

African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

Volume 8

Issue 4 September 2005

Article 18

9-1-2005

Black Seminoles in the Bahamas

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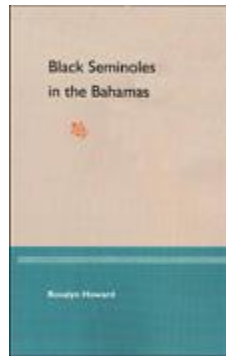
Recommended Citation

Howard, Rosalyn and Hahn, Steven C. (2005) "Black Seminoles in the Bahamas," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 4, Article 18.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol8/iss4/18>

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Book Review



H-NET BOOK REVIEW

Published by H-LatAm, <http://www.h-net.org/~latam> (August 2005).

Rosalyn Howard. *Black Seminoles in the Bahamas*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002. xvii + 150 pp. Maps, figures, notes, bibliography, index. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 0-8130-2559-1; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 0-8130-2743-8.

Reviewed for H-LatAm by Steven C. Hahn, Department of History, St. Olaf College.

I Never Knew . . .

"I never knew that there were Black Seminoles in the Bahamas!" (p. xiii) Such has been the near unanimous response to Rosalyn Howard's revealing book, which (I must confess) elicited the same response from the present reviewer. While at one level a curiosity, Howard's historical and cultural analysis of the residents of Andros Island in the Bahamas raises issues concerning identity, ethnogenesis, and race that transcend the boundaries of the tiny island community and widens our present view of the Black Seminole diaspora. Though her work is wanting in some respects, Howard nevertheless succeeds in her stated task of contributing to "a more inclusive perspective of 'American' ethnohistory" (p. xiii) that connects the experiences of Africans and Native Americans in a variety of New World landscapes.

As with many works that venture into new territory, Howard's "mission" is one of giving voice, for the first time, to a people that have yet to be acknowledged as subjects worthy of historical inquiry. As Howard puts it, her aim is "to address the historical, structural amnesia that obscures African and indigenous peoples' interactions and negates their integral roles in the historiography of the Americas and the Caribbean." (pp. xvi-xvii). Also inherent to the project is Howard's quest to "present for the first time an in-depth rendering of the essence of social memory that sustains Black Seminole heritage in Red Bays."

Toward this end, Howard begins with a brief historical account of the "holocaust of European colonialism" (p. 2), including overviews of the rise of New World African slavery and the devastation that epidemic disease wrought upon the indigenous peoples of the

Americas. Her analysis then turns to the southern frontier of the British southern colonies, which developed plantation economies centered upon rice production and slave labor. While she notes that African slaves in North America tended less often than their counterparts elsewhere in the New World to employ marronage as a resistance strategy due to climate and geography (one might add demography), Howard rightfully identifies conditions on the southern frontier of North America that made marronage -- and thus the formation of Black Seminole communities -- possible. For one, while the majority of maroon communities consisted of Africans and Creoles, they could also take the form of alliances between African and indigenous peoples, who were numerous in the American south at that time. Moreover, the Spanish regime in Florida, beginning in 1693 with a Royal Decree promising protection and freedom to all enslaved who reached St. Augustine, drew escapees southward throughout much of the eighteenth century, leading to the formation of the first "legally sanctioned" free African community at Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose.

The focus then shifts to the formation of the Seminoles and their later alliance with African runaways. The Seminoles, composed of "dissidents" from the Creek nation, began migrating from their traditional homes in Alabama and Georgia as early as the 1730s to form new communities in northern Florida. African-American slaves, seeking solace in Florida to escape plantation slavery, later began fleeing to Seminole territory. Though former slaves acted in concert with the Seminoles, assumed some of their manners, and became "an integral part of the Seminole people" (p. 18), Howard is careful not to overestimate the degree to which the Black Seminoles became culturally "Indian." Black Seminoles tended to live in separate communities, maintained the tradition of patrilineal descent, and retained African naming practices. Moreover, the integration of African and Indian peoples was forged in a climate of mutual hostility to the U.S., which saw Spanish-held Florida and its free Black Seminole communities as a threat to the institution of slavery. This fear among white Americans was in part responsible for the outbreak of the Patriots War of 1812, and three successive Seminole wars that ended only in 1855, after which the vast majority of the tribe were removed to Indian Territory (Oklahoma).

