killed them.\textsuperscript{182}

In addition to providing insightful details of the revolt, the reports contain both a term and a day-name specifying Gold Coast Africans. As mentioned in the previous chapter, "Coromentine" was a term used by European slave traders and ship captains to identify

\textsuperscript{181} Quoted in Rucker, \textit{The River Flows On}, 26-27; The April 7-14, 1712, edition of the \textit{Boston News-Letter}.

\textsuperscript{182} Quoted in Rucker, \textit{The River Flows On}, 28; E. B. O’Callaghan, ed., \textit{Laws of His Majesties’ Colony of New York As They Were Enacted by the Governor, Council and General Assembly in Divers Sessions, the First of Which Began April 9th, 1691} (Albany: Weed, Parsons and Company, 1849), V: 341.
Africans exported from the region around Fort Kromantine. The phrase undoubtedly identifies slaves from the Gold Coast. Moreover, the name “Coffee,” is a variant of Kofi, the Akan day-name for a male born on Friday.

Additional information reinforcing Gold Coast connections in the 1712 New York City Revolt are found in a letter written by Reverend John Sharpe, chaplain of the English troops in New York City. Informing an associate of the details of the revolt, Rev. Sharpe wrote the following on June 23, 1712:

Some Negro Slaves here of ye Nations of Caramantee & Pappa plotted to destroy all the White[s] in order to obtain their freedom and kept their Conspiracy [so] Secret that there was not the least Suspicion of it, (as formerly there had often been) till it come to the Execution. It was agree to New Years Day the Conspirators tying themselves to Secrecy by Sucking ye blood of each Others hands, and to make them invulnerable as they believed a free negroe who pretends Sorcery game them a powder to rub on their Cloths which made them so confident that on Sunday night Apr. 7 ab’ 2 a Clock about the going down of the Moon they Set fire to a house which allarming the town they stood in Streets and Shot down and Stabbed as many as they could, till a great Gun from the fort called up the Inhabitants in arms who soon Scatter’d them they murdered about 8 and wounded 12 more who are since recovered some of them in their flight shot themselves, one shot first his wife and them himself and some who hid themselves in Town when they went to Apprehend them Cut their own throats many were Convicted and ab’ 18 have Suffer’d death.\(^3\)

The blood oath taken by conspirators, as mentioned earlier, is a common ceremony in Akan-led rebellions in Jamaica and Antigua. It was an essential component to the 1736 and 1759 Antigua conspiracies, as well as the 1760 Jamaican rebellion. The Akan loyalty oath reminded Gold Coast Africans of the link between them and their ancestors.

Sharpe’s reference to an obeah doctor, when compared to the details of past conspiracies involving Akan-speakers, becomes clearer in relation to Gold Coast spiritual elements. The conjurer Sharpe was referring to is identified as Peter the Doctor in court records. He was a free African laborer and one of the seven men acquitted in the trial. Peter’s role in the revolt parallels the obeah men in the 1760 Jamaican revolt. In both cases the men were described as giving the conspirators a powder to rub on themselves to make them invulnerable to attack. Whereas an obeah man in the Jamaica revolt was identified as a “Coromantine,” Peter was not. However, there is a link between the use of a powder for protection and the Gold Coast. Helanie K. Minkus explains in “Causal Theory in Akwapim Akan Philosophy” (1977), the use of aduru—a medicine in the form of a liquid or a powder among Akan priests. She explains:

Medicine is categorized, according to the ends which it is expected to accomplish, as either good medicine (aduru pa) or else bad medicine (adubone) or poison (aduto). Good medicine is used to treat illness and disease, to acquire protection from malignant human and spiritual agents, and to increase the chances in such ventures as trading, hunting and war...In contrast, the essential function of bad medicine is to bring about the failure, misadventure, illness or death against whom it is employed.”

