WHITE CANNIBALS, BLACK MARTYRS: FEAR, DEPRESSION, AND RELIGIOUS FAITH AS CAUSES OF SUICIDE AMONG NEW SLAVES

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African slaves composed the largest immigrant group arriving in the New World prior to the American Revolution, and the largest non-English migration to the North American Continent during the same years. These immigrants came unwillingly to American shores; and the cruel hardships they faced during their removal from Africa to a New World bondage were part of the high human price paid for the conquest of the Americas. Had these African newcomers been Christian, their's would have been a celebrated martyrdom, especially the sacrifice of those who chose death over forced submission to an alien faith and culture. But because they were only "heathen Africans," recognition of their martyrdom was withheld.

The horrors of forced migration into American slavery were increased by the miasma of misunderstanding and myth which shrouded the ultimate destiny of the slave emigrants. From the seventeenth century onward the folk beliefs of West and Central Africa from the Senegambia to the Congo explained the insatiable appetite of the Atlantic slave trade in terms of white cannibalism. African captives typically found the European world of the slavers strange and frightening. When Olaudah Equiano, an Ibo boy shipped to the New World in 1756 at the age of eleven, first boarded a slaver and saw downcast blacks chained near a copper pot in which coastal vessels kept fires burning as a prophylactic measure, he fainted in horror and anguish. Revived, he asked the local slave merchants aiding in the loading if he were not to be eaten "by these white men with horrible looks, red faces, and loose hair." Although reassured that he was not, he remained convinced along with the rest of the cargo that ultimately he would be eaten by "these ugly men."³

Many slaves believed death in Africa was preferable to the unspeakable horror that awaited across the Atlantic. Samuel Ajayi Crowther recalled a typical reaction in relating how his fear of being sold to the Portuguese drove him into shock, depression and, ultimately, thoughts of suicide.

My appetite forsook me, and in a few weeks I got the dysentery . . . . I determined with myself that I would not go on . . . ; but would make an end of myself, one way or

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another. In several nights I attempted strangling myself with my band; but had not courage enough to close the noose tight . . . . I determined next, that I would leap out of the canoe into the river, when we should cross it. 

The notion of white cannibalism was especially strong in the African interior, for as John Barnes, a former governor of Senegal, explained in 1789 “slaves near the coast . . . know what to expect, but those from the interior are terrified by not knowing the purpose [of the trade].” Thus, as Francis Moore noted in the eighteenth century, the Fulbe of Bondu in the Senegambia region “imagined that all who were sold for slaves were generally eaten or murdered, since none ever returned.” Mungo Park left an excellent description of such fears at work among slaves about to be taken down the Gambia in a slave coffle from Kaarta and Wassela.

They were all very inquisitive, but they viewed me at first with looks of horror, and repeatedly asked if my countrymen were cannibals. They were very desirous to know what became of the slaves after they had crossed the salt water. I told them that they were employed in cultivating the land, but they would not believe me; and one of them, putting his hand upon the ground, said, with great simplicity, ‘Have you really got such ground as this to set your feet upon?’ A deeply rooted idea that the whites purchase Negroes for the purpose of devouring them, or of selling them to others, that they may be devoured hereafter, naturally makes the slaves contemplate a journey towards the coast with great terror.

So strong was the misapprehension of white cannibalism that in the nineteenth century Richard Burton discovered that even the European custom of kissing was attributed in Dahomey to cannibalistic propensities.

Such rumors of cannibalism doubtless had antecedents in traditional African tribal animosities that placed the imputation of cannibalism on distrusted foreign peoples. In the West Indies new slaves continued to accuse other African ethnic groups of eating human flesh. For example, an Ibo slave related that he was told by an old woman captured in war by the Coromantees that they were cannibals; others said that the Angolas, and Mocoes [Ibibios] were man eating nations. On the African coast such traditional rumors could have transferred easily to the Europeans who were strange in appearance and behavior, and voracious in their appetite for black slaves. Moreover, it is quite possible that the confused rumors of Carib Indian cannibalism which were so prominent in Europe were also carried to the African coast, perhaps as sailors’ tales designed to frighten black emigrants destined for the Americas. An additional hypothesis about the continuing strength of such rumors was indirectly offered by John Fountain who, after spending the year 1788 on the Cape Coast, warned that inland slaves should be kept separate from the locals who might excite them to run away. Presumably the locals would incite slaves recently purchased by the Europeans to run away in order to recapture them and resell them to new buyers—and what better inducement would be needed than the myth of white cannibalism? Such terrifying rumors may also have been used by slave merchants to placate new slaves by pointing out that their present situation was not so bad when compared to the fate they could suffer
under foreign masters. Joseph Wright, a Yoruba of the Egba Alake, was apparently told that the Portuguese were cannibals after his arrival in nineteenth-century Lagos; but once sold to the Portuguese and placed aboard ship he was informed by his new masters (who had just spotted an English man-of-war protecting the coast from illicit slaving) that it was the English who were in reality cannibals, and, thus, that capture by the English meant a fate worse than death. And so it seemed to Samuel Ajayi Crowther after the English took him from a Brazilian slaver on the African coast. In his new situation he and his companions mistook some hanging pork and nearby cannon shot to be the remaining flesh and heads of fellow shipmates taken earlier from the slaver by the English. Only a close inspection of the items relieved them of their horrible fears.

