

Maroon Ethnicity and Identity in Ecuador, Colombia, and Hispaniola

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prepared for delivery at the 2000 meeting

of the

Latin American Studies Association

Hyatt Regency, Miami
March 16-18, 2000

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Maroons have long captivated historians and popular audiences alike. Their daring and initiative in the face of terrible oppression and relentless persecution command our interest and sympathy and yet only a few almost superhuman figures emerge from the historical treatment and the folk legends.¹ Most maroons remained anonymous and little specific is known about them--their names, their origins, or ethnicity. What little we can determine about the people who risked their lives for freedom is in great part shaped by which slave system they challenged and which, therefore, recorded their history. Iberian legal, religious, and social traditions recognized the humanity of all slaves, including Africans, and this ethos led bureaucrats and churchmen to create a more complete ethnographic record of the enslaved in Latin America than is found in areas where they were considered chattel. My new research focuses on maroons living in communities known as *palenques*, *cumbes*, or *manieles* in the Spanish Americas. I am drawing on the ethnographic data available in a wide variety of Spanish colonial documentary sources and reading closely for the material world described in them, as well as in the nascent archaeological record.

The long history of American marronage began in Spanish Hispaniola where by 1503 Governor Nicolás de Ovando was already complaining that escaped slaves could not be retrieved and were teaching the Taino Indians bad customs. African runaways joined in the indigenous wars of resistance begun by Enriquillo in 1519 and retreated with him to the safety of the Bahoruco mountains in the south. Spaniards were further alarmed when in 1521 Wolof slaves from the Senegambia region of Africa led a revolt on Diego Colón's sugar plantation.² Despite their fears of further disturbances the planters of Hispaniola demanded more slaves and after touring the island in 1542, Archdeacon Alonso de Castro estimated the black population at 25,000-30,000, the white population at only 1,200, and the maroon population at 2,000-3,000.³ It was a demographic moment in which a maroon victory seemed possible and a series of great maroon leaders came down from the Bahoruco mountains to wage war against the Spaniards. The most famous included Diego Guzman, Diego Ocampo, Lemba, and Juan Vaquero. They led maroon bands in attacks on Spanish haciendas and sugar ingenios and generally contained Spaniards to the capital city of Santo Domingo.⁴ One of the most feared of the maroon leaders of the 1540s was Lemba, whom the Spaniards acknowledged was extremely able and very knowledgeable in the ways of war. Lemba's guerrilla tactics included dispersing his force of approximately 140 warriors into smaller groups which harried the small rural settlements of the central valley. Lemba led many raids himself and during one attack on the sugar estates of San Juan de la Maguana he returned to the Bahoruco mountains with a supply of steel and iron and a slave blacksmith.⁵ Lemba's selections of booty are significant on several possible levels. The maroons had a practical need of the metals and the blacksmith in order to manufacture weapons with which to maintain their freedom, but it is also possible that the unnamed blacksmith held symbolic or political importance. Although Lemba's ethnicity was unspecified in the Spanish documents, his name has various cultural associations in Kongo. Lemba was a Kongo place-name, the name of a

mercantile association, a ritual association of fathers and sons, and the name of a healing or fertility cult. If Lemba was indeed of Central African origin, he, and perhaps others in his camp, would have certainly been familiar with stories of the first blacksmith kings of both Ndongo and Kongo--men esteemed for wisdom, generosity, and leadership, among other admirable qualities.⁶

As the maroons of Hispaniola were still engaged in their "wars" with the Spaniards, a shipload of "Guinea" slaves en route from Panama to Peru shipwrecked on the coast of Ecuador.⁷ Led by a black man named Anton, seventeen men and six women escaped to the dense inland forests where they allied themselves with the Pidi Indians in 1553. The men served as warriors for the Pidi but also apparently made unwelcome demands on the native population's resources and women. When six of the black men were killed in an enemy encounter the Pidi attempted to rid themselves of the others, at which time Anton retaliated "with such cruelty that he sowed terror throughout the province." Thereafter, Anton ruled unchallenged, but upon his death some years later, a civil war broke out among the black men contending for his vacant seat. After that conflict only seven black men and three black women survived.

