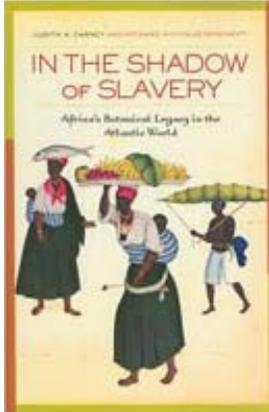




Spring 2012 Newsletter



Judith A. Carney and Richard Nicholas Rosomoff. *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World*. University of California Press, 2010. Paperback, 280 pp., 10 color illus., 10 photographs, 48 line illus. ISBN-13: 978-0-520-25750-4.

Review for African Diaspora Archaeology Network Newsletter by Megan E. Springate, University of Maryland, College Park.

Increasingly, studies of free African and slave life in the Americas have emphasized individual and collective agency in preserving and adapting aspects of African cultures in the New World. More and more of these studies are taking a global, trans-Atlantic approach in their study of culture and custom that are embodied, preserved, and changed in materials (such as clothing, ceramics, and religious/ritual objects). *In the Shadow of Slavery* falls into this latter multiscalar category, stepping back from the more traditional plantation- or regional-level look at African diaspora foodways and exploring African contributions and influences on a trans-Atlantic (and occasionally global) scale in the context of slavery and colonization. Using an extensive array of primary documents (many of which are illustrated, some in color), Carney and Rosomoff provide a powerful and important counter-narrative to dominant meta-narratives of African and slave foodways.

These dominant narratives have obscured the African origins of many globally important foods thus denying the active role of Africans and those of the African diaspora, both free and enslaved, as specialists and curators of crops. Africans instead have been portrayed as “slaves . . . little more than [the] muscles of European ingenuity” (p. 121). Instead, the authors present evidence of the active role enslaved Africans played in the introduction and establishment of African crops in the New World. Carney and Rosomoff argue for the importance of African botanical knowledge and crops in the colonization of the Americas and the slave trade. Their argument is not a new one – the authors provide documentary evidence that the African origins of these foodways and African agency in transporting and transmitting them were acknowledged

by contemporary Europeans. It was only later that the role of Africans was obscured, with Europeans instead cast as the heroes of the story. This morphing of the past(s), as described in this volume, will be of interest to researchers engaged in critical studies and epistemology.

This book focuses predominantly on African food plant domesticates, including millet, sorghum, various species of yam, black-eyed peas, and African rice. The scope of the book is not, however, limited to these food sources, as Carney and Rosomoff also discuss African domesticated animals including cattle, sheep, and Guinea fowl. Also described are African plants that served (and continue to serve) as fodder, as well as brief mention of medicinal and beverage plants. To further contextualize their multiscalar approach, the authors also provide an important discussion of Asian domesticates that were established in Africa well before the period of Columbian Exchange, and touch on the role of Amerindian domesticates and knowledge in the trans-Atlantic sphere.

The first half of *In the Shadow of Slavery* (Chapters 1 through 4) focuses on Africa, describing the domestication and adoption of Asian plants and animals in the millennia pre-dating the Columbian Expansion and the importance of Africa as a supplier of foodstuffs for the slave trade. In Chapter 1, Carney and Rosomoff describe Africa's deep history of plant and animal domestication, establishing Africa in general as a continent of self-sufficiency and food surplus. This is counter to the prevalent cultural meta-narrative of Africa which includes portraying Africa as a region of starvation and reliance on imported food. In Chapter 2, the authors challenge those Eurocentric narratives that frame the Columbian Exchange as the foremost catalyst for spreading new foods and other species, people, and ideas around the globe. They look at the significant impact of African domesticates on the global economy pre-dating the Columbian Exchange – in some cases by thousands of years. This includes the spread of African plants such as sorghum, millet, and cowpea into Asia (including India) and of Asian domesticates such as banana, plantain, and taro into Africa. These crops, significant in the economies of Asia and Africa well before the Columbian Expansion later became critical food sources during the African slave trade.