Wise slaving captains undertook to dispel these rumors by mild treatment and the explanations of an interpreter; otherwise the growing terror among the new slaves would lead to suicide or rebellion. But fears of cannibalism were not easily assuaged. Thomas King, who sailed nine times to Africa during the late eighteenth century, reported that the slaves were quite often a good while on board before becoming reconciled to the idea that they had truly been purchased as labor rather than as food. On Olaudah Equiano’s ship such fears remained until after arrival in the West Indies.

There was much dread and trembling among us, and nothing but bitter cries to be heard all night from these apprehensions, insomuch that at last the white people got some old slaves from the land to pacify us. They told us we were not to be eaten but to work, and were soon to go on land where we should see many of our country people. This report eased us much.

Unfortunately sometimes an old hand among the interpreters thought to have some fun at the expense of the greenhorns from Africa. In 1737 the Prince of Orange docked at St. Christopher where a local slave boarded the ship and jokingly told the arriving Africans that they would have their eyes put out and then be eaten. Over a hundred of the men jumped overboard resolved to end their lives; and although most were recovered, thirty-three were lost. The famous Amistad rebellion of 1839 off Cuba was also instigated after the ship’s captives were informed by the captain’s slave (who surely knew better) that they were to be eaten by the whites. The slaves murdered part of the crew and attempted to force the remaining sailors to return them to Africa.

“Scramble” sales of new slaves aboard ship were banned in Jamaica in 1784 because of bad experiences with new slaves jumping overboard or running away; for, as Bryan Edwards reported, “it frequently happened... that such crowds of people went on board, and began so disgraceful a scramble as to terrify the poor ignorant Africans with a notion that they were seized on by a herd of cannibals, and speedily to be devoured.”

Other Africans arriving in America observed what they considered horrifying confirmation that their new masters had, indeed, a fiendish taste for human blood. When new slaves in Louisiana and Saint-Domingue first saw their masters drinking red wines, some were certain it was blood, leading them in desperation to run
away or commit suicide. In Middleboro, Massachusetts a new slave surprised his master by running away after simply seeing a roaring oven, only later when he had learned enough English could he explain that he had expected he was to be roasted and eaten.

For each slave who ended his life for fear of ending up part of the meal of some white barbarian, many others committed suicide under a depressed mental state brought on by a sense of loss and separation exacerbated by the hopelessness of what seemed an increasingly harsh regime of bondage. Once aboard ship slaves often lost their appetites to strange food, close confinement, and seasickness; even more were unable to eat because of the emotional trauma brought on by their new situation. Disassociation and depression commonly led a few slaves each voyage to refuse all food and water, bringing on weakness and death in a matter of days unless they could be forced to take nourishment. The despondent state of the new slaves also left them extremely vulnerable to the unavoidable illnesses that thrived in the close confinement and unsanitary conditions of the slavers and in the new environments of the Americas. Some slaves welcomed these illnesses, refusing medicines and hoping for a swift death. Illness, in turn, compounded the original depressions leading to more suicides; as the journal of the slaver Mary recorded on 6 June 1796: “This morning one meagre man slave . . . jumped over board. Several rope was [sic] hove him but he endeavored to drown himself having been delirious sometime.”

Healthy slaves also tried to leap from the ships, some far at sea, but many more while the ships were still on the African coast. As Thomas Phillips, captain of the slaver Hannibal, explained:

The negroes are so wilful and loth to leave their own country, that they have often leap’d out of the canoes, boat and ship, into the sea, and kept under water til they were drowned . . . ; they have a more dreadful apprehension of Barbados than we can have of hell . . . . We had about 12 negroes did wilfully drown themselves, and others starved themselves to death.