Sometime in the following decades an African by the name of Alonso de Illescas rose to command at Esmeraldas. A native of Cabo Verde, Alonso was enslaved and taken to Seville as a youth of eighteen, by the important Sevillian merchant and slave trader, Alonso de Illescas, who had his slave baptized and presumably served as his godfather.⁸ A Mercedarian friar, Miguel de Cabello Balboa, and several companions made contact with Illescas, his Indian wife, their children and spouses, and a sizeable entourage of gold-bedecked Indians and mulattos in 1577. The multi-ethnic maroons met the priest and his companions on the beach, listened to prayers and deposited golden ornaments on the crude altar the churchmen had erected there. According to Cabello Balboa, Illescas was respected for his military and linguistic abilities but had developed a bloody reputation when he allegedly assassinated a large group of Indians who had invited him to a banquet. But fear alone could not have guaranteed his success. Illescas quickly learned the indigenous language and cemented his power through marriage and fictive kinships. He married the well-connected daughter of one important Indian chief and the couple had at least six children born at Esmeraldas; sons, Enrique, Alonso Sebastián, Baltasar Antonio, and Gerónimo, and daughters Justa and María. Alonso married off his son Enrique to the orphaned daughter of the Indian leader he had earlier killed, and his daughter María married a Portuguese named Gonçalo de Avila, who was her father's aide-de-camp and with whom she had a daughter, Magdalena.⁹ The early Esmeraldas, although ruled by Africans and their descendants, was thus a multi-racial settlement to which many cultural-linguistic groups contributed.¹⁰

Although West Africans had constituted the majority of the enslaved in the early years of Spanish American slavery, within several decades Central Africans had assumed a larger demographic profile in Hispaniola and other Spanish colonies. The Crowns of Spain and Portugal were joined from 1580-1640 and in 1595 Spain granted Portugal the *asiento* or slave contract to provision the Spanish Americas. At about the same time, Spanish officials in Hispaniola began to complain about maroon activity along the northern coast where escaped

slaves found foreign corsairs and merchants eager to trade for their cattle hides, tobacco, and other products.¹¹ Governor Diego Gómez de Sandoval was determined to eradicate both threats and mounted expeditions against the maroons and their French and English customers on the off-shore island of Tortuga. Gómez claimed most of the maroons he tracked along the northern coasts were ~~A~~ dangerous Angolans and among the maroons captured in raids on the northern settlements were Luis Angola (who fled slavery with his pregnant Biafara wife), Anton Angola, and Sebastián Angola.¹²

By mid-seventeenth century the French had not only secured their hold on Tortuga, but also on the western half of Hispaniola. French planters established what became a flourishing, if killing, sugar regime in Saint Domingue and more than half of the slaves sweating in their cane fields were Central Africans. Like their Kongo/Angola counterparts from South Carolina about whom I have written elsewhere, many of those Central Africans runaways escaped across an international border to get to nearby Spanish territory. Some of the escaping slaves claimed religious sanctuary in Santo Domingo and in 1679 the Spaniards established them in a satellite town of their own, San Lorenzo de los Negros de Mina. Although parish registers designate most of the residents of San Lorenzo as either Mina, Bran, or Arará, some Congos also lived at San Lorenzo and one, García Congo, served as Sergeant of the town's militia, along with a captain of the Bran nation and a Mina lieutenant.¹³

Few escaped slaves on Hispaniola actually availed themselves of sanctuary in San Lorenzo--most escaped slaves preferred to become maroons in the mountainous hinterlands. After more than a century and a half spent in costly and failed military expeditions against them, Spanish authorities tried a different tactic to settle the maroon problem. In 1662 Archbishop Francisco de la Cueva Maldonado was sent to peacefully "reduce" 600 maroon families still living in four separate settlements in the Bahoruco mountains where Lemba had once reigned. Although the Archbishop's mission failed, he recorded valuable information about the maroon life. The maroons subsisted on agriculture, hunting, and animal husbandry. The women also panned for gold in mountain streams which the men then exchanged in the capital of Santo Domingo for clothing, aguardiente and other desired items. The Zape, Biafara, Mandinga, Arará, and Congo nations had all established religious brotherhoods in the capital city by the seventeenth century and it is possible that the maroons' surreptitious trading contacts may have been members of their own nation. The Bahoruco maroons may have also been assisted by the villagers of San Lorenzo, for some were occasionally captured there.¹⁴ The maroons were trading for iron and steel with which to fabricate arrows points, and short, broad swords and the Archbishop commented that the men were both good archers and ironsmiths. This suggests some persistence of old-world military and metallurgical skills at least. It is more difficult to determine which, if any, of the complex religious, political, social and cultural associations with warfare, hunting, and smithing were also maintained despite stress and dislocation.¹⁵

