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“To Kill all Whites:” The Ethics of African Warfare in Bahia and Cuba, 1807-1844

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At midnight on 15 June 1825, a group of African-born men took arms against their masters in the coffee plantation region of Guamacaro in western Cuba. After meeting up they marched on from plantation to plantation, executing white men, women and children and setting crops and buildings on fire, as they advanced towards the small village of Coliseo, where they would meet their final defeat at the hands of a combined force formed of a local militia and well-armed neighbors.¹ The African armed movement that shook the foundations of the then expanding Cuban slave plantation economy was organized and put into action by men who had learned all they knew about war in their African homelands. This armed movement presented many of the traits associated with the so-called African slave revolts that took place in Bahia Brazil, and Cuba during the first half of the nineteenth century.² Time

¹ Manuel Barcia, *The Great African Slave Revolt of 1825: Cuba and the Fight for Freedom in Matanzas* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012), 97-112.

² For Bahia see, among others: Howard Prince, “Slave Rebellion in Bahia, 1807-1835,” Ph.D. Diss. Columbia University, 1972; João José Reis, *Rebelião escrava no Brasil: a história do levante dos Malês em 1835* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2003); and the translation of an early version into English, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil: The Muslim Uprising of 1835 in Bahia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995). For the Cuban case see: Robert L. Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood: The Conspiracy of La Escalera and the Conflict between Empires over Slavery in Cuba*

and again during their march towards Coliseo, the leaders and their soldiers were forced to make ethical decisions that defined their actions.

A few years ago, while discussing West African warfare in the context of the Yoruba civil conflicts of the early nineteenth century, historian Toyin Falola asked for a more comprehensive research agenda that would provide new ample and inclusive studies of several aspects about these wars, and that these should address, among other things, the role played by the ethics of war.³ The same problems that have affected the study of conflagrations in West Africa, have been present in the study of West African warfare in the Americas, and arguably nowhere more so than in relation to the ethics of war. Scholars of the African Diaspora have until now shown little interest in the ethical questions associated to these dozens of armed movements that took place in the first half of the nineteenth century, often considering them as nothing more than products of their exposure to new ideas and ideologies originating in Europe and the Americas.⁴ This article seeks to rectify this

(Middleton, CT.: Wesleyan University Press, 1987); Matt D. Childs, *The 1812 Aponte Rebellion and the Struggle against Atlantic Slavery* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Manuel Barcia, *Seeds of Insurrection: Domination and Resistance on Western Cuban Plantations* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008); and *The Great African Slave Revolt of 1825*; Michele Reid-Vazquez, *The Year of the Lash: Free People of Color in Cuba and the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Athens, GA.: University of Georgia Press, 2011); and Aisha K. Finch, *Rethinking Slave Rebellion in Cuba: La Escalera and the Insurgencies of 1841-1844* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

³ Toyin Falola, "A Research Agenda on the Yoruba in the Nineteenth Century," *History in Africa* 15 (1988): 215-6.

⁴ The scholarship focusing on the impact of the American, French, and Haitian revolutions, among others, upon actions of war protagonized by African slaves in the

absence of an in-depth study of West African military ethics in the Diaspora by offering a first approximation to the problem. It will do so by exploring a number of relevant particular issues which shall permit a detailed analysis of their ethics of war, as they were learned and understood according to West African traditions and practices.

Using case studies extracted from primary sources produced predominantly in Bahia, Brazil and Cuba, this article contends that West African military commanders and troops in both regions exhibited an ethical behavior associated with war, which was strongly tied to their cosmologies of the world. These cosmologies were the result of a learning process that had begun and developed – at least until they were enslaved and sent to the Americas – in their African homelands. Throughout the article, these movements are referred to not as slave revolts or rebellions, but as actions of war; indeed, West African actions of war to be more precise.⁵ As I have argued elsewhere, the testimonies of the vast majority of those interrogated by Brazilian and Cuban authorities following each of these military actions make reference to their actions as actions of war. It is as such, then, that they are studied here.⁶

Furthermore, since these actions were all staged against either slavery or enslavement, it is argued that the central ethical issue of whether it was right to take arms and kill people they considered enemies (*jus ad bellum*),

Americas during the nineteenth century is quite extensive, and new titles continue to appear every years discussing new aspects of it.

⁵ Barcia, *West African Warfare in Bahia and Cuba Soldier Slaves in the Atlantic World, 1807-1844* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 97-105.

⁶ Ibid.

was decided from the moment the protagonists' and participants' plans took shape. Further ethical issues that could and would arise once each of these armed movements was underway, which were more ambiguous, are also considered in this article.

To make war or not

Most of the existing scholarship on ethical issues relating to warfare has been built upon contemporary cases that pertain to organized, large-scale modern and contemporary warfare.⁷ These studies, which are plentiful, have made a number of important contributions to our understanding of some of the principal issues at stake, including, but not limited to the laws of war, pre-emptive and preventive warfare, humanitarian intervention, and collateral damage. Central to almost every study is the issue of *jus ad bellum*, or what it is that constitutes a just war. The focus on the just war aspect is a direct and inevitable result of what can be viewed as the western perspective adopted by the majority of these studies; a viewpoint which understands wars as observable events whose essence can be discerned only through the 'superior' and most 'civilized' eyes of the white man.⁸

⁷ For a few recent examples of this trend see: Stephen Nathanson, *Terrorism and the Ethics of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Christian Ennemark, *Armed Drones and the Ethics of War: Military Virtue in a Post-Heroic Age* (London: Routledge, 2013); A. J. Coates, *The Ethics of War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016); and David L. Perry, *Partly Cloudy: Ethics in War, Espionage, Covert Action and Interrogation* (New York and London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