The powder used by Peter the Doctor and the obeah man in the 1760 Jamaican revolt can definitely be classified as aduru pa since the outcome of the revolt was a positive one, freedom. The medicine was also used on fellow conspirators and not on slave planters,

which would have implied bad medicine or poison. The Akan understanding of *aduru pa* thus creates a better understanding of Peter the Doctor and the practice of obeah as a Gold Coast spiritual element.\(^{185}\)

The Akan belief in transmigration is also portrayed among rebels in the 1712 New York City slave revolt. As mentioned by Rev. Sharpe in his description of the account, several insurgents committed suicide instead of standing trial and being convicted by white community members. The tendency to commit suicide, viewed as a form of rebellion, was a "practice" associated mainly with Igbo slaves from the Bight of Benin. Gomez explains:

> Without question captives from all over West and West Central Africa reacted to enslavement and dislocation by committing suicide. An unthinkable act in Igbo and most other African societies, self-destruction became a plausible solution to many transplanted in the hostile world of white "spirits." It is intriguing, then, to read that the Igbo were perceived as more disposed to suicide than any other group.\(^{186}\)

Gold Coast Africans involved in slave rebellions also had a tendency to take their lives before being incriminated. They believed that their death would result in their souls returning to their land of birth in the Gold Coast. The 1733-1734 St. John rebellion in the Danish West Indies best exemplifies the belief in transmigration among Akan-speaking slave rebels. After a failed attempt to take over the island, thirty-six Akan rebels committed suicide. As Ray A. Kea reports, in "When I Die, I Shall Return to My Own


Land” (1996), a seventeenth-century governor of the Danish West Indies declared that Gold Coast Africans were “the worst runaways of all Blacks [and] at their death they return to their fatherland, or as they express it: ‘mij dodte mij loppe in myn lande.’”\(^{187}\) Translated, this statement in Dutch Creole reads, “when I die, I shall return to my own land.” It not only confirms the Akan belief of transmigration but explains the Gold Coast spiritual continuity in the final actions of the rebels in the 1712 New York City revolt.\(^{188}\) As Rucker states, “If they could not enjoy physical freedom on this plane of existence, suicide allowed [Akan-speaking Africans] to be reborn in Africa as free people.”\(^{189}\)

Despite the central involvement of Gold Coast Africans in the 1712 New York City revolt, the colony continued to import a large number of Akan-speakers. Slaves from the Caribbean and Africa accounted for thirty-five percent of all the immigrants entering New York between 1732 and 1754. Still serving as New York’s main supplier, the Royal African Company obtained the labor from its numerous forts on the Gold Coast, as well as Barbados, Jamaica, and Antigua—colonies with significant populations


of Gold Coast Africans. Consequently, when the 1741 New York City conspiracy occurred, there was a considerable amount of Akan-speakers in the city’s population.\textsuperscript{190}

Accusations resulted from a series of fires in New York City, beginning on March 18, 1741. The targets were homes and public buildings, and between March and April at least ten fires were set. Without delay, city residents suspected a slave conspiracy because of recent robberies with white accomplices. Two events were sufficient enough to confirm the suspicions of a slave conspiracy among New York City officials. The first happened on April 5, when Abigail Earle overhead a conversation from her window among three slaves. It was the statement by Quaco Walter, and the action that followed that caught her attention. He allegedly told his cohorts, "\textit{Fire, Fire, Scorch, Scorch, A LITTLE damn it, BY-AND-BY!}" and then threw his hands up and laughed.\textsuperscript{191} When four different fires were set throughout the city the next day, Abigail Earle immediately reported what she heard to a city official. Quaco admitted to the making the statement, but explained that he was referring to British Admiral Edward Vernon’s seizing of Porto Bello, Jamaica from the Spanish. He “thought that was but a small feat to what this brave officer would do by-and-by, to annoy the Spaniards.”\textsuperscript{192} Testimony from Quaco’s friends

\textsuperscript{190} Ibid., 58-59.


explaining the interpretation was not enough to convince the court that he was referring to anything other than a planned slave revolt and so a military watch was ordered over the city.\textsuperscript{193}

The second event took place on April 6 when Colonel Adolph Philipse's storehouse was set on fire. Of the community members who helped extinguish the fire, two accused Philipse's slave, Cuffee, of acting in a suspicious manner. One man, Jacobus Stoudenburgh, reported that after the blaze was put out and people left to attend to another fire, Cuffee was seen jumping from a window of the building and running away. He was soon caught by a crowd of white people however, and hauled to jail. When put on trial, another man, Isaac Gardner, who helped extinguish the fire at Philipse's storehouse, testified that Cuffee was unwilling to cooperate with others. Gardner stated, "instead of handing [buckets of water] along to the next man, he put them upon the ground and overset them, but which means the ground was a first dry and hard, became so wet that the witness who stood next to him, was almost up to the ankles in mud." While pouring the water on the ground, Garner also accused Cuffee of inappropriately whistling, singing, and dancing.\textsuperscript{194}

