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American Negro Origins

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American Negro Origins.

It is an anomaly that American ethnology, certainly as related to governmental activity, has confined itself almost wholly to the Indian, and has almost wholly ignored the Negro. The National Museum has reproduced in illustration every phase of Indian life, social and economic. A few cases contain all that the government has accumulated of the record of the life history of more than nine million of its population. Popularly speaking, so little is known by the mass of Americans of the Negro's native life that we have come to think of them as a people without an ancestral history. And such knowledge as they have has been so distorted as to be worth but little. American study of the Negro in Africa has been largely confined to a search for evidence in support of one side or the other of the ancient and bootless controversy over the question of the relative positions in the human scale to which the Caucasian and Negro are entitled. It seems little less than criminally foolish for sensible white men to have kept up a dispute among themselves as to whether or not their race is really superior to the Negro.

We have not even taken the preliminary step of determining what tribes contributed to our Negro population. I believe, however, that it is easy to exaggerate the importance of this foundation stone of American Negro ethnological study. In the first place there was much that was common to all the tribes upon which the slave-trader preyed, and in the second place the different slave stocks have become so thoroughly intermixed in this

country as to form a now fairly homogeneous people. I do not mean to undervalue such knowledge at all, but I do believe its value to be greater in the sphere of abstract science than in the field of purely practical affairs. If in this country we ever take racial history into consideration in determining the grant of civil and political privileges, then a knowledge of the race history of the various elements of our population would be, or at least would have been, of very great practical importance. But our scheme has conveniently ignored such paltry considerations. Rights and privileges which are based primarily upon the attaining of his majority upon the part of any male biped do not demand a very close scanning of an individual's racial antecedents. It is of no material concern what use the ancestors of our various polyglot citizens made of their time here on earth. Theoretically, it is not consonant with the much vaunted genius of our institutions to inquire whether the grandfather of a particular citizen were a member of a lawmaking body on the banks of the Thames, or an attendant at an anthropophagous banquet on the banks of the Congo.

Nevertheless, interest always attaches to an inquiry into human origins. In the case of the Negro this interest is probably accentuated by his association with an ancient and mysterious continent, and by the tragic history of his life.

There is a great deal of truth in Sir Harry Johnston's remark that " The Negro, more than any other human type, has been marked out by his mental and physical characteristics as the

servant of other races." ("Colonization of Africa", p. 91.) He adds that there are exceptions to the rule, and that the least divergence from the Negro stock in an upward direction, as in the case of the Gallas and Somalis, is characterized by greater hostility to the slavery relation. This matter of divergence from the true Negro type touches the root of the study of American Negro tribal stocks. The true Negro was found in a rather limited territory extending along the west coast for about fifteen degrees north from the equator. A glance at the accompanying map (Johnston, Colonization, p. 91) will suggest the size of the task of tracing the origins of our heterogeneous Negro population. It would seem necessary to cover the major part of the African continent, rather than the limited territory embracing the Slave, Gold and Guinea coasts. For most purposes it is probably enough to know that during the period of greatest slave-trading activity, most of the American slaves came from the territory which I have indicated, and which is most commonly associated with the traffic. But this merely indicates the outworks of the trade, so to speak, - the open door through which the trader entered. The traffic had two effects on the coast populations; it tended to disperse as well as to destroy them. Under these two influences the coast proper would soon have been an exhausted source of supply. Buxton estimates that between 1680 and 1786 not less than 2,130,000 slaves were imported into the British Colonies alone. Owing to the demand in Cuba and Brazil the trade actually increased in the early part of the Nineteenth century, those two markets taking about 138,000 slaves annually as late as 1840. (The Church Missionary Atlas, 1896, pp. 20 and 21.) Sir Arthur Helps estimated the

total number of Negroes imported into America between 1517, when Charles Fifth first sanctioned the trade, to its abolition by England and the United States in 1807, at not less than five or six millions. He himself considered his estimate low. (Spanish Conquest in America, edn. 1904, vol. 4, p. 248.)