⁸ Bertrand Russell, "The Ethics of War," *International Journal of Ethics* 25, no. 2 (1915): 127-42; James T. Johnson, "Natural Law as a Language for the Ethics of War," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 3, no. 2 (1975): 217-42; Gaoshan Zuo and Xi

In the words of Torkel Brekke – one of the few scholars to attempt to write a comparative ethical study of warfare in specific western and non-western societies – “the academic study of the ethics of war often takes the European just war tradition as its point of departure.”⁹ I would dare to add that these studies do so without even bothering to examine or elucidate the cultural differences between warfare in the western and non-western worlds. In the words of John K. Thornton, when it comes to the study of African warfare, “military backwardness has been assumed as a parallel to economic backwardness.”¹⁰ Unsurprisingly, the result has been the creation of an abysmal gulf between the number of studies on western and non-western warfare, which is compounded by the patronizing view eschewed by traditional military historians of societies that do not fit the western mold.

Such a biased understanding of warfare has frequently led authors to offer hypothetical lose-lose situations as examples in which their protagonists, – which are almost always white western observers facing non-white, non-western actors – are presented with moral dilemmas for which there are no viable ways out. Certainly none through which they can redeem their western humanity and superior moral standing. Confronted with the brutality and ethical dubiousness of non-white, non-western antagonists, these white

Yunpeng, “Just war and justice of war: Reflections on ethics of war,” *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 2, no. 2 (2007): 280-90; and Rosemary B. Kellison, “Character and Critique in the Ethics of War,” *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 97, no. 2 (2014): 174-85.

⁹ Torkel Brekke, “The Ethics of War and the Concept of War in India and Europe,” *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions* 52, no. 1 (2005): 60.

¹⁰ John K. Thornton, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa, 1500-1800* (London: UCL Press, 1999), 7.

western protagonists are often forced to commit a minor atrocity in the hope of avoiding a major one perpetrated by those putting them in the spot. A case in point is that used by Barry Paskins and Michael Dockrill in *The Ethics of War*, in which Jim, an English botanist (white westerner) who is doing research in a Latin-American rainforest comes across Pedro, a local captain (non-white, non-westerner) who is about to execute in cold blood twenty Indians for some random reason. In an ironic twist, which also serves to illustrate the callousness of the non-white, non-westerner Pedro, he offers Jim a choice: “you shoot one of the Indians or I shoot them all.”¹¹ Under such pressure, Jim’s humanity is put to the test by Pedro’s unmitigated lack of benevolence and mercy for either him or the twenty Indians he was about to execute.

Such one-dimensional conceptualizations of warfare based on western understanding, and the use of western terms that do not apply to non-western societies, are therefore problems which are additionally loaded with nostalgic pseudo-colonial or imperial elements that presuppose, although this is never explicitly stated as far as I know, that white westerners are less violent and more morally responsible and humane than those from other backgrounds. This presupposition, as should be expected, is particularly amplified when the subjects of study are Africans, regardless of whether their actions of war are undertaken in Africa or in the Diaspora.

Interesting as they are, lose-lose impossible predicaments such as the one faced by Jim the botanist, an American president about to allow a drone attack in the Middle East in the hope of killing a well-known terrorist while

¹¹ Barry Paskins and Michael Dockrill, *The Ethics of War* (London: Duckworth, 1979), 152.

causing the collateral deaths of innocent women and children, or the WWII Allied generals being forced to send their men to a certain death during the D-Day invasion in Normandy in the hope of defeating Nazi Germany, do not contribute much to theoretical or methodological models applied to the examination of West African warfare in the Diaspora in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Widely differing parameters and conceptions of warfare come into play, chief among them is the previously mentioned concept of *jus ad bellum*, whose usefulness is negligible if we depart from the basic fact that all West African military actions in Bahia and Cuba between 1807 and 1844 were first and foremost directed against enslavement as a social condition or against slavery as a socio-economic system. In both cases, the rightfulness of the struggle of West African men and women is hardly questionable, since their fight for freedom basically renders the need for a *jus ad bellum* justification, or even discussion, meaningless.

Does that mean that we cannot talk of a West African ethics of war in the Diaspora? In reality, as suggested above, many issues central to the study of war ethics are irrelevant when considered in the specific military instances that are discussed in the following paragraphs. For example, matters concerning the state's duty to protect its citizens are rendered null, as these West African men, women and children had no state that could protect them.¹² Equally, another essential element in discussions about the ethics of

¹² The role of the state has been discussed at length in plenty of studies. See, for example, Brian Orend, "Michael Walzer on Resorting to Force," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 33, no. 3 (2000): 523-47; and Andrew Fiala, "Practical Pacifism, Jus

war during the past few decades, that of pacifism, should not be retrospectively applied to nineteenth-century actions of war, since the term was first adopted in 1901 during the 10th Universal Peace Congress celebrated in Glasgow, Scotland, and thus its use would be strictly anachronistic.¹³

Every known war action undertaken by West African men, women, and children in Bahia and Cuba throughout the first half of the nineteenth century was also a self-defense action and a form of resistance against oppression. Thus, each of these actions was essentially *just* by any and all measures. Consequently, in this article, instead of following existing models resulting from studies of western warfare, often associated with religion, and mostly concerned with determining when waging war is just and when is not, I concentrate on the ethical details of planned or spontaneous actions that are by definition just. I do so by presenting case studies extracted from primary sources while exploring a number of conceptual and epistemological matters related to these actions.