Surface collection and shallow excavations at an early eighteenth-century maroon settlement in eastern Hispaniola, the Maniel José Leta, confirm some of Archbishop Cueva

Maldonado's observations in the Bahoruco mountain settlements. The José Leta site yielded seventeen copper bracelets, metal arrowtips, and a variety of iron objects, including tongs and a lance points. Iron slag deposits are evidence that the runaway smiths were manufacturing the objects on site. The simple bracelets of coiled metal may have only been body decoration but perhaps, as in Kongo, they also implied status or leadership functions for those who wore them.¹⁶ In nearby caves explorers have also found metal daggers, clay water jugs, and triton shell trumpets which they identify as the work of African runaways. Most of the shells have the tips cut off and are drilled to enable them to be hung on a cord. While the white shells were probably used to communicate across the mountainous terrain, their association with water and their spiraling form may have also held symbolic value for Kongos among the maroons.¹⁷ The Dominican archaeologist Manuel García Arévalo has assembled an important collection of pots made by African runaways and retrieved from water-filled caves near the Santo Domingo airport. That the pots, which were often containers for Kongo minkisi, were so carefully placed in water and hidden from view suggests they were offerings with some symbolic meaning.¹⁸

The Kongo presence in these sites is not surprising. More than a century of civil wars in Kongo sent many of the defeated into the holds of slave ships. The W.E.B. Dubois Dataset of Slaving Voyages documents that in the 1780s French slavers transported more than 116,000 slaves across the Atlantic, most of whom were destined for Saint Domingue. As John Thornton argues, at least some of them may have had military training that they could employ in their subsequent American battles.¹⁹ Spanish expeditionaries feared the influx and patrolled the countryside, taking captured slaves into Santo Domingo for interrogation. One group of thirteen men questioned in 1770 included six men who identified themselves as Congo, Congo Mondongo, or Mondongo. Bucú, who could not speak either Spanish or French and must have communicated through an African interpreter was unable to say how long he had been on the run but reported that as soon as he got off the boat he ran for the Spanish side--which seems to suggest that as their counterparts did in Florida, captives quickly learned to read the geopolitics of their day. Several other Congo men had already branded by their French owners and were able to give some information about their Christian names, those of the owners, and the names of the sugar ingenios from which they had escaped. Several reported they had been fugitives for up to four years before being captured.²⁰

Although we have seen that Spaniards occasionally captured some slave runaways, they could never totally eliminate maroon settlements. In 1785 the Spanish priest, Luis de Chavez, conducted a *visita* of Neyba, a maroon settlement composed of fifty-seven households of 133 persons. Residents said the population had once been larger but epidemics of measles and dysentery had killed many of them, including two aged males "who were much venerated." The surviving Neyba population was comprised of forty-three adult males, thirty-seven adult females (twenty of whom had been born on site) and fifty-two children. Although all ages must have been estimated, some of the oldest residents whom Chavez guessed to be about sixty-years of age were born at the site, which dates its establishment to the first decades of the eighteenth century.²¹

The escalating exploitation of African labor on the sugar plantations across the French border is

reflected in the population at Neyba. Eleven women and thirty-one men living at Neyba had once been the slaves of French masters. Some of the refugees bore French names and spoke some French and occasionally, some Spanish. Others, however, still bore African names such as Quamina, Macuba, and Musunga and were probably unacculturated *bozales* who may have re-introduced African cultural elements to the settlement.²²