While the majority of Seminoles -- Black and Indian -- were busy rebuilding their lives in Indian Territory, or fleeing from the U.S. military in the swamps of Florida, groups of Black Seminoles embarked upon what can only be described as a heroic migration to the Bahamas, which began as early as 1819, with the majority of immigrants arriving between 1821 and 1837. Initially classified in official British documents as "slaves" and detained in Nassau for one year, the Black Seminoles were eventually allowed to return to their landing place at Red Bays, Andros Island, to live as free people. That they were allowed to do so suggests that their destination was well chosen. As Howard explains, the experiences of African peoples in the Bahamas "deviated from the norm of West Indian plantation life" (p. 63) in a variety of ways that made the Bahamas -- and Andros Island in particular -- fertile ground for the establishment of free Black (and Black Seminole) communities. Thinly populated, Andros Island received an influx of Loyalist refugees who fled the American Revolution in 1783 and arrived at Andros in 1787. Many were slaveholders and initially the Loyalists sought to reestablish the plantation system they had enjoyed in North America. They failed to do so, however, due to Andros's "rocky land, unyielding soil, and

devastation caused by the chenille bug" (p. 62). After 1807, the island began receiving an influx of liberated Africans, the beneficiaries of British captures of Spanish slaving ships on the high seas. Though liberated African and white Loyalist communities remained strictly segregated, and many of the "liberated" Africans continued to work under open-ended indenture contracts akin to slavery, the presence of liberated African peoples set a precedent for African freedom, which was sanctioned legally in 1834 by the passage of the Abolition Act prohibiting slavery in all of the British colonies.

Among Howard's more interesting contributions are the oral histories that document the Black Seminoles' collective memory of this migration and their Seminole roots. Many of her informants adeptly recall the harshness of the slavery from which they fled. One elderly informant, for example, recalled hearing her elders describe the work regimen under slavery: "in slavery time, they have a white boss, like the master. So they would go out and they work and they do all they master's work and sometime they be beaten" (p. 40). The lucidity of Black Seminole memories also applies to family genealogies. Many of Howard's informants recall specific ancestors who made the voyage to Andros Island, and while memories are sometimes vague, virtually all members of the Black Seminole community can relate family oral traditions that affirm some degree of biological ("blood") relationship to the Indian Seminoles. A feeling of kinship persists, as one of Howard's informants, Alma Miller, relates "when I be young and be traveling [in Florida] and the Indian they begin owning me, as a part of them. Sometime I see them right here in Nassau. They come over on trips and I go in the States the same thing" (p. 40).

Upon establishing themselves on Andros Island, for the next century or more the Black Seminoles tended to live as they preferred: in isolation. Accessible only by boat or footpath until 1968, the Black Seminoles subsisted primarily by harvesting sponges, fishing, making grass baskets, and raising small crops such as corn, sesame seed, peas, and beans. They remained shadowy elements of the Bahamian population, earning the distinction "wild Indians" of Andros Island. Integration into the greater Bahamian community appears to have begun, however, in the 1950s and 1960s; first in 1953 with the formation of the first black majority Bahamian political party, the PLP (Progressive Liberal Party), which began drawing Andros islanders into the political process, and later in 1968, when a logging company cut a road to the principle Black Seminole community at Red Bays.

These developments foreshadowed the soon-to-be-felt effects of national independence (gained in 1973) and globalization. Black Seminole communities today boast a thriving school system, the proliferation of small shops that sell dry and canned goods, and an enhanced subsistence economy generated by the sale of produce to members of the logging companies, which also employ members of the Black Seminole communities. Phone lines, of which there had been only one in 1998, have now been installed in many homes, and the Black Seminoles' traditional wood-frame, thatch roof houses have been replaced by cement block or frame houses, complete with ceramic tile floors, and satellite dishes. These developments have certainly transformed the lives of many people, but not all members of the community have benefited equally. Politically, this division can be seen in the rise of a new political party, the FNM (Free National Movement), which pursues economic uplift through integration into the global economy and draws much of its support from the black

middle class. Interestingly, the Black Seminole communities that had formerly backed the PLP are now divided politically, and the FNM gained a majority of the votes in the 2002 election. This development, Howard suggests, signifies the beginnings of what is likely to be a continuing debate on the scope and nature of Bahamian integration into the global economy.