Ethical issues once war is underway

Some issues are universal to any armed conflagration and as such, are worth examining, with the intention of drawing fresh conclusions not centered on the *just war* principle, and instead tailor-made for each circumstance and built

in bello, and citizen responsibility: The case of Iraq," *Ethical Perspectives* 13, no. 4 (2006): 673-97.

¹³ It should be pointed out, however, that even pacifists have backed up military actions when these have been justified. *Proceedings of the Tenth Universal Peace Congress: Held in the St. Andrew's Hall, Glasgow, from 10th to 13th September, 1901* (Bern: International Peace Bureau, 1902).

while keeping into consideration cultural differences and specificities. Some of them have been hardly ever been discussed, as their precise characteristics either do not match or do not apply traditional western warfare.

Ethics of killing non-combatant enemies

In spite of what documents produced by colonial and imperial authorities say, Africans in the diaspora often wanted more than simply to kill their masters or all whites. Authorities and planters who recorded news of these so-called revolts and rebellions started a pseudo-tradition of what we can only refer to as an oversimplification of the ideas and actions of those Africans who had decided to take arms. More problematic, and until very recently, generation upon generation of historians willingly reproduced this narrowed and westernized version of history, solidifying myths created precisely by those who enslaved, exploited, and violently repressed those same Africans.¹⁴

In reality, and for most of the period studied here, West African men and women in the Diaspora had diverse and often intricate reasons to go to war. When scrutinized, historical sources tell a very different story to that presented to us until very recently. Theirs was a history of conflict and violence, but also one of simple human aspirations and a strong desire for freedom.

It is true that 'killing all the whites' was often given as a reason by captured rebels and by key witnesses. In the Cuban case alone, there were such claims made during a number of recorded instances of armed struggle. For example, in 1806, a Creole slave named Francisco Fuertes had been

¹⁴ There have been a number of exceptions to this rule. See for example the authors cited in footnote no. 2.

recruiting men for the movement he hoped to lead in the neighborhood of Guara, south of Havana, by assuring them that slaves from the surrounding estates were ready to take arms in order to kill all of the whites, including their children.¹⁵ Similar accusations were made against the leader of the 1825 movement in Guamacaro, Lorenzo Lucumí, who was said to have visited several plantations promising people that with the war all would be lost, and that they would make sure to kill all the whites in the process.¹⁶ Even before these two instances took place, in 1798, the leaders of an aborted plot in the southern town of Trinidad, were said to want to kill all the whites, and run away to Jamaica, where they hoped to join the maroon communities there.¹⁷

From these testimonies, we can also infer that even when the extermination of the white population may have been a constant in the minds of the slaves, some ethical and moral conundrums may have existed as well. In the vast majority of cases recorded, killing innocent women and children constituted an issue that the rebels dealt with once their military operations were underway. The alleged willingness of Francisco Fuertes to kill all the white children he would encounter was echoed in more than one opportunity in the decades to come. In 1825, Lorenzo Lucumí, who had gone around promising his fellow Africans that they would be allowed to kill all the whites, was forced to make a stand against one of his subordinates at the beginning

¹⁵ Gloria García, *Conspiraciones y revueltas: la actividad política de los negros en Cuba (1790–1845)* (Santiago de Cuba: Oriente, 2003), 38-9; Ada Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 218-20; and Barcia, *The Great African Slave Rebellion of 1825*, 61-2.

¹⁶ Barcia, *The Great African Slave Revolt of 1825*, 129-31.

¹⁷ Luis Alexandro de Bassecourt to the Count of Santa Clara, Trinidad, 3 August 1798. Archivo General de Indias: Estado, 1/80.

of the Guamacaro military uprising.¹⁸ On this occasion, Lorenzo had to stop Antonio Carabalí from executing the youngest son of British planter Joshua Armitage, after every other member of the family, including two other children, had been killed in cold blood moments before. To Lorenzo, and some domestic female slaves who also protected the toddler, taking the life of this child was simply unacceptable, as, in his own words, “he knew nothing,” of the suffering his elders had inflicted upon the Africans.¹⁹ On this occasion, as in other cases, internal disagreement among those who had taken arms and put their lives at risk to fight against enslavement or slavery, turned into a contentious, potentially challenging issue. The discrepancies between Lorenzo Lucumí and Antonio Carabalí were hardly unique or rare, as they appeared in one way or another in virtually every other West African armed movement during the period.²⁰

White women, for example, were variously perceived either as innocent bystanders or as pernicious antagonists. In many cases, their lives were taken without warning, while in many others they escaped unharmed even after being surrounded or captured by West African troops. Additionally, in a number of cases they were also considered to be valuable trophies to the rebels-to-be, who determined that once the war was over, their lives should be spared so that they could marry them, even if against their wishes. It could

¹⁸ Barcia, *The Great African Slave Revolt of 1825*, 105.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ For example, in Cuba, there were disagreements between the leaders of the 1833 and 1843 military forces in Banes and La Guanábana, and in Bahia similar instances were recorded in some of the major movements occurred in the period, including those of 1814 in Iguape, and those of 1830 and 1835 in Salvador.

be argued that these propositions may have constituted a central ethical dilemma to some, although the women of the defeated have also been enslaved and married across various West African regions for centuries.²¹