In view of such numbers, and of the competition among traders, - England, alone, having 192 ships in the African trade in 1771, (Missionary Atlas, above) - the business of assembling their human cargo on shore was the most important part of the whole iniquitous traffic. The conception of the African end of the trade as involving merely the sending of a party ashore and the purchase at once of a cargo, is one which may have been true in the earliest days of the trade but certainly not in the later and more active periods. It is not difficult to learn from what ports certain slavers embarked their cargoes. From the map before us you can see that the trade routes to the West Indies and the United States were primarily from the region of the mouths of the Gambia and Senegal rivers, between ten and fifteen degrees of north latitude, with other bases on the Guinea Coast at and west of the mouth of the Niger, - say at about latitude five above the equator. Another route, less frequently followed, lay around the Cape of Good Hope to depots in Portugese East Africa, the mouth of the Zambesi, and across the Mozambique Channel, to the island of Madagascar. Brazil drew her supply at first from the Guinea Coast, but in the main from Portugese West Africa, along the coast from the mouth of the Congo south to St. Paul de Loando and Benguela, in Angola, say between 5 and 15 degrees of south latitude. The Island of Zanzibar and the opposite coast were the great sources

of the ocean trade destined for the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, for Arabia, Persia, Turkey, Egypt and India.

But when we speak of the sources of the slave-trader's stock, we can no more stop at the port or point at which he shipped his cargo than we can consider the shipping port of a legitimate trade as the point of origin of the particular commodity dealt in. The factories of European nations on the African coasts and rivers were simply the depots at which were accumulated the slaves destined for the American, West Indian or Brazilian trade. They were, in fact, only points at which the journey of the slave was broken, for the trade was one associated primarily with travel by land rather than water. Throughout Central Africa, from the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic, the country is traversed by the paths of the slave-trader. From Cape Verde easterly to the source of the Nile, and from Portugese West Africa to the Eastern Colony of the same, ^{the} the continent has been crossed and recrossed thousands of times by the interior agents of the maritime traders. On the eastern side of the continent the trade extended from the equator south to even below the Zambesi. The extent of the ramifications of the interior trade brought about such an intermixture of tribes at the various depots on the coasts, as to impair the value of any deductions as to origin which might be drawn from the mere geographical locations of these shipping points themselves. I do not say that these have no value at all, because unquestionably they have. We know, for example, that there must of necessity be a tremendous proportion of genuine West African blood in our American Negroes. When we ascertain that from 1759 to 1803 there were consigned from Angola to Brazil 642,000 Negroes (Portugese Colonization in Brazil, A. G. Keller, Yale Review, Feby. 1906, p. 402),

and that for many years Angola supplied Brazil almost exclusively, we are safe in saying that the Brazilian Negro is largely of South West African extraction. The point I wish to emphasize is that in these preponderating masses there were such large numbers of Negroes who differed from those by whom they were surrounded as to make it unsafe to generalize as to the characteristics of any large part of the whole from what we know of the tribes which inhabited any given slave-trading district.

I may draw on Sierra Leone to illustrate the probable complexity of this branch of our population. This colony (Sierra Leone) embraces territory directly within the field of active slave-trading operations. It was known to the Portugese before the discovery of America, and probably as early as 1463. It was one of the first Portugese entrepots for the slave trade. Through its long history as an accumulating and shipping point for slaves, it is particularly interesting in an attempted study of the tribal composition of American Negro stocks. You may be interested to know that one of the original purposes for which the present colony was founded was to provide an asylum for Negro slaves in England. It is estimated that there were some 12 to 20 thousand Negro slaves held in England at the time of Lord Mansfield's decision in the Somersett case in 1772. Under this decision, that slavery was repugnant to English institutions and could not exist on English soil, a great number of these Negroes congregated in London, and became objects of charity and also a nuisance. Granville Sharp secured the removal of some, possibly most, of these Negroes to Sierra Leone, in 1787, and it became thenceforth a refuge for liberated slaves. It was formally taken over by the Crown in 1808,

and was dedicated to the use of Negroes set free from captured slavers. It thus became an assembling ground for Negroes from all the ports of Africa which were visited by slave ships, and for all the interior territories which contributed to their cargoes. (See Church Missionary Atlas, 1896, pp. 30 and 31.)