Along the coast new slaves who leaped overboard were often trying to escape to shore, but many, like those who jumped far at sea, clearly felt a quick death, even by sharks, was better than dying slowly day by day.

The state of mind of the new slaves was recorded by white observers who noted the blues-like songs of sorrow which the captive Africans released into the freedom of the sea breezes from their oppressive confinement below deck. When ordered to sing at mid-day as part of an antidote (along with forced exercise and feeding) to melancholic depression, the slaves opened their hearts with tunes lamenting their hunger, illness, and fears; and always they sang mournfully of the memory of their lost homeland, friends, and family.

Those less prone to depression sometimes attempted suicidally desperate escapes and uprisings whose purpose was, literally, liberty or death. The thinking of many such rebels is illustrated in the report of Henry H. Dalrymple before the British House of Commons that after a rebellion aboard a slave ship out of the
Gambia was thwarted in 1779, the slaves continually begged to be permitted to throw themselves overboard.  

New slaves who were shipped with countrymen or friends probably survived the horrors of the middle passage and the New World seasoning better than those who faced these trials alone. Young Africans also recovered from their depression faster and adjusted to New World slavery better than did adults who seem to have had a higher suicide rate. Likewise, females may have withstood the Atlantic crossing and New World bondage slightly better than males.

Although suicide is a cardinal sin in Christian theology, for most African immigrants suicide was basically a personal concern. Moreover, in certain instances West Africans considered suicide an admirable act—as, for example, the suicide of prisoners of war. For those who willingly ended their lives to escape American slavery, suicide was a reaffirmation of faith—a form of religious martyrdom. West Africans believed, like the Quappa Ibo, “that after a given time, [the dead] must return to their own country, and remain forever free from care or pain.”

Thus, put on board slave ships many West Africans attempted suicide, as Thomas Phillips of the Hannibal explained, because “tis their belief that when they die they return to their own country and friends.” Under New World bondage Africans continued to cherish these beliefs; and, according to Zephaniah Swift, “to them the prospect of terminating life furnishes the pleasing consolation of terminating their wretchedness . . . and they fondly believe that they shall have a day of retribution in another existence in their native land.” Swift’s point was made more forcefully in May 1733 by an African woman in Salem, Massachusetts, who, after announcing she was going home to her own country, slit open her stomach. Similarly a woman captive aboard the slaver Canterbury in 1767 refused to speak to the white crew, and despite torture starved herself until her death—telling her black shipmates the night before she died that “she was going to her friends.” Lieutenant Baker Davidson informed the House of Commons during their inquiry into the slave trade that it was common for sick Negroes to say, with much pleasure, that they were going to die, and were “going home from this Buccra country.” It was generally accepted in the Afro-American subcultures that suicides would return to Africa after death, possessions and all. Fredrika Bremer reports that female slaves commonly placed their favorite headkerchiefs on the corpse of a suicide; for each assumed that “it will thus be conveyed to those who are dear to her in the mother country; and will bear a salutation from her. The corpse of a suicide slave has been covered with hundreds of such tokens.”

The first days ashore were the most dangerous for new slaves prone to take their own lives; this seems to have been especially true for those who had been leaders or of high status in Africa. African nobility took bondage in disdain, making recalcitrant servants at best. Dr. Harrison’s testimony to the House of Commons offered a typical case of a Jamaican Negro who had been a great man in his native country, and who therefore refused to work for any white man. When punishment by the overseer failed to change his resolve, his master ordered him
removed to another estate; but on the way the new slave leaped from a bridge to his death in the waters below.\textsuperscript{46} Newly arrived African leaders also led mass suicide attempts by their fellow shipmates and countrymen. J.G.F. Wurdemann and Fredrika Bremer were told of a case (or two similar cases) in Cuba where a master purchased eight newly arrived Lucomee (Yoruba) slaves from the coast. He attempted to chastise a young man among them only to discover that the young man was a Yoruba prince, and the others insisted on sharing any punishment meted out to him. Their request was refused as inimical to good order. Shortly thereafter the slaves began singing and dancing; when their master arrived to see what was happening, the eight new slaves (each with a rope around his neck) scattered looking for trees on which to hang themselves. Two succeeded.\textsuperscript{47} Rather similar circumstances probably led a group of Ibo slaves under the direction of a tribal leader, and singing tribal songs, to drown themselves in Dunbar Creek, St. Simons Island, Georgia.\textsuperscript{48}