Intriguingly enough, some records seem to suggest that to those leading West African forces in Bahia and Cuba, not all white men were considered to be equals. At least on one occasion, a West African group of men suggested sparing the lives of poor Canary Islands migrants (*isleños*) so that they could be used as laborers, while on another, British engineers were supposed to be kept alive so that they could keep the mills and railways working.²² In these instances, West Africans do not seem to have had any ethical issues while discussing the virtual enslavement of white men who, in every way, they associated with those they hoped to defeat, but who they also saw, to an extent, as independent players in their own right. This independence was to them nothing short of a sort of currency, which would

²¹ On keeping white women alive so they could be married to victorious African soldiers see Barcia, *The Great African Slave Revolt of 1825*, 207. See also Robin Law, "An Alternative Text of King Agaja of Dahomey's Letter to King George I of England, 1726," *History in Africa* 29 (2002): 268; Robin Law, ed., *Dahomey and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade: British Vice-Consul to the Kingdom of Dahomey, West Africa, 1851-1852* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 217. In both cases, King Agaja in 1726 and King Gezo in 1851, mentioned cases in which the women of the defeated were married by the victors. Olatunji Ojo has also discussed the fate of the Yoruba women captured in war, although for a later period. See Ojo, "Slavery, Marriage, and Gender Relations in Eastern Yorubaland, 1875-1920," in Judith A. Byfield, LaRay Denzer, and Anthea Morrison, eds., *Gendering the African Diaspora: Women, Culture, and Historical Change in the Caribbean and Nigerian Hinterland* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 144-77.

²² See, among others, the depositions of Melitón and José Gangá. Gibacoa, May 1844. Archivo Histórico de la Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad de la Habana, Fondo General, 117/1.

have been enough to allow them to stay alive, but not enough to see them retain their freedom.

Indeed, in the frenzy of these actions of war, even other Africans could be targeted. It is well known that both in Bahia and Cuba, Creole slaves hardly ever joined West Africans in their military endeavors, often because they were not allowed to do so.²³ More to the point, they were often considered to be the collaborators of their masters and authorities, and as such, there were very few ethical reasons not to target them once military actions got underway. A similar situation was that of Bantu Africans, who were also considered to be pliant to the white man, and therefore untrustworthy. Their participation in West African armed uprisings in both regions was almost as limited as that of the Creoles.²⁴ It should be pointed out that, as a significant number of West African combatants in Bahia and Cuba during this period were Muslim, they may have found a justification for violent actions in the teachings of some Islamic thinkers, who over time had stated that Muslims had the obligation of fighting slavery and attaining freedom.²⁵ As a matter of fact, one of the main reasons behind the *jihād* started in 1804 by Uthman dan

²³ Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil*, 141-6; Barcia, *West African Warfare in Bahia and Cuba*, 132-4.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ See, for example, Paul Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 30-2, 70-3; and Timothy Cleveland, "Ahmad Baba al-Timbukti and his Islamic critique of racial slavery in the Maghrib," *Journal of North African Studies* 20, no. 1 (2015): 42-64.

Fodio, founder of the Sokoto Caliphate, was precisely the need the fight against the enslavement of Muslims by non-believers.²⁶

Uncontrolled violence, fuelled sometimes by the exaggerated consumption of spirits and liquors, turned some of these movements into frenetic events where most of those who antagonized the rebels were targeted and executed, without much ethical or moral consideration regardless of their skin color or status. The issue of alcohol consumption is one that should not be taken lightly, as its occurrence often led to clouded judgments on the part of West African combatants, particularly when challenging ethical problems were presented to them. In some of those cases where white women and children were targeted, those who attacked them and slaughtered them were clearly intoxicated.²⁷

The execution and planned-subjugation of non-combatant enemies and bystanders was, then, a common feature to many of the West African armed movements discussed in these pages. Every case, however, was unique and particular to the extent to which the leaders were able to exercise their authority. In cases like the ones mentioned above leadership could make all the difference. Thus, when in 1825 Lorenzo Lucumí averted the execution of a toddler, or when in 1826 Zeferina Nagô ordered an all-out attack on the forces which had surrounded the Urubu quilombo, they both determined who lived

²⁶ Paul Lovejoy, "Slavery, the Bilād al Sūdān, and the Frontiers of the African Diaspora," in Paul Lovejoy, ed., *Slavery on the Frontiers of Islam* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2004), 15.

²⁷ A case in question is that of 1825 with which this article begins, where a number of West African men stole several bottles of port wine and muscatel from the stores of the plantations they attacked, which they then proceeded to consume. Barcia, *The Great African Slave Revolt of 1825*, 112.

and who died, and more importantly what actions were correct and honorable, and what actions were not.²⁸

The Ethics of loyalty, trust, and honor

Ethical decisions once on the battlefield often fell to men and women such as Lorenzo Lucumí and Zeferina Nagô, who were in command of military forces. Subsequently, the leadership qualities of these men and women became vital to each and every one of these West African armed movements. Battle experience, outlook of the world, and capacity to command obedience were among the most desired attributes that any West African military leader in Bahia or Cuba could and should have. Various reports from the period point to a transferal of military leadership directly from West Africa to the Americas.²⁹ As I have argued elsewhere, West Africans were left with the human capital that survived the Middle Passage, and thus many of those who had been military commanders in West Africa were certain to perish before reaching the other side of the Atlantic.³⁰ When confronting organized Colonial or Imperial troops these men and women were then frequently led by makeshift commanders who had little or no real experience leading troops into battle, even though a significant number of them had almost certainly been soldiers themselves.