The continuing predominance of Central Africans in the Spanish slave trade is demonstrated in Enriqueta Vila Vilar's study of Portuguese slaving contracts from 1596 to 163. She finds that Angolans constituted slightly over 46% of the slave imports into Cartagena and yet Spanish records on Colombian palenques show that they were as diversified ethnolinguistically as their Dominican and Ecuadorian counterparts.²³ Most of the slaves imported into Cartagena were destined for labor in nearby gold mines or haciendas, but unknown numbers escaped to the maroon settlements in the rugged interior provinces.²⁴ The most famous of these palenques was San Basilio, founded around 1526 by Domingo Bioho, who, like other of his contemporaries, claimed to have been a ruler in Africa. Calling himself King Benkos, Bioho founded an American dynasty which survived even after Cartagena's governor betrayed their peace treaty and hung Benkos in 1619. San Basilio was not "reduced" into a legitimate and law-abiding town until 1686, by which time it had been in existence for over sixty years and numbered more than 3000 inhabitants, including six hundred warriors, ruled by four war captains, each of his own "nation."²⁵

One Domingo Padilla, also known as Capitan Domingo Angola, was the acknowledged leader of the nearby and contemporary maroon settlement of Matudere. Some Spanish documents described Domingo as a criollo and state that his father, also named Domingo, was born in Angola. Even if Domingo the younger were American-born, it seems he self-identified as an Angolan. Captain Domingo's aged father, wife, and young sons lived with him at Matudere and it is possible that like King Benkos, Domingo hoped to establish a dynasty. Although Domingo bore the title of Capitan, his wife Juana called herself Virreina, and it is possible the couple's sons may have been destined to inherit leadership at the settlement. Matudere's fighting forces were led by Mina and Arará war captains with a Congo serving as standard bearer. These assignments reflected the relative demographic strength of the nations at Matudere and this practice may have also operated at San Basilio. When the Spaniards attacked Matudere in 1693, 250 persons were living there, more than 100 of whom were either African-born, or born to African parents. Among the Africans identified by nation were twenty eight Minas, nineteen Ararás, ten Congos, nine Luangos, five Angolas, three Popos, three Wolofs, two Caravalés, one Bran, one Goyo, and one Biafara.²⁶

The ethnolinguistic diversity evident at Matudere and the Spanish American maroon sites discussed earlier in this paper indicates that maroons managed political and cultural accommodations which enabled them to collaborate and survive for more than three centuries despite determined efforts to eradicate them. As David Birmingham noted, Kwanza valley war camps or *kilombos* organized themselves *by* initiation, and *not* by birth—a pattern which strengthened the power of military leaders. By the sixteenth century, according to Birmingham,

the infamous Imbangala. Almost all their individual ethnic affiliations, and many of their old customs. As they swept toward the coast perhaps the Imbangala spread this pattern along with the violence and destruction for which they were more noted.²⁷ Central Africans had already experienced and were able to adopt new cultural affiliations before they reached the Americas. Once there, Central African maroons readily adapted certain elements of Spanish political and religious institutions in their re-created communities.²⁸

Almost three centuries later, in 1953, Colombian anthropologist Aquiles Escalante found the modern residents of San Basilio living in a material culture which seems remarkably little altered from what we can see described in colonial documents of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They relied heavily on local woods, palms, and rattans for making a wide variety of necessities such as thatch roofs, matting, baskets, mortars and pestles, and musical instruments such as tall wooden drums, flutes, and rattles. Communal groups still constructed houses using the wattle and daub construction techniques noted in the colonial period, and the new homeowners paid their neighbors with gifts of rum and tobacco.²⁹

In the brief dry season the men of San Basilio, accompanied by their dogs, trapped and hunted wild pigs and birds using elaborate traps and rituals which may well have been passed down from their African ancestors. The men trailed bits of salt along the path to purify the catch and struck the nests of certain birds with palm fronds or gunshots to counter spells. Other hunting rituals incorporated elements of Catholicism such as saying three our fathers where paths diverged in the jungle. In other Afro-Caribbean sites it is still common to make offerings to the god of the crossroads, Elegua, to assure the path taken is the right, rather than the wrong one.³⁰