There were numerous instances of mass suicide throughout the Americas. In Brazil slave arrivals from Gabon were reported to have committed suicide in groups of from ten to twenty.\textsuperscript{49} William Snelgrave, a slaver, reported that, at least prior to the 1720s, Coromantine Negroes in the West Indies also often hung themselves in large groups of twenty or more to protest ill-usage.\textsuperscript{50} Whether the six Negroes recently arrived in the West Indies who hung themselves together in the woods, as reported by Thomas Woolrich, were of the same tribe is unknown but likely; at any rate, the other blacks suggested their suicide was the result of a preference for death over slavery.\textsuperscript{51}

Suicide among new Negroes in the Americas was most common among those who refused to lower themselves to a slave status and those who believed death better than harsh or undeserved punishment.\textsuperscript{52} Thus, Henry Coor reported a typical case in relating that it was cruel treatment which led a party of fourteen Jamaican slaves to run into the woods and cut their throats together in the mid-eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{53}

Certain ethnic groups among the slaves may have been especially prone to self-destruction. Lord Macartney, the British Governor of Grenada, the Granadines, and Tobago in the late eighteenth century, held that there was one nation of Negroes prone to suicide in Africa which consequently affected their dispositions in the West Indies.\textsuperscript{54} And in South Carolina Henry Laurens, among others, reported that the country of origin of new slaves was immaterial except with Calabar (Ibo) slaves who were “quite out of repute from members in every cargo that have been sold with us destroying themselves.”\textsuperscript{55} Certainly, the ethnic stereotypes of the slave trade implied that the Ibo were suicide prone.\textsuperscript{56} It was also held that regional difference among the Africans accounted in part for different methods of self-destruction; Henry Coor, for example, suggested that Gold Coast Negroes when driven to despair by harsh usage always cut their throats, while those from more inland countries hung themselves.\textsuperscript{57} In Saint-Domingue the Ibo were believed apt to hang themselves.\textsuperscript{58} While in Brazil Thomas Ewbank noted that it was the men and women known as Minas (slaves shipped from the
port of Elmina) who were said to be liable to suicide by hanging. On the other hand, some Africans may have been more resistant to self-destruction because of a cultural bias against suicide.

Hanging seems to have been one of the two most common modes chosen by new slaves to end their lives. The Intendant of Cuba reported in 1847 that "for committing suicide, [the slaves] never adopt other means except hanging themselves from trees or in their huts." Besides offering a convenience of method, hanging allowed for proper preparations for the expected return to Africa. As the Intendant explained, "they put on all their clothes, put unconsumed food in their hats, and even bring to the place where they are to die the animals which belong to them, the better to return well supplied to their native land where they believe they go body and soul." Thus it becomes easy to understand the actions of Congo Pomp who fled Truro, Massachusetts, for the Cape Cod coast where, after placing at the foot of a tree a loaf of bread and a jug of water, he hanged himself from one of its limbs.

Drowning was the other most widely reported method of suicide. Death by hanging or drowning seems to have been especially connected by the slaves to their beliefs in translation back to Africa. In the minds of later generations of Afro-Americans there was a clear link between death by water and the long water passage which had brought the Africans to America. Thus a Georgia slave reported that Ibo suicides would "march right down in the river back to Africa." Esteban Montejo, an ex-slave, commented on such ideas in Cuba, explaining that black suicides did not throw themselves into rivers, instead, he contended, "they fastened a chain to their waists which was full of magic." Similarly, he believed, neither did they hang themselves—most, he said, escaped to Africa; for in Cuba, as on the Georgia Sea Islands, it was believed that many Africans escaped slavery by flying back to their homeland. As Montejo explained, "they flew through the sky and returned to their own lands. The Musundi [Sonde] Congolese were the ones that flew the most, they disappeared by means of witchcraft." These twentieth century beliefs about new slaves flying back to Africa or using magic chains seem to be the confused remnants of the original African traditions that led to suicide by hanging and drowning.