The vast extent of the interior slave trade employed in accumulating Negroes at the entrepots on the coasts, is suggested in a work by the Rev. S. W. Koelle, an English missionary in Sierra Leone from 1847 to 1853, - "Polyglotta Africana". He compiled vocabularies of 200 different languages spoken by the liberated members of the various African tribes which had contributed to the population of Sierra Leone the people who had been destined for the slave markets of Brazil, the West Indies and North America. These people had little in common but the misery of their situation. They could not understand each other's speech, and differed in tribal habits, customs and practices. They were drawn from practically the entire West Coast, from the Upper Niger, from Senegal, from Lake Chad, from the Southwest Coast as far as Benguela, from Nyassaland, from the mouth of the Zambesi, from the Southeast Coast and from Wadai. (Church Missionary Atlas, 1896, p. 30, and Sir Harry Johnston's "Colonization of Africa", 1899, p. 99.)

This accumulation of nations^{res} from all parts of Africa served not only to show the vast extent of territory involved in slave trading operations, but also furnished a field for comparative study of the different tribes which furnished the slave stocks of the western world. Some tribes could not be enslaved successfully, and these were either largely let alone, as in the case of the Zulus, or they were armed, adopted as allies, and were themselves converted into slave raiders and traders by the Arabs, as

in the case of the Manyema of the upper Congo. Some of the most inveterate traders, and most extensive, to be found in the interior, were the Hausas and Fulahs of the Egyptian Sudan. But the latter were not Negroes, and would resent being thus identified as quickly and forcibly as would white men. The Negro proper, to again quote the words of Sir Harry Johnston, probably the best English authority we have, "is in general a born slave. He is possessed of great physical strength, docility, cheerfulness of disposition, a short memory for sorrows and cruelties, and an easily aroused" (and I should add easily dissipated)"["] gratitude for kindness and just dealing. He does not suffer from homesickness to the overbearing extent that afflicts other peoples torn from their homes, and, provided he is well fed, he is easily made happy. . . . He has little or no race-fellowships, - that is to say, he has no sympathy for other Negroes; he recognizes and follows his master independent of any race affinities, and, as he is usually a strong man and a good fighter, he has come into request not only as a labourer but as a soldier." (The Colonization of Africa, pp.91 & 92.)

This description applies fairly well to the great mass of Negroes who found their way into the slave markets of the world, regardless of the particular tribe from which they came. It was true of those on the West Coast who were sent to America and the West Indies, and likewise of those from farther east who were distributed through the island of Manzibar, probably the greatest slave clearing-house in the modern world. It held good with those who were enslaved by their neighbors and kindred the Hausas, and with those who were collected in the Sudan and carried north and east by Arab traders overland across the desert to Morocco, Algeria,

and Egypt. (Johnston, Colonization of Africa, p. 92, and Buxton's Slave Trade, 1840, pp. 63 and 64.) The same general terms also describe the distant Negroes who were the victims of the fierce slave raids of the Matabele Zulus in South Africa, prior to British domination and final control of that territory. True, there were local tribal differences, even among those from the same general territory. John Atkins, from his personal African observations as a surgeon in the Royal Navy, quaintly remarked in 1735, that "Slaves differ in their Goodness; those from the Gold Coast are accounted best, being cleanest limbed, and more docible by our Settlements than others; but then they are, for that very reason, more prompt to Revenge, and murder the Instruments of their Slavery, and also apter in the means to compass it." "To Windward", he adds, "they approach in Goodness as is the distance from the Gold Coast; so, as at Gambia, or Sierraleon, to be much better, than at any of the interjacent places. To Leeward from thence, they alter gradually for the worse; an Angolan Negro is a Proverb for worthlessness; and they mend (if we may call it so) in that way, till you come to the Hottentots, that is, to the Southermost Extremity of Africa". (A Voyage to Guinea, Brazil and the West Indies, John Atkin, London, 1735, p. 179.) It may also be added that the Council of the Indies annulled a contract given Portugese agents by two Germans (Henry Ciguer and William Sailer) to whom, in 1528, Charles the Fifth had granted a trading monopoly for 4000 slaves a year to Cuba, upon the alleged ground that they "delivered Negroes of such inferior quality." (Helps, Conquest, vol. 3, p. 149, Appenheim's note.) But these differences were all covered in the description which I have quoted from Johnston. But