As earlier maroons had done, the men of San Basilio cut down the large trees and prepared the fields, while women and children performed most of the agricultural labor, with rice and yucca being the most important staple crops. The residents of San Basilio also grew corn, peanuts, ñame, plantains, a variety of bananas, melons, tobacco, and cotton. They protected these fields with a fascinating amalgam of rituals, placing a cow's head or crosses at the corners. They laid roasted toads in the nearby underbrush to poison the foxes which might eat the planted crops. Prayers to Saint Paul protected crops, animals and humans alike from worms.³¹

Escalante's rich ethnographic study of a maroon community which persisted in place over several centuries can alert us to ideas, practices, and patterns of material culture which might have been overlooked previously in the historical record. As more archaeological evidence from precolonial African sites and American maroon sites is uncovered and as new and more exact studies of the slave trade generate additional data on ethnicity we will also be able to refine our historical research. The task of tracking the African past is hugely complex, but the opportunity to exchange findings with scholars from a variety of disciplines studying such a wide range of geographic and temporal locales will greatly advance our combined efforts.

NOTES

¹. For a discussion of some of the most famous maroons such as Cudjoe, of Jamaica, Yanga, of New Spain, and Ganga-Zumba of Brazil see Richard Price, ed., Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

². Royal Cédula Replying to Governor Nicolás de Obando, March 29, 1503, Indiferente General, Archivo General de Indias, Seville (hereafter cited as AGI); Slave codes, Santo Domingo, January 6, 1522, Patronato 295, AGI.

³. Alonso de Castro to the Council of the Indies, March 26. 1542, cited in José Luis Saez, La Iglesia y el negro esclavo en Santo Domingo: Una historia de tres siglos (Santo Domingo: Patronato de la Ciudad Colonial de Santo Domingo, 1994), 273-4. Many Spaniards had departed the island seeking quicker fortunes in the fabled mines of New Spain and Peru.

⁴. The war begun by Enriquillo lasted for fourteen years and after the Taino chief finally negotiated a peace with the Spaniards, the Africans fought on. Carlos Esteban Deive, Los guerrilleros negros: esclavos fugitivos y cimarrones en Santo Domingo (Santo Domingo: Fundación Cultural Dominicana, 1989), 19-54.

⁵. Ibid., 50. David Birmingham, Central Africa to 1870: Zambezia, Zaire, and the South Atlantic (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 65; Wyatt MacGaffey, Religion and Society in Central Africa: the BaKongo of Lower Zaire (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 88, 94, 112; Thompson, Flash of the Spirit, 107.

⁶. John Thornton, African Nations in the New World Experience, paper delivered at Vanderbilt University, 1992.

⁷. Relación de Miguel Cabello Balboa, 1578, Audiencia de Quito (hereafter cited as AQ) 22/4, AGI, on microfilm at the Banco Central de Quito; P. Rafael Savoia, "El negro Alonso de Illescas y sus descendientes (entre 1553-1867)," in Actas del primer congreso de historia del negro en el Ecuador y el sur de Colombia, ed. P. Rafael Savoia (Quito: Centro Cultural Afro-ecuatoriano, 1988), pp. 29-61.

⁸. Alonso Illescas was a member of the powerful Sevillian Merchant Guild in the mid-16th century (Ruth Pike, Aristocrats and Traders: Sevillian Society in the Sixteenth Century (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 45-7.

⁹. Avila may have been on the original shipwreck as Ruth Pike documents the Illesca family's connections to both the Portuguese and the African slave trade to the Americas (Pike, Aristocrats and Traders, 45-47). The priest Cabello alleged that Illescas actually had between fourteen and fifteen other Indian wives with whom he had many more unnamed children (Cabello, Relación, cited in Savoia, "El negro Alonso de Illescas," 40-1).

¹⁰. Ibid.

¹¹. The corsairs made the off-shore island of Tortuga a stronghold. Kris E. Lane, Pillaging the Empire: Piracy in the Americas, 1500-1750 (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 97-102.

¹². Deive, Los guerrilleros negros, 64-66.

¹³. The men all served as witnesses at the marriage of free blacks, Simon and Juana on May 31,

1682, Archivo General de la Arquidiócesis de Santo Domingo, Matrimoniales, 1674-1719.