New slaves were also reported by white observers to have killed themselves by more subtle and devious means. Some Africans were believed able to bring on death simply by holding their breaths or by swallowing their tongues in a method of self-strangulation. But this seems to have been an after-the-fact rationalization for an unknown cause of death. Others were said to have surreptitiously attempted to end their lives by eating poisonous clay or by directly taking poison. It is likely that most dirt eating was the product of malnutrition as Mungo Park first suggested during his African experience on the Gambia. Nonetheless, two women in the slave coffle Park accompanied down river induced serious vomiting and weakness by eating clay at the very beginning of the trip. Since they were consequently sent back as too weak for travel, this may suggest that clay eating could also have been used to feign illness, a supposition...
which loses no strength by the prevalence of the custom under New World slavery.

The African’s belief that suicide was a feasible method of escape from bondage was greatly disturbing to masters who could catch most runaways, but were helpless to retrieve the dead. Their only recourse was to convince their African laborers that suicide was unnecessary or unthinkable. After Colonel Walrond, a seventeenth century slave owner from Barbados, lost three or four of his best slaves to suicide, he adopted a plan to prevent further losses. Walrond erected a twelve foot pole and placed upon it one of the heads of the suicides.

Having done that, [he] caused all his Negroes to come forth, and march round about his head, and bid them look on it, whether this were not the head of such an one that hang’d himself. Which they acknowledging he then told them, that they were in a main error, in thinking they went into their own countries, after they were dead; for, this man’s head was here, as they were all witnesses of; and how was it possible, the body would go without a head. Being convinc’d by this sad, yet lively spectacle, they changed their opinions; and after that, no more hanged themselves.68

Other masters who adopted similar tactics also played upon their slaves’ faith in a translation back to Africa. They hoped to discourage suicide by mutilating the corpses in order to convince their Africans that such a defaced condition would make return to the homeland undesirable or impossible. In Saint-Domingue the first Ibo slave to die in a shipment was beheaded or had his nose and eyes cut out to prevent suicides among other Ibo slaves.69 In Cuba corpses were burned and their ashes scattered to achieve the same effect among other tribal groups.70 One Barbados master was said to have foiled suicides by threatening to hang himself and thereby transmigrate, whip in hand, to Africa where he would punish his slaves ten times more severely than he had hitherto.71 While this story is probably an exaggerated anecdote, it has a kernel of truth; for from the Gold Coast to Dahomey it was believed that in the land of the dead “the earthly king is a king, the slave a slave for ever and ever.”72

Slaving captains may have started the practice of corpse mutilation to prevent suicide. Captain Thomas Phillips of the Hannibal reported that he was informed in the early 1690s that some commanders cut off the arms and legs of the most wilful slaves to terrify the rest; the slaves, he said, believed that if they lost an appendage, they could not return home again.73 Similarly, William Snelgrave explained that an African involved in the slave rising aboard the Elizabeth in 1727 was hung and then beheaded “for many of the Blacks believe, that if they are put to death and not dismembered, they shall return again to their own Country, after they are thrown overboard.”74 Whether, in fact, African peoples believed that the loss of a head or limb prevented translation is unclear. The thousands of slaves beheaded as funeral sacrifices by the nobility of West Africa in the belief that such victims would be of service in the afterlife offer little support to the idea that West Africans commonly believed mutilation of the corpse precluded its entrance into the hereafter.75 Perhaps what they feared was the separation of the members of the body, but in West Africa those who died far from home or in foreign wars were
sometimes dismembered so that a part of the body might be returned for burial in native soil.\textsuperscript{76} African emigrants may also have speculated that such mutilated suicides would be slaves to the Europeans in the next world. At any rate, Ecroide Claxton, a ship's surgeon, testified to the continuing strength of this barbaric form of suicide prevention among Atlantic slavers, relating that in 1788 Captain Forbes of the \textit{Garland} tried to prevent losses among his slaves from Bonny by heheading those who died, pointing out to his captives that those who were determined to return must do so without their heads.\textsuperscript{77}

But in the prevention of slave suicides time was the best deterrent. While suicide was frequent among new slaves recently arrived from Africa, it soon abated, in part because, as the Cuban Council noted in 1852, “their preoccupations which they brought with them from their country are already dissipating.”\textsuperscript{78} Once an African immigrant became reconciled to life in the Americas the fears and depression usually passed, and resistance to bondage took less self-destructive forms. If many, and probably most, of the African immigrants retained their belief in a final return to Africa after death, few were any longer in a great hurry to achieve that final homecoming. And once the suicides aimed at return to Africa were gone, the general suicide rate of the slaves appears to have fallen below that of the corresponding white population.\textsuperscript{79} Nonetheless, in the nineteenth century American south some masters continued to attempt to dissuade suicides among second and third generation Afro-Americans in much the same manner they always had; only now it was entrance into a Christian heaven, rather than an African hereafter, that masters tried to convince their slaves would be denied to suicides. As Charles Ball, an ex-slave, related, “all the arguments which can be derived against it are used . . . and such as take this dreadful means . . . are always branded in reputation after death, as the worst of criminals, and their bodies are not allowed the small portion of Christian rites which are awarded to the corpses of other slaves.”\textsuperscript{80}

