


African Intellectuals and Abolitionists

Lourenço da Silva Mendonça and the Black Atlantic Abolitionist Movement in the Seventeenth Century

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In this pathbreaking study, José Lingna Nafafé challenges much of what has become accepted about African and Atlantic history. He does so with evidence accumulated during two decades of research in archives in Angola, Portugal, Brazil, Spain, Italy, and the Vatican. By deftly interpreting new and reinterpreting known sources, Nafafé makes several important contributions to the African and Atlantic historiography. First, he details the life of an influential intellectual from West Central Africa. Lourenço da Silva de Mendonça traveled throughout the Atlantic in the second half of the seventeenth century and argued a criminal and ethical case in the Vatican court accusing European nations of crimes against humanity. Second, Nafafé demonstrates that we should begin narratives about the abolition of slavery and the trade in enslaved Africans earlier than the eighteenth century and with a set of actors very different from Europeans like Granville Sharp and William Wilberforce. He does so by exploring a highly organized, international legal challenge to slavery that Mendonça spearheaded. Finally, Nafafé provides a powerful counter to scholarship that argues that slavery as an institution was endemic in Africa before the rise of the Atlantic trade in enslaved Africans. As Nafafé writes, ‘Slavery did not exist in Angola or Kongo before the arrival of the Portuguese’ (135).

Born in the kingdom of Pungo-Andongo sometime in the late 1640s, Mendonça was descended from Kongo rulers. As such, he grew up as a Catholic and spoke Portuguese. He also knew well the ravages that wars of enslavement had on his region. In Mendonça’s time, Pungo-Andongo was a vassal kingdom of Portugal. The relationship between West Central African kingdoms and Portugal was complex and centered on the trade in enslaved people. For Nafafé, that trade did not rise from a West Central African institution of slavery. Rather, as the result of Portuguese conquest and Portugal’s implementation in 1626 of the *baculamento*, a tax payment in enslaved people, Portugal introduced slavery and slave trading. In brief, the *baculamento* compelled *sobas* or local rulers to make a payment of 100 people annually. The system radically transformed regional social, political, and economic systems, turning rulers against one another.

By the 1660s, Portugal’s influence was waning, and local elites were challenging Portuguese hegemony. Fearing that they might lose their foothold in the region entirely, Portugal attacked and destroyed Pungo-Andongo and rounded up the royal family in 1671. Because of their popularity, the royals, including Mendonça, were sent to Brazil. There Mendonça observed the treatment of enslaved Africans and indigenous people and engaged with Catholic Black Brotherhoods. While the royals were in Brazil, Portuguese officials feared their presence would influence runaway enslaved people who controlled the Quilombo of Palmares. This self-governing community was dominated



by West Central Africans who embraced an ideology of liberation that was rooted in West Central African values. To remove the royals from a potentially inflammatory situation, Portuguese officials sent Mendonça and his brothers to Braga, Portugal, where Mendonça studied law and theology for three or four years. Continuing his relationship with Catholic Black Brotherhoods, he entered a confraternity in Lisbon and joined with others in voicing a desire for African freedom from slavery. Unable to get the support he wanted, he moved to Spain. Soon he was appointed as an attorney for a confraternity in Madrid and for all confraternities in Toledo. He also created a network with New Christians and Indigenous Americans across the Iberian Peninsula, each of these groups voicing demands for human rights. Here Nafafé charts new historiographical ground by showing that groups of Africans, New Christians, and Indigenous Americans, who sought an end to oppression, did not operate in isolation from one another but, rather, were in dialogue, creating a vast network that intellectuals like Mendonça tapped.

Nafafé concludes his book with an examination of the legal and ethical case that Mendonça brought to the Vatican in the 1680s. Before the Church, the skilled attorney drew on interpretations natural, divine, human, and civil law to argue that African slavery was illegal. Further, he tied African freedom to the freedom of all who were oppressed in the Atlantic world. In making his arguments, Mendonça documented injustices that had been endorsed by papal bulls and implemented by priests, merchants, and Iberian authorities. To be sure, the Vatican did not embrace Mendonça's 'case for radical abolition' (386). However, Nafafé argues, the case did influence Portuguese slavery legislation in 1684.

Nafafé's book should be required reading for anyone engaged in research or teaching about Atlantic slavery. My only quibbles are few. First, in proclaiming that slavery was not an African institution before the arrival of Europeans, Nafafé gives us only a brief look at preexisting forms of dependency and at the ways that people with power transformed local institutions to meet the demands of the *baculamento*. Second, the African section of the study focuses on West Central Africa but makes claims about other regions, including Upper Guinea, for which Nafafé provides little evidence. Finally, I would have liked more of Mendonça's words mixed in with Nafafé's interpretation of them.

But these are trivial criticisms of a wonderful book that takes readers deep into West Central African, Brazilian, Iberian, and Church history. Along the way and with incredible passion, Nafafé engages with important historiographical debates. Only rarely does Atlantic historiography reveal what Africans thought about slavery, the trade in enslaved people, and European colonialism. In this book, we get the powerful words of an elite from Pungo-Andongo and the imaginative interpretation of a scholar who traveled the Atlantic to give us a compelling history.

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