West African Warfare in Bahia and Cuba: Soldier Slaves in the Atlantic World 1807-1844

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In the last two decades a series of publications on Africa in (Latin) America (1), the role of enslaved African soldiers in slave uprisings and the slave revolution in Haiti (2), and the independence movements of Latin America (3) have been published. Manuel Barcia, Professor of Latin American History at the University of Leeds and specialist in the history of slavery, particularly slave resistance in Cuba, continues this tradition. His book compares the agency of West Africans, particularly of Yoruba origin, as soldier slaves in the slave insurrections in Bahia and Cuba, 1807–44. Whereas the African roots of Bahian slave revolts have been studied thoroughly (4), the African roots of slave resistance in Cuba have been given less attention. Cuban Creole-led insurrections and conspiracies were described in monographs (5), but African-led rebellions or marronage were instead mentioned in books on slave uprisings in general (6) or in texts on the cimarrones. (7) Barcia underlines, with reason, the absence of comparative studies on the role of the Yoruba diaspora in slave insurrections in Brazil and Cuba, but he does not mention that there are studies which compare these two countries – but without an African focus.(8) Of course, comparing the military activities of Nagô slaves (as they were named in Brazil) and Lucumí slaves (as they were called in Cuba) enables the exploration of the consequences of historical events and developments in West Africa in two different slavery societies on the other side of the Atlantic and helps to overcome the old divisions of the area-based historiography. The idea of the particular belligerence of recent imported African slaves (9) is re-iterated here.

After an introduction into the historiography on the role of African warfare in armed slave resistance in the Americas, Barcia explains in detail the African wars of the caliphate of Sokoto (established in 1809), Dahomey, Ilorin and other neighbour states against the kingdom of Oyo which led to the massive enslavement of Yoruba people in the first decades of the 19th century. I found this chapter very useful for my own work on (post)slavery studies in the Caribbean, though a review by a specialist in African history would be required to ascertain fully its accuracy. The next chapter refers to the statistics and the human hardships of the slave trade from the interior to the coast and the Middle Passage, giving detailed information on the fate of some of the ships and their human cargo. The main source for the stories of the Middle Passage recounted here are the papers of the Mixed Commissions Courts in Havana, Rio de Janeiro and Freetown, though these have not been ignored by other historians to the degree that Barcia stresses.(10)
Barcia emphasizes that many Africans introduced as Lucumí and thus supposed to worship orishas were actually Muslims, a fact which Cuban authorities tended to ignore and to obscure by giving them Christian names (p. 67–71). The chapter ‘Between Bozal y Ladino in Bahia and Cuba’ describes the slave markets of Salvador da Bahia, Recife de Pernambuco and Havana and treats the adaptation of recently imported slaves to nature and the two slave societies in the New World, both marked by high levels of social unrest. In the following chapter Barcia explains how West African warfare functioned in slave rebellions. He points out, on the basis of interrogations of captives after the Bahian rebellions of 1807 and 1835, that the African soldiers conceived these rebellions as war against the whites, not as insurrections against a legitimate regime, which is how they were defined by colonial authorities (p. 101–2). This reconstruction of the difference between the worldview of African warriors and Western ideology as reflected in the questions of colonial functionaries and judges is an important contribution of Barcia’s book to the history of the African Atlantic. But I would have wished to read more and longer quotations of sources in which the speech of Africans is recorded. Although statements before courts were made in a highly repressive situation and the protocol of a testimony of an captive African soldier and rebel is not a verbal annotation of ‘what he really said’, the preserved discourses of Africans offer an insight of their vision of their own agency, their white owners and enemies, and the surrounding colonial society. Social historians should always try to return the voices of forgotten, marginalized people such as these slaves. Barcia follows this approach, but he quotes only parts of sentences, whilst the whole speech in which terms like ‘making war to the whites’ were used would be of interest for every historian of slavery and for Afro-descendant communities, too. But perhaps these limits were editorial decisions, rather than being made by the author himself.

The next two chapters treat the military organization, strategies and weaponry of this particular warfare. Barcia emphasizes the important role which African male leaders with military experience honoured for their bravery played in the slave wars of Bahia and Cuba (p. 118). But he also recounts the exceptional stories of female leaders as Carlota and Ferminia Lucumí in Cuba (leaders of the Triunvirato and Acana revolt in 1843 near Matanzas) and Zeferina Nagô (leader of the quilombo Urubu in the Cachoeira district) (p. 130). Through the study of Barcia we also learn more about hierarchies and differences between slaves: the organized and systematic warfare of Lucumís in Cuba (e.g. in Guamácaro 1825 and in Bemba 1843) and Haussa in Bahia (e.g. in Iguape 1828) sometimes involved death threats against those slaves who did not want to join the army. In other cases (as in 1843 in Triunvirato and Ácana) the liberated slaves had the choice to join the rebellion or to stay in the ingenio (pp. 124–5). Congo and Creole slaves were sometimes involved, but sometimes excluded, by West Africans in their wars against slave owners and state authorities. In any case neither urban nor rural slaves were a homogenous social class. Ethnic differences and the conflicts between bozal slaves (recently imported Africans), ladino slaves (who spoke Portuguese or Spanish and had adapted to the American societies) and creole slaves (Brazilian or Cuban born) impeded common military resistance (pp. 132–4). I would suggest that one should look not only at ethnicity and culture, but also at social differences: slave overseers, slaves with professional skills in a privileged position, slaves with savings who could buy their freedom in the near future, slaves with family bonds – all could have something to lose by joining the war against whites.

At the end of the book a useful overview on African-led slave rebellions in both regions is included. The maps and historical images (of African soldiers and their weapons) are also very helpful. However, the book is without a chapter on other forms of slave resistance (11) or slave struggles for their own freedom and liberation of family members (the common female form of emancipation), and thus does not direct much attention to women with the exception of the small number of female leaders in slave wars. Barcia mentions the deficit himself (pp. 130–1), but why then did he did not try to fill it? I would also suppose that women played a significant role in the transmission of African values from generation to generation, for instance in storytelling about African military heroes and explaining African religions to children and grandchildren.

Finally - is there anything else missing from Barcia´s book? Recent publications which declare that the influence of Bantu-speaking people of Central Africa in Latin America was much higher than ‘Yoruba-centric’ studies previously thought should have been discussed (12), as they contradict Barcia´s thesis of the ‘Nagoization’
and *Lucumization* (p. 17) of Bahia and Cuba in the first half of the 19th century. But this is a critique of some details, not a fundamental critique of the study. In general Barcia’s book is a very valuable study in a new research field which can be recommended sincerely to colleagues and students. I have ordered the book myself for the Leibniz University Hanover library, and I will make use of this important contribution to the history of the African Atlantic and the South Atlantic in my own classes and research.

**Notes**


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