Only a small minority of African emigrants willfully ended their lives.\textsuperscript{81} But since these suicides were part of one of the world’s largest intercontinental migrations, their numbers were probably into the hundreds of thousands over the three century span of the Atlantic slave trade. These victims chose a classic martyrdom, resisting the imposition of an unwanted bondage in an alien land while reaffirming traditional faith in the immortality of the African lineage. Their loss is as important to the study of African religious and social history as it is to the comparative history of American immigrations and Afro-American cultures.


\footnote{2In addition to the many examples cited below see Bryan Edwards, \textit{The History of the British Colonies in the West Indies}, II (London, 1801), 127n, for such beliefs held by an Ashanti; similar beliefs were held by Ali Eisami, a recaptive from Nigeria in Sierra Leone, see Philip D. Curtin, ed., \textit{Africa Remembered} (Madison, 1968), 215. For such beliefs in Angola see G. A. Cavazzi, \textit{Istorica Descrizione de' Tre Regni Congo, Matamba et Angola} (Bologna, 1687), 164; John Atkins, \textit{A Voyage to Guinea, Brazil, and the West Indies} (London, 1735), 175; and the testimony of James Frazier,
Abridgement of the Evidence Taken Before a Committee of the Whole House, . . . To Consider the Slave-Trade, II (London, 1790), 34.


Crowther is quoted in Curtin, Africa Remembered, 307-308.


Francis Moore, Travels into the Inland Parts of Africa (London, 1738), in The World Displayed or, a Curious Collection of Voyages and Travels, XVII (Dublin, 1779), 103.


This point is forcefully made by Thomas Winterbottom, An Account of the Native African in the Neighborhood of Sierra Leone, I (London, 1803), 166-167, during his discussion dispelling rumors of African cannibalism. William Snelgrave, A New Account of Guinea, 41-42, contends that the people of Ardra and Whidaw were especially frightened by what they believed to be Dahomean cannibalism; and Crow, Memoirs of the Late Captain, 200, relates that the Ibos regarded the Ibibios, whom he calls Quaws (Mocos in the West Indies), as cannibals, perhaps, in part, because they sharpened their teeth. This ornamental affectation was common in West Africa and may have originally been designed for its terrifying effect. At any rate, it surely achieved that effect with certain European observers.

Mrs. Carmichael, Domestic Manners and Social Conditions of the West Indies, I (London, 1833), 314-315, and for another example of this rumor at the Laural Hill Estate, Trinidad see Ibid., II, 171. An Ibo woman captured as an adolescent said her mother was eaten by her captors in an interior war, and testified that she was forced to eat her own mother’s heart, Ibid., I, 304. See also James M. Phillippo, Jamaica: Its Past and Present State (Philadelphia, 1843), 92, on the Angolas and Mocoes; Edwards, History of the West Indies, II, 90, also argues from American evidence that the Mocos were cannibals; and John G. Stedman, Narrative of a Five Year’s Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam in Guiana on the Wild Coast of South America From the Years 1772 to 1777, II (1796; reprint ed., Barre, Mass., 1971), 367, holds the same was true for the Gango Negroes.

Such a speculation was first suggested by William Bosman, A New Description Guinea, 489.


Testimony of John Fountain, Evidence of the House, I, 53.

The weak Niger Delta peoples were able to keep thousands of slaves in subjugation by threatening to send recalcitrant servants to the Aro Oracle who was believed to eat slaves. Actually the Aros sent such slaves into the Atlantic slave trade; and Basil Davidson, African Slave Trade, 212, speculates that the belief in the Oracle’s cannibalism may have been transferred to belief in European cannibalism by the Ibo who understood that the Oracle did not actually eat slaves.

Wright is quoted in Curtin, Africa Remembered, 331.

Crowther is quoted in Ibid., 313. Similarly, Louis M. J. O. de Grandpré, Voyage à la Cote...
Occidentale d’Afrique, fait dans les années 1786 et 1787, 1 (Paris, 1801), xi, reports that Africans seeing white sailors drinking wine and eating salt pork feared that they were watching cannibalistic rites.