The suspicious events of slaves reported by Stoudenburgh and Garner intensified the fears of a slave conspiracy among community members. Making an effort to bring


the sporadic fires to end, on April 11, town officials offered awards to those revealing the conspirators. Mary Burton, an indentured servant, was the main indicter, accusing various people, even her boss, of involvement in the plot to burn New York City to the ground. In addition to Burton’s allegations, testimonies and confessions from slaves resulted in eighteen Blacks hanged, thirteen burned to death, and seventy deported.\textsuperscript{195} While none of this information confirms the existence of a plot to destroy New York City, court records verify the presence of Gold Coast spiritual elements in New York City during 1741.

One of the principal elements of Gold Coast spirituality present in the 1741 New York City conspiracy was the presence of Akan day-names. In addition to Cuffee Philipse, ten other people with Akan day-names were accused of involvement in the conspiracy. They were: two Cajoe’s, three Quack’s, two Cuffee’s, a Quamino, and a Quash. Respectively, these are variations of Kwadwo, Kweku, Kofi, Kwame, and Kwasi. There was also a female indicted by the name of Cuba, a modification of Akua. It is not certain whether these people were African-born, or American-born, however their names illustrate their discernible understanding and connection to Gold Coast spirituality.\textsuperscript{196}


\textsuperscript{196} Rucker, \textit{The River Flows On}, 84.
Similar to other Akan-led slave revolts and conspiracies, there is also a presence of what could be obeah in the 1741 New York City conspiracy. Described by Daniel Horsmanden, the recorder of the conspiracy trial, in his journal, reissued as *The New York Conspiracy* (1971), Doctor Harry was “a smooth soft spoken fellow... [with] the air of sincerity and innocence, but was of a suspicious character.”\(^{197}\) Horsmanden and other court officials were in fact familiar with Doctor Harry because of his involvement in a malpractice suit years earlier. He was found guilty, suffered a severe whipping, and was expelled from Manhattan Island. Doctor Harry was also accused of having a pivotal role in the 1741 conspiracy, comparable to the part of Peter the Doctor in the 1712 New York City revolt.\(^{198}\)

According to records of Horsmaden, Doctor Harry supplied the insurgents with two vital elements to the plot. Based on a confession by William Kane, Doctor Harry supplied the conspirators with “some black stuff...to set fire to the roofs of houses in dry weather.” A French slave named Bastian Vaarach explained further, “We had combustibles prepared by doctor Harry, made up into balls, which we were to set fire to and throw them upon the roof of the church, which sticking fast would set fire to the shingles.” Kane also professed that Doctor Harry supplied the plot leaders and a man named Quack with a poison. The intention was for the ringleaders to use the poison if


they were seized. Assuming Quack would not be captured, "he might go to the prison to carry victuals, and so could give the poison to those that were condemned, to prevent their execution." 199

The "black stuff" and the poison allegedly supplied by Doctor Harry would definitely connect him with the practice of obeah. As explained by Minkus, in Akan philosophy there are good medicines and bad medicines, the later inflicting misfortune and death. Both substances supplied by Doctor Harry were intended to have destructive effects, thereby suggesting his knowledge as an Akan healer or obeah practitioner. A statement given by Elias Rice, captain of a ship that transported slaves involved in the conspiracy to Hispaniola, implies that Doctor Harry's poison had African origins. Referring to an incident in which the slaves on board suspected the cook of putting poison in their food, Rice testifies:

Ten Eyck's Dick was cooking the victuals for the ship in the passage, and the negroes suspected he had a design of poisoning them, and saw him busy with yellow stuff in shells in a bag; which upon examination the negroes looked upon to be poison, which he had from doctor Harry, the negro. Some of the negroes knew it to be poison, the same sort they saw in Guinea. 200


The fact that the slaves were able to recognize Doctor Harry's poison links his practice to West Africa. Moreover, the poison represents an understanding among Doctor Harry and the conspirators of the transmigration concept present in other Akan-led revolts and conspiracies.201