I cannot believe that such differences, no matter what importance may once have been claimed for them, can be of very great practical moment after the coalescing and unifying processes of the past two or three hundred years of contact between these different tribes in America.

On the other hand, I do believe that the very great differences of character, capacity and achievement which here and there set apart a Negro from his fellows, may be accounted for either by tribal differences or by group or class differences within the same tribe. The African tribal organization everywhere meant a government by Chiefs or head-men, and these in turn held place by virtue of superior individual capacity. There was hereditary rule, it is true, but the tenure of a family was not so sacred that it could not be broken by a man of peculiar mental or physical force. "The good old rule, the simple plan, to let him take who hath the might, and let him keep who can," worked as well in savage Africa as it did in somewhat more civilized Europe. And while in practice it was never consonant with "golden rule" principles, it had least had the virtue of affording outlet and encouragement for those individuals who were endowed by nature with a mental equipment superior to that of the mass of the tribe. The slave-trader was no respecter of persons, and in the dragnet which he spread he caught not infrequently men who were head and shoulders above their fellows. These men and their descendants, when their superior capacity was transmitted, found or made places for themselves in their new environment. There was not a plantation in America or the West Indies which did not have in its slave population individuals of marked superiority. And it was seldom that this

superiority failed of recognition through preferment of various kinds. And the number of such exceptional individuals among native Africans, also the sphere of their accomplishments, was probably much larger than we have generally supposed.

When the British punitive expedition captured the so-called city of Benin, in the Niger Coast Protectorate, in 1897, they discovered a collection of works of native art of very great ethnological value. There were not only ivory carvings of a high degree of artistic skill, but, what was more remarkable, a number of excellent castings in bronze. These showed the effect of European contact, some of them illustrating Portugese dress of the middle of the 16th Century. At least one authority, Mr. H. Ling Roth, seems to think that the art of bronze casting reached a high degree of perfection at an earlier period in Benin than in the Iberian Peninsula, or possibly even in the rest of Europe. We know that the art of smelting and forging iron was common among numerous tribes. I dare say many a Negro blacksmith in the ante bellum South came from a class or caste of metal-working ancestors. Certainly numbers of them have developed a high degree of skill. (See "Great Benin, Its Customs, Art and Horrors." H. Ling Roth, Halifax, England, 1903, pp. 226 et seq.) In considering our Negro stocks it should be kept in mind that the most depraved social and moral condition was not at all incompatible with a considerable degree of intellectual capacity and fairly well developed mechanical skill. Nor were such contradictions confined to Africa. Unless a much slandered individual, Benvenuto Cellini deserved his rank among the wickedest men of the world, while we know that he was one of the world's greatest and most artistic craftsmen.