17John Newton, Thoughts on the Slave Trade (London, 1788), 103. For examples of captains who tried to assuage the fears of their cargo see Crow, Memoirs of the Late Captain, 199-200; and Snelgrave, A New Account of the Slave Trade, 162-163.

18Testimony of Thomas King, Evidence of the House, I, 254.

19Equiano, Equiano’s Travels, 31.


21Edwin P. Hoyt, The Amistad Affair (New York, 1970), 37; for a similar case see Atkins, A Voyage to Guinea, 175.

22Edwards, History of the West Indies, II, 150-151. Such a scramble sale led some thirty new slaves to jump overboard in Kingston, Jamaica, according to Alexander Falconbridge, An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa (London, 1788), 34-35.


24Thomas Weston, History of the Town of Middleboro, Massachusetts (Boston, 1906), 101-102.

25This was probably not actual starvation in most cases, although the slaves’ refusal to take nourishment was doubtless a contributing factor in their demise. See the testimony in Evidence of the House, II, 567, 588, III (London, 1791), 81, 87, 116, 136-137, 158, 387, IV (London, 1791), 16, 21, 37. In December of 1807 two boatloads of new Negroes were said to have purposefully starved themselves in Charleston, South Carolina, out of fear that they were to be eaten, Charles W. Elliot, Winfield Scott (New York, 1937), 17; but such mass starvation is most unlikely.


29See, for example, the testimony of Alexander Falconbridge, Evidence of the House, II, 598; the House testimony offers many other examples.

30See Evidence of the House, II, 595; III, 370; IV, 22; and passim.

31Testimony of Ecroide Claxton, Evidence of the House, IV, 36.

32James Barbot, An Abstract of a Voyage to Congo River, in Churchill, Collection of Voyages, V, 513; Snelgrave, A New Account of Guinea, 190; and Cugoano, Thoughts and Sentiments, 10.


34See Equiano, Equiano’s Travels, 33; and testimony of Ecroide Claxton, Evidence of the House, IV, 36.

35Testimony of John Ashley Hall, Evidence of the House, II, 518; Atkins, Voyage to Guinea, 177; Henry Koster, Travels in Brazil, II (London, 1817), 252; Savanna Unit of the Georgia Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration, Drums and Shadows (Athens, Ga., 1940), 181. On suicide among older slaves see Ulrich B. Phillips, Life and Labor in the Old South (Boston, 1929), 194-195. The adjustment of the young can be seen in the opinion of Henry Laurens who held Callabar slaves in poor repute because of their tendency to commit suicide, but was willing, nonetheless, to deal in Callabars under the age of eighteen; see Letter of Henry Laurens to John and William Halliday, 14 February 1757, as quoted in Donnan, Documents Illustrative of the Slave Trade, IV, 368.


38Joseph Hawkins, A History of a Voyage to the Coast of Africa, and Travels Into the Interior of


Zephaniah Swift, Oration on Domestic Slavery (Hartford, 1791), 15; or see Griffith Hughes, The Natural History of Barbados (London, 1750), 16 n21; Charles Leslie, A New and Exact Account of Jamaica (Edinburgh, 1740), 307-310; and Evidence of the House, IV, 123, 133, 196, and passim.


Fredrika Bremer, The Homes of the New World, II (New York, 1868), 332; see a similar account from Jamaica in Leslie, A New Account of Jamaica, 326. Indeed, throughout the Americas the funeral customs of Afro-Americans were shaped by the belief that the dead would return to Africa.

See, for example, Hugh Jones, The Present State of Virginia (1724; reprint ed., New York, 1865), 38; Charles Ball, Slavery in the United States (1836; reprint ed., New York, 1969), 126; and Jose H. Rodrigues, Brazil and Africa (Berkeley, 1965), 43.

Testimony of Dr. Harrison, Evidence of the House, IV, 50; similarly see the testimony of Dr. Thomas Trotter and Sir George Young, Ibid., III, 81, 212.

J. G. F. Wurtemman, Notes on Cuba (Boston, 1844), 255-256; and Bremer, Homes of the New World, II, 338. Similarly see Stedman, Narrative of a Five Years Expedition, II, 369.

Georgia Writers Project, Drums and Shadows, 150.

Koster, Travels in Brazil, II, 255.