Several slaves and witnesses also provided testimony describing various oathing ceremonies as a part of the plot to destroy New York City. The earliest allegedly took place at Hughson's tavern. According to the slave Bastian, Hughson led the oath reading a passage from the Bible followed by a statement “that the first thunder might strike them dead that discovered, or did not stand to their words to perform what they had engaged to do.” Reportedly, the conspirators in attendance, Cuffee Philipse, Quack Roosevelt, Cuffee Gomez, Cajoe Gomez, Caesear Peck, Will Ward, and Quash Rutger, drank a “punch” containing rum and agreed to the proposed plan. This was not a typical Akan oathing ceremony involving blood and graveyard dirt. The fact that it was led by a non-Akan speaking person and involved the Bible was also uncharacteristic of an Akan loyalty oath. The bond established among the men through the Bible passage and the drinking of the punch however resembled the Akan loyalty oath and certainly had significance to the Gold Coast Africans in attendance.202

---


A confession by a slave, Cato Shurmaur also suggests that Hughson was aware of the cultural link between the men at the ceremony. According to slave, Cato Shurmaur:

Hughson told the negroes present, that they must not attempt to draw in anyone that was not their countryman; that if they met with any countrymen, they must tell them so; and if they found they were likely to come in, then they might tell them of the plot; and those that were willing, they were to bring to Hughson’s to be sworn.\textsuperscript{203}

Hughson’s explicit instructions imply that he understood the Akan loyalty oath and the firm union it created among Gold Coast Africans. His leadership role also clarifies why he performed his own version of the ceremony—to ensure the proper execution and secrecy of the plot.

Another ceremony involving Cuffee Philipse, Jenny Comfort, Quack Roosevelt, and number of other “Coromantees” reportedly took place at Hughson’s neighbor’s house, Gerardus Comfort. Although the presence of punch is not mentioned the conspirators seemingly swore “to be true to one another, on the oath, \textit{that Gold Almighty would strike them dead with the first thunder}.\textsuperscript{204} Again, this was not a typical Akan oathing ceremony, but the purpose of the oath was clear and it parallels with other seventeenth and eighteenth century revolts involving Gold Coast Africans. The economic tensions between the New York City white community during this time was

\textsuperscript{203} Davis, ed., \textit{The New York Conspiracy}, 239.

\textsuperscript{204} Davis, ed., \textit{The New York Conspiracy}, 87.
certainly reason for Hughson and Gerardus Comfort’s involvement in the 1741 conspiracy. Moreover, white people probably felt that utilizing African cultural elements such as the Akan loyalty oath would ensure a successful slave revolt.205

Trial testimony from Fortune Wilkin, a slave indicted for his alleged participation in the conspiracy, suggests that there was perhaps one attempt of a genuine Akan oathing ceremony. According to Fortune, about a week before Fort George was burned, Quack Roosevelt asked him to accompany him to the Common. When Fortune asked why, Quack was unwilling to explain. When the men arrived at the Common, Quack reportedly left Fortune and “went down into the swamp, near the powder-house, where he gathered something, and returned to him again.” Quack would not explain what he collected, but took Fortune to Fort George. At the Fort, Quack asked Fortune to drink a dram, which he refused. Without confrontation the men left the fort and went their separate ways. They met again days later and Quack told Fortune “that in a few days there would be alternations in the fort.” When asked to explain Quack openly stated, “the fort would be burnt.”206


Fortune’s testimony implies that Quack was trying to get him to take a loyalty oath by drinking the dram. At first glance this may not seem true because of the absence of certain essential elements of an Akan loyalty oath. However, an understanding of the landscape of New York City during 1741 suggests that Quack did have at least one ingredient—graveyard dirt. Rucker explains:

When the two men met in the Common and Quack went into the swamp near the powder house, he would have been at the northern edge of the African Burial Ground, southwest of Collect Pond…The material that Quack gathered was probably graveyard dirt which would fully explain why he took his companion north of the Common—and thus within a brief walk of the African Burial Ground—and why he later offered a dram of “punch” for Fortune to consume.

Again, looking at past slave revolts involving Akan-speakers, graveyard dirt was common substance used in oath drinks. Among Gold Coast Africans, graveyard dirt represented the direct connection between them and their ancestors, and so taking in the substance as part of an oath made it unbreakable. The oath drink with the graveyard dirt was important to Quack in terms of recruiting an accomplice. After he was unsuccessful in recruiting Fortune and Sandy Niblet, Cuffee Gomez finally agreed to assist Quack in burning Fort George.207 This suggests that it took a fellow Akan who understood the spiritual significance of the ceremony to consume the oath drink and commit to the plan.