²⁸ For Zeferina Nagô's leadership and actions see: Imperial Police Guard, Military Division, Prosecutor's report. Bahia, 17 December 1826. Arquivo Público do Estado da Bahia (hereafter): *Insurreções de Escravos*, 2845. Cf. Reis, *Rebelião escrava no Brasil*, 100-102.

²⁹ Henry B. Lovejoy, "Old Oyo Influences on the Transformation of Lucumí Identity in Colonial Cuba," Ph.D. Diss. UCLA, 2012, 197.

³⁰ Barcia, *West African Warfare in Bahia and Cuba*, 116-9.

Some, however, did make it alive and their leadership qualities shined through the armed movements they commanded on the other side of the Atlantic. Some obvious cases, like those of Lorenzo Lucumí and Zeferina Nagô, have been mentioned here already, but they were by no means the only ones. Recognizing them is sometimes an easy task, due to their behavior during military actions. A case in point is that of Fierabrás Lucumí and Luis Lucumí during the 1833 armed uprising that started at the Salvador coffee plantation southwest of Havana, in the midst of a cholera epidemic that had terrorized the entire Cuban population.³¹

Beyond the apparent fact that they led a small army formed mostly of Lucumí former soldiers, their organizational skills and their readiness to take advantage of a moment of weakness of their enemies were traits associated with good leaders. Once on the battlefield, they led by example. They were reported to shout orders and to carry parasols with them, a clear symbol of royalty in the Yoruba-speaking states at the time, and that could indicate not only the presence of military commanders but also of royal blood among them.³² A respected leader was more likely to be obeyed without hesitation, and as such, his or her decision-making often defined the ethical behavior of their forces during military operations. For example who was to live and who was to die, frequently came down to what these military leaders thought was the right thing to do.

Experience and recruitment strategies

³¹ Ibid., 117; Lovejoy, "Old Oyo Influences," 197.

³² Lovejoy, "Old Oyo Influences," 197-8.

Fierabrás Lucumí and Luis Lucumí were deeply respected and their orders obeyed, even when they entailed mistreating or killing innocent bystanders, a circumstance that suggests that they had previous experience of commanding other men into battle. The issue of experience is one intrinsically related to that of the ethics of war, and that has not been given its rightful place so far in many studies of African Diaspora warfare. Experience on the West African battlefields would have been crucial when taking arms in the Americas. Many men and women taken to Bahia and Cuba during the period examined here had been enslaved after being seized in battle. For example, most of the men interviewed by the French Consul in Bahia, Francis de Castelnau, in 1848 confessed to have been soldiers who had participated in numerous campaigns before being captured and sent to the Bights to be sold as slaves to European slave traders.³³ Among them were three Hausa men named Mahammah, Braz, and Boué, and also a Borno named Karo, all of which gave meticulous, and often gruesome, descriptions of their enslavement as a result of their participation in military campaigns in their West African homelands.³⁴ Equally, some of those interviewed by the German missionary Sigismund Koelle in Sierra Leone in the late 1840s and early 1850s also gave him clear indications of their past as soldiers and prisoners of war, before being sent into the transatlantic slave trade.³⁵

³³ Francis de Castelnau, *Renseignements sur l'Afrique centrale et sur une nation d'hommes à queue qui s'y trouveraient* (Paris: Chez P. Bertrand, 1851), 10-25.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ See for example, the case of Wuene, a Bariba also known as William Cole in Freetown, who had been a soldier in the Bussa army that participated in the disastrous battle of Ilorin in 1835, where he was captured and enslaved. P. E. H.

In Bahia, as in Cuba, veterans from West African military conflicts were often the leaders of the so-called slave rebellions that shook both areas during the first half of the nineteenth century. There are plenty of examples that demonstrate this past experience, some of them quite comprehensive. The vast majority of them were carried out in the style of West African military raids: fast paced, violent actions that destroyed slave-system infrastructure and took the lives of almost all white persons they found in their path.³⁶ The military actions that took place in Iguape in 1814 and 1828, in Cotegipe in 1829, and in Salvador de Bahia in 1830 and 1835, all presented similar organization and war tactics. The weapons used by these men and women also unequivocally reflected an experience acquired and honed in West Africa. Among them were spears, and bows and arrows whose use had been already abandoned at the time by Western armies.

In Cuba, the well-documented uprisings of 1825, 1833 and 1843, among others, featured West African war veterans who were able to command troops, and lead them into battle just as they would have done in their homelands. The use of standards, flags, parasols or umbrellas, and horses, also points to the existence of some sort of military ranking system, which would probably have included some leaders with royal blood. As briefly discussed above, it is well known that in several regions of West Africa, parasols or umbrellas were a symbol reserved for those belonging to royal

Hair, "The Enslavement of Koelle's Informants," *Journal of African History* 6, no. 2 (1965): 193-203; esp. 197-8.

³⁶ For instance, Bahian authorities described the attack upon their forces by the Urubu Africans as "a furious charge." Prosecutor's Report, [Piraja], 17 December 1826. APEB: Insurreções de Escravos, 2845.

lineages. Their adoption by West African armies in Cuba during the first half of the nineteenth century may be an indication of members of West African royal families leading armed forces against plantation owners, local militias, and Spanish authorities in Cuba.³⁷ As Henry Lovejoy pointed out, the use of umbrellas and specific clothing, including women's dresses, likely suggests the existence of Ilari, or royal Oyo bodyguards, engaging in military operations on the American side of the Atlantic.³⁸ Equally, the use of horses in various armed movements in both Bahia and Cuba, may denote the existence of ethical codes associated with leadership qualities acquired in West Africa, since, according to Richard Reid, "Cavalry also implied social stratification, as the horsed warrior represented an investment in terms of training as well as financial resources, giving rise to a more professional ethic and in turn to codes of honour and nobility which became an integral part of horsemanship."³⁹

In one case, led by a number of Gangá slaves in 1827, the only surviving African confessed that he and his companions had followed Tomás into battle, because he had been their captain since they were in Africa.⁴⁰ In other cases of armed struggle instigated by recently arrived Lucumí *bozales*, such as those recorded in 1836 in the San Pablo plantation and in 1837 in La Sonora sugar estate, those who participated were said to have obediently

³⁷ Lovejoy, "Old Oyo Influences," 197.