Carney and Rosomoff expand on the importance of African food crops to the slave trade in Chapters 3 and 4. These are important and dense chapters, discussing both the provisioning of slave ships for the Middle Passage and the necessary provisioning of European garrisons and commercial centers in Africa that supplied slaves and food and protected European interests in

Africa. The European traders knew very little about the crops, relying on Africans' knowledge and labor to grow and prepare the food that supported their own enslavement. The authors also examine the introduction of Amerindian domesticates including corn, peanuts, and manioc to Africa as additional food sources for the slave trade. European slavers, they argue, knew little about the crops they bought in Africa to feed themselves and their cargo on their trans-Atlantic journey, and were also dependent upon African agricultural knowledge and crops. Slave owners in the Americas were just as ignorant, and "plant introductions owed their presence in slave food fields to Africans themselves, who took the initiative in planting their dietary preferences from the leftover provisions that at times fortuitously remained from the slave voyages" (p. 66).

In the second half of the book (Chapters 5 through 10), Carney and Rosomoff describe the establishment and importance of African domesticates in the Americas. In Chapter 5, the authors compare the subsistence strategies of Maroons and enslaved peoples in the Americas and investigate the exchange of knowledge between Africans and Amerindians. The authors make an important distinction between foods such as bananas, millet, and African rice that were introduced by Europeans as commodities and foods such as yams and plantains that were grown by Africans for their own subsistence. The importance of this distinction is elaborated upon in the later chapters.

In Chapters 6 through 8, the authors explore the Africanization of plantation food systems. The New World environment, they argue, was initially as foreign to Europeans as it was to African slaves – which placed enslaved Africans at an advantage in that they knew how to raise food (plant and animal) in humid and semiarid tropical environments (p.103). Faced with their own food and financial insecurities in an unfamiliar environment, some early plantation owners provided a plot of land for slaves to grow their own food, rather than provisioning them. While this freed slaveholders from the expense and hassle of feeding their slaves, it also gave the slaves an opportunity to recreate kinship, culture, and identity in part through the use of familiar foodstuffs and culinary preparations. Slave owners were not, however, oblivious to what was growing in the garden plots: "... planters comfortably straddled two important agricultural domains: the subsistence domain of their slaves, in which they discovered many new crops, and the commercial domain of commodity production. It is perhaps not accidental that it is a plantation owner who first recognizes the value of the indigenous knowledge held by his slaves, and catapults it into the realm of commerce" (p. 143).

While much of the book focuses on domesticated plant foods, Chapter 9 discusses the important contributions of African fodder and animal domesticates in the context of both subsistence and commodity production. Finally, in the chapter, “Memory Dishes of the African Diaspora,” the authors link the African agricultural knowledge and crops discussed in previous chapters to current African-inspired dishes such as gumbo and fufu that embody the dynamic histories of the African diaspora.

This book provides an important counter-narrative to the historical accounts of American foodways that (1) obscure the African origins of many important foods, (2) position the Columbian Expansion as the first and most important example of globalization and trade, and (3) deny the active role of African slaves in curating crops and food knowledge across the Middle Passage. Contributions of this book to the study and understanding of the African diaspora include documentation of Africans as innovators and providers in a global economy (and not just as producers and product); the discussion of commodity foods versus subsistence foods and how subsistence foods became commodities; and the importance of both African and Amerindian knowledge in the success of colonial endeavors in the New World. While not all of these ideas are original to the book, Carney and Rosomoff provide a synthetic framework within which researchers can begin exploring these ideas and framing research questions at multiscale, holistic levels. Although not aimed at historical archaeologists, *In the Shadow of Slavery* contains much that archaeologists of the African diaspora, colonization, Atlantic trade, contact period, and foodways will find of use.

Return to Spring 2012 Newsletter:
<http://www.diaspora.uiuc.edu/news0312/news0312.html>