---

When compared with other slave revolts in the Americas, the numerous slaves with Akan day-names involved in the 1741 conspiracy alone insinuates a plot to destroy New York City. The involvement of Doctor Harry, the oathing ceremonies hosted by whites, and the actions of Quack Roosevelt further support the claim of a plot. Moreover, allegations of their actions illustrate that Gold Coast spiritual elements were a part of eighteenth-century New York City slave culture.

The African Burial Ground where Quack Roosevelt allegedly went before asking Fortune to drink the dram contains additional evidence of Gold Coast spiritual continuities in New York slave culture. The African Burial Ground, situated in present-day lower Manhattan, was used by both free and enslaved Africans in New York City from the 1600s to 1796. Reporting on the result of the 1712 slave revolt, Rev. John Sharpe stated that the free Blacks and slaves involved “are buried in the Common by those of their own country and complexion without the office [Christian funeral service], on the contrary the Heathenish rites are performed at the grave by their countrymen.”

The cemetery was definitely a haven for the burial practices of many Africans since in

---

208 Quoted in Goodfriend, Before the Melting Pot, 122; Rucker, The River Flows On, 47.
1697 the Trinity Church prohibited Africans from being buried in their church cemetery. Moreover, twentieth century archeological excavations reveal that among those cultures represented is the Akan culture of the Gold Coast.\footnote{209}

Excavations of the colonial African cemetery began in 1991 when the burial site was rediscovered in 1991 during the construction of a federal building. As of 1993 only 427 out of 20,000 graves were excavated, but among that small number are various indications of Akan cultural burial practices. For instance, “Burial #340” contained a clay pipe and 111 various beads. As mentioned earlier, clay pipes were a popular grave decoration in South Carolina with plausible links to both the Gold Coast and West Central Africa.\footnote{210} According to Bosman’s description of burial practices among Gold Coast Africans, some of these items are also buried with the deceased. He states:

They are richly cloathed when put into the Coffin; besides which several fine Cloaths, Gold Fetiches, high-prized Corals, (of which I have several times spoken) Conte di Terra, and several other valuable things are put into the Coffin to him, for his use in the other Life, them not doubting but he may have occasion for them.\footnote{211}

Bosman’s description further links the burial to the Gold Coast, but interment with personal items is also a common practice in West and West Central African cultures.

Michael Blakey, anthropologist and scientific director of the African Burial Ground


\footnote{210} Rucker, \textit{The River Flows On}, 49.

\footnote{211} Bosman, \textit{A New and Accurate Description}, 230.
Project, reinforces a Gold Coast link to the burial practices in “The New York African Burial Ground Project: An Examination of Enslaved Lives, A Construction of Ancestral Ties,” (1998) by stating, “The string of 111 glass beads and cowrie shells around the waist of one woman’s burial... suggest that she belonged to an Akan-speaking society in which such beads are buried with their owner.” Additionally, Jamieson reports that “at ElMina the grave goods included ceramic vessels, beads, and tobacco pipes. A 1602 document from ElMina claimed that the Africans would bury all of the deceased’s belongs in the grave.”

The large amounts of broken pottery found at the African Burial Ground can also provide evidence of an Akan burial practice. As mentioned earlier, the placement of earthenware on the tops of graves was a familiar practice in the Gold Coast. In addition to broken pottery found at the cemetery, many bodies were found wrapped in cloth and a total of five hundred shroud pins were discovered. Rucker explains, “using cloth to cover the body of the deceased was a custom associated with Gold Coast Africans.”

Arguably, one of the most interesting findings on the African Burial Ground related to the Gold Coast was the coffin of “Burial #101.” Nineteen metal tacks arranged in a heart-shape were on the lid of the coffin. According to art historian Kwaku Ofori-


Ansai, this decoration is a representation of the Akan Adinkra symbol, Sankofa.\textsuperscript{215} Adinkra is a Twi word formed by the words di nkra meaning “to bid farewell.” The symbols not only express “goodbye,” but they also convey a certain philosophical message as part of mourning. Explaining Sankofa, Ofori-Ansa states, “The symbol expresses the Akan social thought that espouses the essence of tying the past with the present in order to prepare for the future.” The Sankofa Adinkra symbol is most often found represented by a mythic bird flying forward with its head turned backwards.\textsuperscript{216} According to Opoku, “The symbol suggests that the past still has relevance for us today, for what is past is not necessarily useless or irrelevant.”\textsuperscript{217} The two other versions of the Adinkra symbol Sankofa exists in the shape of heart with curved ends. The curved ends of the heart-shaped symbolize reaching back to retrieve the useful aspects of one’s past. The Sankofa symbol would be an appropriate coffin decoration for a slave who was known to refer back to their cultural heritage for guidance, perhaps in a slave rebellion.