³⁸ Lovejoy "Old Oyo Influences," 197.

³⁹ Richard Reid, *Warfare in African History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 58.

⁴⁰ Deposition of Rafael Gangá. Catalina de Güines, September 1827. Archivo Nacional de Cuba (hereafter ANC): Miscelánea de Expedientes, 1069/B.

followed the orders shouted by their respective leaders, to whom they were likely bound by obedience and with whom they had probably shared the experience of war in West Africa in the same military units.⁴¹

All in all, experience, combined with leadership, contributed to a deeper knowledge of what sort of ethical challenges any battle could present. It could be argued that the more experience commanders and soldiers had, the more likely they were to be prepared to make right decisions, although it could also be argued that they may not have always been the most ethical ones.

Another fundamental element associated with ethical decision-making once military actions were underway was the method or methods of recruitment deployed by those in command of armed troops. As had been the case in many West African societies at the time, recruitment was not always optional. West African military commanders in Bahia and Cuba were keen to enforce recruitment methods that left little leeway for discrepancy. In some cases, those who declined to join their armed forces were beaten, dragged around, or simply left in chains while the rest of their companions were freed.

In various recorded cases, the slave uprisings' military leaders threatened death to any slaves who refused to join them. It happened in June 1825 in Guamacaro and again in March 1843 in Bemba. Equally, when a West African-led armed force later that same year invaded the Ácana estate in La Guanábana, those slaves who were in shackles were given the option to

⁴¹ Depositions of Nemesio Lucumí and Federico Lucumí. Ingenio San Pablo, September 1836. ANC: Miscelánea de Expedientes, 1193/H. Deposition of Valentín Lucumí. Ingenio La Sonora, June 1837. ANC: Miscelánea de Expedientes, 1178/B.

either being released under the condition of joining the armed uprising, or to remain in chains if they so preferred.⁴²

A host of similar instances were recorded during the same period in Bahia. The military forces led by Hausa Africans in 1814 in Itapuã and in 1816 in Santo Amaro and São Francisco do Conde, threatened and killed those who declined their offer to join them in their struggle.⁴³ Something similar happened in 1828 in Iguape, where the leaders of a West African force once again threatened and wounded those who rejected their invitation to join them.⁴⁴

In these cases, as in many others, which were never documented to the same level of detail, military commanders did not vacillate in exercising their authority over other Africans, even if that meant taking their lives. From a purely ethical point of view, these may have been difficult decisions to make, but at the same time, they were necessary to assert control and to assure those who stayed alive observed the utmost obedience towards them. Ethically speaking, these excesses may have been justified, as a necessary means to reach a higher and nobler end, and as an essential punishment to those without honor or courage.⁴⁵

The Ethics of withdrawal and surrender

⁴² Deposition of Fermín Lucumí. Ingenio Alcançá, April 1843. ANC: Comisión Militar, 29/5/1.

⁴³ Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil*, 45, 50.

⁴⁴ Reis, *Rebelião escrava no Brasil*, 110-1.

⁴⁵ John Iliffe, *Honour in African History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 87, 348.

For West African commanders and soldiers in the Diaspora, the actions of withdrawal and surrender carried with them strong ethical connotations. Although there are plenty of cases of surrendering recorded, the historical record suggests that running away, or even committing suicide were more likely acceptable outcomes whenever armed movements failed. This was not a new characteristic of West African warfare in the Diaspora, but instead something that, as Thornton has discussed elsewhere, was also practiced across West Africa at the time.⁴⁶

In the Americas running away was a well known practice since the first Africans arrived in La Hispaniola in the early sixteenth century. There, they collaborated with the indigenous populations, creating the first runaway slave hideouts or palenques recorded in the New World.⁴⁷ Over the centuries, fleeing to the forest, swamp, or mountain became a logical and effective way to escape from enslavement and slavery; one that did not necessarily lead to the loss of human lives, although those who escaped broadly accepted the fact that they would almost certainly be relentlessly hunted down.⁴⁸

In the first few decades of the nineteenth century, both Bahia and Cuba saw a persistent flow of runaway Africans fleeing away from oppression in cities and plantations. Numerous quilombos in Bahia and palenques in Cuba

⁴⁶ Thornton, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa*, 81.

⁴⁷ Ralph H. Vigil, "Negro Slaves and Rebels in the Spanish Possessions, 1503-1558," *The Historian* 33, no. 4 (1971): 637-55; and Ida Altman, "The Revolt of Enriquillo and the Historiography of Early Spanish America," *The Americas* 63, no. 4 (2007): 587-614.