I have heard many men who belonged to the older South give accounts of remarkable slaves, and it is beyond question that there were numerous instances of supposed Negroes of far more than ordinary ability. I say "supposed Negroes" advisedly. I have mentioned the wide extents and ramifications of the interior African slave trade, and its tendency to bring about a commingling of various tribal stocks. But such intermixture did not depend wholly on the slave trade. The history of African tribes is largely a history of migrations. Rotzel finds as great a degree of racial confusion in western interior Africa as Junker discovered farther east. (vol.3, p. 51.) In the Congo basin side by side with a lean and degraded population are to be found men whom Rotzel calls "bronze statues", whose "thinner lips, aquiline noses, and free carriage" suggest a new type. Rotzel says that "The fact of such a blending of various races is common in Negro Africa".(p.51) So even when we think that we have found instances of remarkable Negroes of pure blood, we have to face the likelihood that we have simply stumbled upon a scion of some superior associated tribe. Such an individual was the blacksmith Ellis, who as a slave in Alabama, earned for himself the title of the colored Elihu Burritt. He was reputed to have learned English, Latin, Greek and Hebrew while following his trade. (Dwight's Am. Magazine, vol.1, 1845, p. 69, - acct. repd. from the New Orleans Protestant). Another instance was that of the Rev. John Chavis, a Presbyterian Negro minister who for many years prior to the Civil War taught a classical school for white boys in North Carolina. (Old Time Negro Education in the South, Dr. G. S. Dickerman, Southern Workman, vol. 32, Oct. 1903, p. 503.) Still another was King, the Alabama bridge builder and contractor, who was manumitted by his owner and given legal rights by a special act of the Alabama

legislature, in order to place him on an equal footing with white contractors. Another was the prodigy in astronomical knowledge owned by a gentleman (Capt. W. W. Thornton) in Cumberland Co., Va., just before the war.

Similar modern cases, - e.g. the remarkably talented boy in my county who worked in corn pith, etc. etc..

In addition to such cases there are unquestionably in this country, the West Indies and Brazil, numerous representatives of African families which not only are not Negroes but which in Africa stand on a different footing and regard themselves, and are regarded, as distinctly superior to the Negro. Of these probably the most important are the Fulahs of the lower western Sudan. These people for years have been slave holders and slave dealers, as well as advance agents of Islam to the Negro tribes to their south and west. Probably the best known name which they have contributed to history is that of ~~Othman~~ ^{Dan} Fodio, the past chief of the first years of the nineteenth century. It was an incident of the slave trade that its local agents frequently became its victims. One of the occasional tricks of the trade was the kidnapping of a Fulah or half-caste Arab dealer, after he had supplied part of the cargo of a slave ship. Under this convenient process the master of the vessel not only secured his cargo, but got back his purchase money, and along with the latter a dozen or a score of men in every way superior mentally to the usual run of Negro slaves. These Fulahs were probably swallowed up in the mass of Negroes who surrounded them, occasionally to live again in the person of some descendant of unusual intellectual capacity. Here and there, however, when they happened to be educated in Arabic, as many of them were, they were discovered by their

American purchasers and have passed into local history. A few have been returned to their native country, after undergoing various experiences as slaves.

The case of "Job", for example, who was discovered in Maryland in 1731, taken to London at Oglethorpe's instance, and finally returned to Africa. A sketch of him by Thos. Bluett, who discovered him and accompanied him to England, was published in London in 1734.

Another somewhat similar case was that of Abdul Rahamon, who was a slave near Natchez, Miss., about 1810 to 1820. It was claimed that he was a native of Morocco, unmixed with Negro blood. Dr. Thomas H. Gallaudet was instrumental in securing his release, and after a while spent in study in this country he is said to have entered the missionary field in Liberia.

Another instance was Omeroh, who was brought to South Carolina long after the cessation of the legal slave trade, in one of the smuggled cargoes which found their way into America and the West Indies after the trade had become piratical in character. He was nominally owned by a brother of a former governor of North Carolina, but was, in fact, in many ways treated practically as a member of the family. He was locally noted for his knowledge of the Arabic language, and for his piety and high character. (A True Story of an African Prince in Southern Home. In North America and Africa, a Key to the Negro Problem. By Dr. John F. Foard, Statesville, N.C.. 1904. pp. 62 et seq.. Stone vol. 39, No. 18.)