\textsuperscript{216} The Twi word Sankofa is a combination of three verbs, san, ko, and fa, meaning respectively to return, to go, and to pick up. Literally, the word Sankofa means: “go back and pick it.”

\textsuperscript{217} Opoku, \textit{Hearing and Keeping}, 126-127.
Joyce Hansen and Gary McGowan however assert that the heart-shaped symbol on the coffin signifies a different Adinkra symbol known as Akoma. Akoma is also represented by a heart-shape. The fact that this Adinkra symbol does not have curved ends gives substance to Hasen and McGowan’s argument because the symbol on the coffin did not. Moreover, the symbolic meaning of Akoma—goodwill, patience, faithfulness, devotion and endearing—is also an appropriate statement to put on a person’s coffin.218

The interpretation of the correct Adinkra symbol on the coffin is not the main problem when trying link it with the Gold Coast. Adinkra symbols are certainly an Akan art, but as some scholars argue the historical origin dating the symbols does not correlate with the dating of the motif on the coffin of “Burial #101.” The exact origin of Adinkra symbols is unknown, but a 1817 account by European traveler Thomas Edward Bowdich reported seeing clothes with printed symbols in Kumasi that fit the description of Adinkra. There is also a legend that points to the Gyaman people of present-day Côte d’Ivoire. After a war between the Akan states of Gyaman and Asante between 1818 and 1819, it is believed that Asantehene Osei Bunsu captured the Gyaman king, Kwadwo Adinkra, and learned the techniques of the cloth making. By the mid nineteenth-century the Asantes enhanced the technique and referred to it as Adinkra symbols. Another version of that legend tells that the Gyaman king created a personal copy of the Asante

Golden Stool, and that when he was captured and beheaded by the Asante military the stool was stripped revealing a variety of symbols now known as *Adinkras*. In the historical account of the war there is no mention of a replica of the Golden Stool or symbols, so there is no way to verify this account. Both Bodwich’s report and the legends cite the nineteenth-century for the origins of the motifs, and as Rucker says, “It would be highly unlikely that the symbol found on the coffin of Burial #101 has any link to the Akan *Adinkra.*”

Again, trial records and testimony of slave rebellions and conspiracies provide one of the best insights into the slave cultures at a time when slaves are planning their freedom. During this time, both free and enslaved Africans were relying on what they sincerely believed would ensure them their independence—their African culture. Court records from the 1712 New York City slave revolt and the 1741 New York City conspiracy provide evidence of obeah doctors and loyalty oaths. In the Gold Coast, persons with the knowledge of obeah doctors were held with high esteem, so much that they were entrusted to lead the military in wars and serve as advisors to the *Asantehene*. Loyalty oaths involving blood and graveyard dirt were also valued among the Akan, binding a person’s word with the spirit of their ancestors. These elements were essential

---

to the slave revolt and conspiracy in New York City, and when compared with other slave revolts in the Americas, such as the 1685 Jamaican revolt, and the 1759 St. Croix rebellion, certain actions become undeniably linked to the Gold Coast.

Burial customs also serve as evidence of the culture Africans brought with them to the Americas, and this is evident in South Carolina and New York. Graveyard decorations and grave gifts such as pottery and pipes were reported in eighteenth-century Gold Coast by Willem Bosman, and they were used for the same purposes in South Carolina and New York. These burial practices, the numerous people with Akan day-names, the presence of obeah doctors, Akan loyalty oaths, and Akan burial practices in South Carolina and New York City confirms the existence of Gold Coast spiritual continuities in eighteenth-century North America.
CONCLUSION

Recognizing Africa’s presence in African-American culture for some scholars has been a daunting task. For instance, Paul Gilroy’s call for abandoning “nationalist or ethnically absolute approaches” and instead “taking on the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis,” in The Black Atlantic (1992), disregards the variations and differences between people of African descent. Gilroy’s “Black Atlantic” dismantles the unique identities of people throughout the African Diaspora, ignoring African retentions and continuities that define African-American culture.