⁴⁸ See, for example, the essays published in Richard Price, ed., *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).

hosted genuine West African communities in the Diaspora.⁴⁹ In these communities, Nagô and Lucumí escapees were occasionally the leaders. As a matter of fact, even in Sierra Leone, Yoruba-speaking men and women considered escaping from the British colonial authorities as the only way to secure their freedom during the so-called Aku revolt of 1831.⁵⁰

Fleeing to the bush or to the mountains was an action with very few ethical drawbacks, especially for those who had just been defeated in battle. In truth, the options left to them were limited to fleeing, surrendering or committing suicide, and it seems reasonable that the former was the simplest and most logical one to follow. As stated above, cases of fleeing after defeat in battle abound both in Bahia and Cuba during the period. In some occasions, those who escaped joined existing communities of runaway slaves and continued to be a thorn in the side of local authorities for years to come. For example, José Ramón Mandinga, one of the most prominent participants in the armed movement of Guamacaro in 1825, managed to avoid capture for almost three years. During that time, he joined forces with other runaway slaves in the foothills of Sabanazo, and acquired an almost mythical reputation among the slaves living in the region of being impossible to apprehend “due to his daftness and intelligence in the woods.”⁵¹ Upon being captured in April 1828, he was immediately executed, his body mutilated, and

⁴⁹ Flávio dos Santos Gomes, *A hidra e os pântanos: Mocambos, quilombos e comunidades de fugitivos no Brasil (séculos XVII-XIX)* (São Paulo: UNESP, 2005); and Gabino La Rosa Corzo, *Runaway Slave Settlements in Cuba: Resistance and Repression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

⁵⁰ A. B. C. Sibthorpe, *The History of Sierra Leone* (London: Frank Cass, 1970), 45-6.

⁵¹ Report of Prosecutor Francisco Seidel. Havana, 17 April 1828. ANC: CM, 2/4.

his head and right hand exposed in a public place as a deterrent to other slaves from following his example.⁵²

Surrendering, on the other hand, presented those who had taken arms with an ethical problem, since to many of them this was an action that implied a permanent loss of honor and the likelihood of heavy punishment or even execution. West African men and women were aware of the type of punishment that would await those who had actively participated in actions of war against the whites, and who had surrendered instead of running away or taking their own lives. On more than one occasion this knowledge was verbally expressed and written down during the interrogations that followed military encounters.⁵³

Surrendering, therefore, was a double-edged, heavily charged, ethical decision that seldom guaranteed the lives of those who did so, and risked tainting their honor forever. Consequently, West African men and women seem to have acquiesced to so only when other options were not available, such as, for example, when they had been injured in battle and were unable to take another course of action, or more rarely, when their military commanders ordered them to do so. Military commanders, however, frequently resorted to committing suicide as the most effective and honorable way out of defeat.

The Ethics of suicide upon defeat

⁵² Barcia, *The Great African Slave Revolt of 1825*, 210.

⁵³ There are numerous examples of this sort of testimony. See, for example, Reis *Rebelião escrava no Brasil*; Barcia, *The Great African Slave Revolt of 1825*; and Finch, *Rethinking Slave Rebellion in Cuba*.

It is well known that in some parts of West Africa at the time “it was considered honorable (and even obligatory) in some cultures, for military leaders who faced the prospect of capture or defeat in war to commit suicide.”⁵⁴ The robust and traditional relationship existing across West Africa between honor and the act of committing suicide was documented time and again during the period studied here. As Sandra Greene has explained, “military commanders faced with the prospect of being humiliated by their enemies” frequently committed suicide rather than surrender.⁵⁵ In many West African regions, taking one’s own life was not considered in itself an act of cowardice. On the contrary, to many of those defeated men and women, it was seen as an effective way to return in body and soul to their own homes. Europeans often referred to these beliefs in what they called “transmigration of the souls,” and did everything in their power to limit such beliefs during the Middle Passage and upon the arrival of West African men and women in the Americas.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Sandra E. Greene, *West African Narratives of Slavery: Text from Late Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth Century Ghana* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 40.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ William Piersen, “White Cannibals, Black Martyrs: Fear, Depression and Religious Faith as causes of Suicide among New Slaves,” *Journal of Negro History* 62, no.2 (1977): 147-59; Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 116-9; João José Reis, *Death is a Festival: Funeral Rites and Rebellion in Nineteenth-Century Brazil* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 145-6; Barcia, *Seeds of Insurrection*, 71-83

In Bahia, suicides occasionally followed West African actions of war. This was the case of the “many other rebels,” who after participating in the famous movement of 1835, known as the Malê uprising, took their own lives rather than surrender to the Bahian authorities.⁵⁷ Equally, a police report produced in the aftermath of the armed uprising of 1814 in the Recôncavo valley, suggested that upon being overpowered by Colonial troops, many appear to have committed suicide “by drowning in the river or by hanging.”⁵⁸ In what it was probably the best description of a collective act of suicide in nineteenth-century Brazil, Bahian soldiers recounted to have found the bodies of five African men “who had obviously slit each other’s throats,” after being defeated during the Urubu quilombo battle of 1826.⁵⁹

In Cuba, similar cases were recorded throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. For example, after the crushing of the 1825 Guamacaro movement, some of the leaders opted to take their own lives rather than submit to the authorities and makeshift militias that had been formed to capture them. Less than two years later, a group of Lucumí men confronted first their masters at the coffee plantation Tentativa and then a regular detachment sent from Matanzas to put their armed insurgency down. Overwhelmed by the superiority of the Colonial troops, they were soon beaten and forced to retreat. Colonel Joaquín de Miranda y Madariaga, reported that when he and his men followed the Africans into the bush, they found no less

⁵⁷ Reis, *Death is a Festival*, 184-5.