In this category belongs, probably, the case of Prince Hannibal, of Warrenton, Va.. He also was brought from Africa after the close of the legal slave trade. He claimed to be of superior birth

to his Negro companions, and his master became satisfied of it and emancipated him. He had nothing to do with Negroes, refused to marry, became himself a slaveholder, was a Southern sympathizer during the civil war, and was once imprisoned by the government on account of his treasonable affiliations.

A somewhat similar instance was that of John Wesley Dunn, of Mississippi.

In addition to these elements in our original slave stocks, - that is, the lowest Negro types of the Coast, the higher types which were occasionally associated with them, and a number of representatives of non-Negro tribes like the Fulahs, - we had a sprinkling of natives from the island of Madagascar. These were called Malagasy, and were characterized by coarse straight black hair, and a copper complexion. They were sometimes known as "red Negroes", a term probably applied as often to them as to the Fulahs who were brought to this country. They do not seem to have exhibited as much intellectual capacity as the Fulahs, though for some purposes they were esteemed by their owners above the darker and more characteristically "Negro" slaves from the West Coast.

The natives of Madagascar are of Malay origin, and notwithstanding a considerable infusion of African blood, they are still more Malay than Negro in appearance. I have occasionally found descendants of Malagasy slaves who retained crude traditions of their origin and former home. They have corrupted their name into various modifications of Malagasy, such as Malligaster, Mallyglasser, etc., but they are nearly always found to have a distinct feeling of superiority to the Negroes around them. In some cases they will not intermarry or associate with the latter.

The so-called "Moors" in Delaware now constitute about the only body of American Africans who retain any tribal identity, or sense of distinction from the Negro masses. And even they have no clear idea as to who they are or whence they came. They call themselves "Moors", and hold themselves aloof from Negroes, though they associate with mulattoes. They will not accept Negro teachers in their schools, a prejudice which is recognized by providing them with mulatto instructors.

The mention of mulattoes suggests the last, and a very important, element in our polyglot Negro population. It is an error to suppose that no white intermixture occurred until after the American slave was brought from Africa. We must remember that contact between so-called Negroes and Europeans antedates the discovery of America, and that the slave trade between Africa and the West Indies was regularly established a century before the first Negroes were landed on the Virginia coast. Wherever the slave trade gained a foothold, there was found the intermixture of races, whether the trade was in the hands of Europeans or Arabs, or both combined. This blending process, begun on the African coast, as much as four and a half centuries ago, has now reached the point when in the old Portugese Colonies R^otzel says "the number of mulattoes is so great that the Negro divides men into blacks, whites, and Portugese; feeling himself nearer to the last." (Rotzel, vol. 3, p. 106.)

I would not suggest that any large number of mulatto slaves were brought to this country, but that some were cannot be questioned. The earliest colonial legislation recognized their presence as part of the original slave population. Their number has

steadily increased, both through diffusion and further intermixture, and they now constitute what is in many respects the most important element in our Negro population. Their separate enumeration has been attempted four times. In 1850 they constituted 11.2 per cent of the Negro population; in 1860, 13.2 per cent; in 1870, 12.0 per cent, and in 1890, 15.2 per cent. It will probably be attempted again in 1910.

My principal conclusion is that our Negro population is composed of quite as many as, and even more diverse elements than, our white population. It seems to me impracticable, even impossible, at this day to ascertain the extent to which these various elements enter into the whole; or the influence which any of them have^S exercised in developing the traits and characteristics of the conglomerate mass which we now designate the American Negro. In studying this new type I believe it to be of primary importance that we recognize its complex character, and not be led astray by the occasional appearance in it of individuals of marked superiority. These individuals are more likely to be evidences of the strength of heredity than of the general capacity of the mass. They are likely to be either the result of atavistic influences, bringing to light the superior character of some tribal Negro-enslaving ancestor, or the result of an intermixture of white and Negro blood. They may be leaders among the people to whom unscientific social usage has assigned them, - instruments for good or evil, as their individual characters may determine. But they tell no more of the potentialities of the American Negro^{class} than the degraded and brutish specimen of the West African which we often meet in the South tells us of its permanent limitations.