¹⁴. Jose Luis Saez, La iglesia y el negro esclavo en Santo Domingo: Una historia de tres siglos (Santo Domingo: Patronato de la Ciudad Colonial de Santo Domingo, 1994), 50-52, 304-10, 327-37.

¹⁵. Francisco de la Cueva Maldonado to the king, September 15, 1662, Santo Domingo, 54-1-9, AGI, cited in José Juan Arrom and Manuel A. García Arévalo, Cimarrón (Santo Domingo: Fundación García Arévalo, 1986), 82-4.

¹⁶. The bracelets found in Hispaniola are almost replicas of the king of Kongo's bracelets drawn by Olfert Dapper in 1668. Eugenia W. Herbert, Iron, Gender, and Power: Rituals of Transformation in African Societies (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 131-63, 188, 190.

¹⁷. Cimarron, 48-55.

¹⁸. Interview, Manuel García Arévalo, Santo Domingo, August, 1996; Leland Ferguson, Uncommon Ground: Archaeology and Early African America, 1650-1800 (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 18-32, 109-116, and "Looking for the "Afro" in Colono-Indian Pottery," in Archaeological Perspectives on Ethnicity in America, ed. Robert L. Schuyler (New York, 1980), 14-28. Also see Ferguson, "The Cross is a Magic Sign": Marks on Eighteenth-Century Bowls from South Carolina," in I, Too, Am America, ed. Theresa A. Singleton (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999), 116-31. These rather crude hand built and low-fired vessels incorporate indigenous elements such as bats in decorative patterns and are examples of a specific type of pottery designated colonoware; a pottery spatially defined by being found in areas where blacks and Indians coexisted. Scholars are now revisiting collections once identified as purely Indian in search of African production. See Matthew C. Emerson, "African Inspiration in a New World Art and Artifact: Decorated Pipes from the Chesapeake," in *ibid.*, 47-81.

¹⁹. David Geggus, "On the Eve of the Haitian Revolution: Slave Runaways in Saint Domingue in the year 1790," 6, no. 3 (December 1985), 113-; John K. Thornton, "African Soldiers in the Haitian Revolution," The Journal of Caribbean History 25, nos. 1 & 2 (1991): 58-80.

²⁰. The men who identified as Congo were Bucú, Bautista, Bautista Fransua and Agustin. Andres called himself Congo Mondongo, and Antonio identified simply as Mondongo. Interrogation by royal notary Francisco Rendon Sarmiento and Don Juan Tomati, July 2, 1770, Santo Domingo, (hereafter cited as SD) 1101, AGI.

²¹. The number of children indicates that despite having experienced epidemic stress, the population was once again growing. Luis de Chávez y Mendoza, "Lista de los negros que se contienen en el Maniel de Neyba," April 12, 1785, SD 1102, AGI.

²². *Ibid.*

²³. Enriqueta Vila Vilar, Hispano-America y el comercio de esclavos: Los Asientos portugueses (Sevilla: Escuela de Estudios Hispano-Americanos, 1977), 148-52.

²⁴. Leslie B. Rout, Jr., The African Experience in Spanish America 1502 to the Present Day (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 109-111.

²⁵. Real Cédula, July 13, 1686, Santa Fe 531, libro 11, folio 217, AGI; Anthony McFarlane,

"Cimarrones and Palenques: Runaways and Resistance in Colonial Colombia," Slavery and Abolition, 6 (1985): 134-5.

²⁶. Report of Martin de Cevallos, May 29, 1693, Santa Fe 213, AGI.

²⁷. Birmingham, Central Africa, 23-4; Joseph C. Miller, Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730-1830 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 142-3.

²⁸. McFarlane, Cimarrones and Palenques; Jane G. Landers, Black Society in Spanish Florida (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

29. Aquiles Escalante, El palenque de San Basilio: una comunidad de descendientes de negros cimarrones (Barranquilla, 1979), 26-7, 30-2, and illustrated plates in appendices.

30. Aquiles Escalante, El palenque de San Basilio: una comunidad de descendientes de negros cimarrones (Barranquilla, 1979), 26-7, 30-2; Eugenio Matibag, Afro-Cuban Religious Experience: Cultural Reflections in Narrative (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1996), 61-2.

31. *Ibid.*, 34-8.