⁵⁸ Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil*, 47.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 56-7.

than eighteen of them hanging from nearby trees.⁶⁰ Another similar case took place after a group of Lucumí men and women decided to confront their overseer at the La Magdalena sugar estate in 1835. In this occasion, some of them were crystal clear while articulating their feelings on the matter, by screaming that rather than obeying this man's orders, they preferred "to die instead," as several of them eventually did.⁶¹ Collective suicides, as well as isolated ones, also followed the defeats of the armed movements of 1833 in Banes, and 1843 in Bemba and La Guanábana.⁶²

All in all, the alleged belief in an afterlife that implied a return to West Africa, where these men, women and children could be re-acquainted with their relatives, as it was put to planter José Leopoldo Yarini in 1833 by a Carabalí African, constituted an effective way out for those who had just been beaten on the battlefield.⁶³ From an ethical point of view, to them committing suicide did not exactly equate to the loss of their lives. Instead, this act provided them with an opportunity to restart their former lives surrounded by their loved ones. As discussed before, taking one's life was also an honorable

⁶⁰ Joaquín de Miranda y Madariaga to Captain General Francisco Dionisio Vives. Cafetal Reunión, 9 January 1827. ANC: Real Consulado y Junta de Fomento, 150/7436.

⁶¹ Deposition of Domingo Lucumí. Santa Ana, July 1835. ANC: Miscelánea de Expedientes, 232/Z.

⁶² See Barcia, *Seeds of Insurrection*, 71-83.

⁶³ Yarini interrogated an African who explained in detail the meaning of the items placed alongside the corpse of a deceased African. Most of the items were expected to be of some use for the journey back home and others would be needed to wake up his relatives and to keep away the dogs in case they did not recognize him. See José Leopoldo Yarini, Untitled manuscript on the 1833 cholera epidemic in his Guamacaro estate. Archivo Histórico de la Oficina del Historiador de la Habana. Unclassified.

action that, in contrast with Western ideas about death, denoted courage and bravery.⁶⁴

Conclusions

Just before Balé was forced to take his own life in the aftermath of the 1833 Lucumí armed uprising of Banes, he had to make an important ethical decision. In an action that echoed that of the five Africans who slit each others' throats in Bahia in 1826, seeing that Ochó, one of his comrades, had been fatally wounded, Balé carried him on his shoulders until Ochó begged him to kill him, rather than continuing his attempt to saving his life. Faced with such a delicate decision, Balé took a pistol and shot him dead. Without hesitation, he was reported to follow through by placing the barrel in his mouth and pulling the trigger, killing himself on the battlefield where he and his comrades had just been routed.⁶⁵ Balé's ethical predicament was perhaps facilitated by the fact that he had been one of the leaders of the movement, but also because, as his name suggested, he had likely been a military commander somewhere in the Yoruba-speaking territories before being taken to Cuba, and had an understanding of how a leader was expected to behave and act.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Iliffe, *Honor in African History*, 71-6, 87, 131.

⁶⁵ Depositions of Eguyoví (or Matthias Lucumí), and Ayaí (or Pascual Lucumí). Cafetal Salvador, August 1833. ANC: Miscelánea de Expedientes, 540/B.

⁶⁶ Balé was the title given across Yoruba-speaking territories in West Africa to town and village military chiefs. Robert S. Smith, *Kingdoms of the Yoruba* (London: Methuen & co., 1969), 109.

Decisions such as those taken by Balé, the five Africans of 1826 in Urubu, or by the eighteen Lucumís who were found hanging from trees after the armed uprising at the Tentativa coffee estate in 1827, were engrained in a long tradition of West African warfare. This warfare tradition was not without a significant quantity of ethical issues that soldiers and their leaders were forced to deal with time and again. Many of these ethical decisions involved terminating someone's life, had to be taken in haste, and for those who took them, having to live with the consequences for the rest of their lives was a real prospect. The ethical principles emanating from these West African warfare traditions were transferred to the Americas, and as it has been revealed in this article, manifested themselves in several of the actions of wars undertaken by these men, women, and children in Bahia and Cuba during the first half of the nineteenth century.

Unlike historical cases drawn from other places where military conflict arose, for West Africans in Bahia and Cuba the issue of *jus ad bellum* did not carry the ethical weight that it had in many other settings and environments. Instead, West Africans in Bahia and Cuba were confronted by ethical problems that, although not unique to their circumstances, were definitely disassociated from those stemming from the grand question of when it was justified to go to war, and when it was not. As they were not protected by any state, and their armed struggle was directed against enslavement as a social condition or against slavery as a socio-economic system, the ethical dimension behind the *jus ad bellum* was rendered valueless in each of their actions.

Instead, when studying the ethics of war of each of these movements, other aspects become essential for the understanding of their actions. The behavior of military commanders had consequences for all those who followed them. Orders given in the battlefield were usually obeyed, regardless of their ethical consequences. The right to kill innocent bystanders, including women, children, and the elderly was perhaps the major ethical question they were confronted with time and again. Whether to run away or take their own lives also became critical ethical conundrums, which were, more often than not, resolved according to West African codes of honor brought with them across the Atlantic.

Any attempt to examine the ethics of war put in practice by these West African men and women in Bahia and Cuba in the first half of the nineteenth century must disentangle itself from historiographical traditions that have privileged the study of western types of warfare. These traditions, where the *jus ad bellum* still constitutes a departing point, and where pacifism remains a central issue to consider, do not allow for a systematic and practical examination of the ethics of war of West African slaves in the Americas during the period studied here. §