Snellgrave, A New Account of the Slave Trade, 173.

Testimony of Thomas Woolrich, Evidence of the House, III, 273-274.

This point was made directly by the testimony of Captain Robert Ross, Evidence of the House, IV, 65; and is made indirectly by the evidence of many of the suicides reported to the House Committee.

Testimony of Henry Coor, Evidence of the House, IV, 71.

Testimony of Lord Macartney, Evidence of the House, II, 425.

Letter of Henry Laurens to Peter Furnell, Jamaica, 6 September 1755, as quoted in Donnan, Documents Illustrative of the Slave Trade, IV, 317n. Likewise see the letter of John Gerard to William Tolloff, 1 June 1752, as quoted in Darold D. Wax, “Preferences for Slaves in Colonial America,” Journal of Negro History, LXIII (Oct., 1973), 395.

In addition to the examples above see Ulrich B. Phillips, American Negro Slavery (New York, 1918), 43; Johannes Postma, “The Origin of African Slaves: The Dutch Activities on the Guinea Coast, 1675-1795,” in Engerman and Genovese, Race and Slavery, 36; and the testimony of Matthew Terry, Evidence of the House, IV, 85. Melville J. Herskovits, The Myth of the Negro Past (Boston, 1941), 36, argues that this has continued as an Ibo cultural trait. For similar stereotyping among other groups see below.

Testimony of Henry Coor, Evidence of the House, IV, 72.


Thomas Ewbank, Life in Brazil (New York, 1856), 440-441. A propensity for suicide among “Minnals” was also reported by James Grainger, Essays in West Indian Diseases (London, 1764), as quoted in Frank W. Pitman, “Slavery in the British West India Plantations,” Journal of Negro History, XI (Oct., 1926), 631.

John Adams, Remarks on the Country Extending From Cape Palmas to the River Congo (London, 1823), 36-37, reports that among the Fantees suicide was abhorred and considered a mad act.


Alice M. Earle, Customs and Fashions in Old New England (New York, 1898), 92; similarly see Fredrika Bremer’s report, Homes of the New World, II, 332, that eleven Cuban Luccommees hung
themselves from the branches of a guasima tree, each with his breakfast bound in a girdle around his waist.

63Georgia Writers Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 185.


67Park, *Travels in the Interior*, 321; Richard R. Madden *A Twelve months Residence in the West Indies During the Transition from Slavery to Apprenticeship*, II (Philadelphia, 1835), 63; and Elsa V. Goveia, *Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands at the End of the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven, 1965), 234. Africans in the Sierra Leone area attempted to cure their children of this habit considering it a morbid appetite; but in the West Indies there were said to be people who sold cakes of clay to indulge those blacks who found the clay irresistible, Winterbottom, *An Account of the Africans*, II, 225.

68Richard Ligon, *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes 1647–1650* (1653; reprint ed., University College of the West Indies, 1951), 17. In Jamaica suicides were said to be “often hanged up” to demonstrate that the dead remained on the island, Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery*, 196.

69Moreau de St. Mery, *Description de l’Isle Saint-Domingue*, 1, 51.


75See, for example, John M’Leod, *A Voyage to Africa* (London, 1820), 57. For the general case see Davidson, *African Slave Trade*, 235-236, 244.


78Hall, *Social Control in Slave Societies*, 23 & 50. See also William Beckford, *Negroses in Jamaica* (London, 1788), 23, who claimed that suicide was most common among Ibos during seasoning. Other observers also noted that suicide among blacks was common only among new Negroses; see, for example, *Evidence of the House*, III, 273, 333; IV, 85, 156, 174, 196, 229.

79On the low rate of slave suicides in the American South see Robert W. Fogel and Stanley Engerman, *Time on the Cross* (Boston, 1974), 124; or the references cited in Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (New York, 1974), passim. Correspondingly, Edwards, *History of the West Indies*, II, 104, holds that among blacks who had resided for any length of time in the West Indies suicide was less frequent than it was among the inhabitants of Great Britain.


81Since the loss of slaves in transit was usually from about ten to twenty percent of the cargo, and most of these were probably lost through illness, the percentage of slaves lost to suicide was of necessity small. Loss of slaves in seasoning was even higher than in transit; but, again, as a percentage of the total slave population the number lost to suicide was small. On the mortality of the crossing see Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 275-282; and on seasoning see Joseph Ragatz, *The Fall of the Planter Class in the English Caribbean 1763-1853* (New York, 1963), 87.