Similarly, Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price attempt to deter attention from cultural links to Africa by arguing that the variety of African cultures in the trans-Atlantic slave trade hindered any one from enduring in the Americas. They suggest that in order to identify cultural similarities, one must focus on finding similar values and beliefs. However, they find a historical and cultural comparison problematic. Mintz and Price explain:

---

All too often, however, the historical connections are simply inferred from a small number of formal similarities, with lexical items, for examples, playing a major role in “documenting” alleged relationships. The dangers of comparing the cultures of contemporary Jamaica and contemporary Ashanti should be fairly obvious; so are the difficulties in comparing what is known of the culture of the slaves in colonial Jamaica with what can be retrieved historically concerning the Ashanti people of the eighteenth century. 221

In other words, Mintz and Price leave little opportunity for the identification of African continuities in African-American culture.

Jon Butler, though specifically dealing with spirituality, also discredits the transmission of African culture elements. He claims that an “African spiritual holocaust” took place in North America before the eighteenth century with the absence of an African spiritual system. Not understanding that the practice of individual elements, such as burial customs, does not entail the absence of an African spiritual system, Butler wrongly uses Western concepts to define an African spiritual belief system. He also employs his belief that an African and Christian religious system cannot exist concurrently as evidence for an “African spiritual holocaust.” 222

Despite the reservations of Butler, Mintz and Price, and Gilroy, African cultural elements did survive the trans-Atlantic slave trade and there is a viable way to demonstrate the transmission of an African culture in the Americas. The Diasporic


Approach allows for the reconfiguration of the African Diaspora by first identifying the historical cultural practices of a certain group of people, then tracing their movement across the Atlantic into the Americas, and further examining their way of life after forced migration. Discontinuities are distinguished, as well as continuities.

When examining eighteenth- and twentieth-century Suriname, and eighteenth-century North America, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Gold Coast spiritual continuities are evident in various forms. Accounts from European explorers provide a great deal of insight into the spiritual beliefs of Gold Coast Africans in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries. The Akan people's belief in God, the role of deities, the concept of man, day-names, the notion of transmigration, the function of priests, priestess, and herbalists, loyalty oaths, and Anansi tales are referenced in the traveler's accounts. The contemporary writings of scholars allows for a better understanding of these practices. Combined with the primary sources, the present-day scholarship allows one to recognize retentions and continuities.

Acknowledging eighteenth-century Akan spiritual elements using early twentieth-century anthropological accounts of Suriname culture is even feasible because of the unique isolation of the Suriname Maroons. The importation of Akan-speakers into the colony of Suriname was considerable, and an understanding of their spiritual world, inclusive of Twi words, heavily resembles the Akan spiritual system described by
contemporary writers. Understanding that culture is not static, this remarkable similarity with Akan spirituality suggests that the spiritual practices of the Suriname Maroons were moderately undisturbed.

The same notion can be applied to the early twentieth-century observations of burial practices in South Carolina and accounts given by ex-slaves in this region of obeah doctors and Anansi stories. The colony of South Carolina also had a substantial amount of Akan-speaking Africans, and although not a maroon community, people in certain parts of the region, like on the coast, lived in considerable isolation. Moreover, there are clear and unmistakable Gold Coast continuities in the observations and accounts.

The court records from the 1712 New York City slave revolt and the 1741 New York City slave conspiracy also demonstrate clear spiritual connections with the Gold Coast. The numerous conspirators with day-names, the practice of obeah, the importance of the loyalty oath, and the notion of transmigration are all inherent in the testimonies. The African Burial Ground even exemplifies Akan continuities with certain burial customs and the possible use of *Adinkra* symbols on coffins.

The transference of Akan spiritual continuities to the Americas did not happen inadvertently. Spirituality was a way of life for Gold Coast Africans, encompassing almost every aspect. In the process of being captured, marched in chains to the coast, held in the most inhumane conditions in dungeons for several weeks, to then be shipped
to foreign lands where they were overworked, beaten, and raped, Gold Coast Africans
could carry with them only one thing—*their spirit.*
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Printed Primary Sources


*Boston News-Letter*, April 7-14, 1712.


Secondary Sources


143