Howard's historical narrative then shifts into a more ethnographic mode in chapter 5, where she discusses demography, kinship and social structure, gender norms, subsistence, and recreation. Especially valuable here is Howard's discussion of marriage and kinship, which provides a basis for comparison with Black communities throughout the Western Hemisphere. Howard finds that the Black Seminoles' kinship system is a rather flexible one. The islanders tend to confer kinship status -- as brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts -- to many men and women who are unrelated by blood or marriage, and the "adoption" of outsiders as members of family casts a wider net of kinship. Extramarital relations are also common; Howard finds that a majority of women in Red Bays have borne children from multiple unions and that the majority of men have extra-residential relations with women whom they dub "sweethearts." Howard attributes this pattern in part to African traditions of polygamy and to slavery, whereby masters promoted the conception of children to increase the labor force. As a result, though a double-standard of sexual activity persists in this patriarchal society, women who bear children out of wedlock are generally not ostracized, nor do the men disown the children from extramarital unions, called "outside children" by the locals.

Howard's final chapters (6-8) take up the important question of Black Seminole identity, which she rightly regards as a contextual problem. Bahamians in general tend to reject the label of "West Indian," and many Afro-West Indians persistently deny the "African Presence" (p. 106) as being central to the region's ethos. The Bahamas are therefore a "world between worlds" and its residents tend to identify themselves simply as "Bahamian." The Black Seminoles, Howard finds, are no different, arguing that the fact of their Seminole heritage is "essentially a nonissue" and that they "unfailingly consider themselves to be 'Bahamian'" (p. 109). Moreover, the Black Seminoles, while assertive of their Seminole heritage, currently have expressed little interest in becoming recognized members of the Seminole communities of the United States, suggesting the importance of place in the formation of their identity.

Howard's book is most certainly eye-opening and a worthwhile read, but it is not without its shortcomings. While Howard rightly points out that this tendency on the part of Black Seminole Bahamians to emphasize the "Bahamian" aspect of their identity is evidence for the fluidity of identity formation, this same fact tends to call into question the extent to which these communities can justly be called "Seminole." The Black Seminole Bahamians retain cultural traditions such as patrilineal descent and African naming patterns that are contrary to Seminole Indian practices, nor does any syncretism in religion or language appear to have occurred. What has been preserved, Howard argues, "is not necessarily tangibly evident, but is, rather, epistemological -- a complex of knowledge, beliefs, and ways of knowing that derive from the synthesis of heritage and adaptation" (p. 119). Howard's account, somewhat ironically, put me in mind of many white southerners who

claim some form of "Indian" ancestry, but who do so in a nostalgic way that betrays the fact that they do not generally share in the wider culture and history of the Southern Indians. Therefore, it might have been equally, if not more fruitful for Howard to investigate the more tangible "African" elements of the Andros Islanders' culture rather than their nostalgic recollection of their "Indian" past.

Moreover, scholars with expertise in Seminole and southeastern Indian history are likely to find her historical research into the formation of the Seminoles and Black Seminoles of the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries to be wanting, as her evidence is based on somewhat dated secondary materials and could have been buttressed by recent works by Claudio Saunt, Brent Weisman, and others. Howard also could have done a better job of pinning her historical narrative to a stricter chronology. She has a tendency to slip into the ethnographic present when discussing Black Seminole culture, leaving her discussion of it somewhat detached from the changes wrought by a century of life in the Bahamas and recent integration into the wider Bahamian and global communities. At times, important topics that might have allowed for her to delve deeply into that culture are overlooked, such as religion, to which she devotes less than one page. A fuller analysis of religious practices might have enabled her to find connections (or not) to Seminole belief systems, and, given the apparent importance of Christianity in the lives of her subjects (her most important informant, in fact, is a Baptist minister) would have allowed for fuller investigation of the Black Seminoles' world view and identity.

These shortcomings aside, Howard's book is valuable in that the story is compelling, presented succinctly, and it succeeds in its stated goal of giving voice to a people "without history." Furthermore, her case study will certainly prove valuable to anyone doing comparative work in Caribbean ethnic history, and the histories of the African, Black Seminole, and Seminole diasporas, of which we can only expect more in the future. Howard sums it up best, stating that her book, "hopefully, provides a point of departure for future research into the unwritten stories of African and Native American encounters in the New World" (p. xvii). Indeed! *Black Seminoles in the Bahamas* is sure to leave readers eager to learn more and generate further studies about these intriguing peoples. We can only hope that Professor Howard will be among the first to take the challenge and delve more deeply into this interesting subject.

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