Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World

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on the work of Douglas Riach 35 years ago, the volume expands our understanding of this complex web, especially taken alongside recent work by Nini Rodgers and Angela Murphy on Ireland and anti-slavery, with another study forthcoming from David Sim. A focus on O’Connell’s personal relationship with abolition complements this expanding palate of research.

Like a mural on the Falls Road, historical studies are necessarily selective, choosing to colour particular aspects of a subject and place them in a specific political context. Kinealy fills an important gap in our knowledge of Atlantic abolitionism after 1833, even if O’Connell’s monarchism has shadowed his record in the eyes of modern republicans. This book paints a picture of a reforming nationalist and internationalist who considered anti-slavery a core concern in his political career. Contemporaries never described O’Connell as ‘an Irish Frederick Douglass’, but Kinealy highlights some fascinating abolitionist tints to the life of ‘the Liberator’.

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The ‘traumas of empire’ – imposed by the distorting power of one people over another – is the context for James Sweet’s challenging and rewarding new book. The subject is the remarkable Domingos Álvares, African healer and diviner, authentically a man of the Atlantic world, whom Sweet follows over a span of two decades during the first half of the eighteenth century. Thrice caught in the crossfire of imperial struggles – first in West Africa as warring factions each sought to dominate Dahomey; then as Portugal extended its commercial reach through the Atlantic trade in slaves, sugar and gold; and later as the Holy Office of the Inquisition sought to impose a purity of faith on overseas colonies by extinguishing popular religious beliefs – Domingos survived by practising healing and divination. Through Domingos we discover, says Sweet, the ‘impacts of African institutions and ideas’ beyond Africa (5).

If Domingos died in Portugal a broken man, alone and banished by the Inquisition sometime after 1749, his legacy, by Sweet’s account, was vibrant, enduring and larger than just one man. Faced with the debilitating restraints of being enslaved – the long hours of back-breaking work, a strange new language, the absence of kin and being confined geographically to a master’s property – Domingos used esoteric knowledge, allegedly received from his priest-parents, not only to reconstitute his personal identity as a respected holy man, but to establish kinship and community, repeating this strategy in each new place where he was forced to live and make his way.
It is an engaging argument, but the reality seems more complex and multi-sided than is explored here. Relying on the only shreds of evidence available, Sweet argues that priests of the special category called Sakpata, priests devoted to the vodun of smallpox, were preferentially sold into slavery precisely because they were seen by Dahomeans to possess dangerous and disruptive knowledge. Domingos’s training and experience as a Sakpata priest supposedly had equipped him to challenge abuses of power in his homeland. This priestly identity becomes central in understanding the ways he responded to other imperial powers. As a slave in Pernambuco, and more emphatically in Rio de Janeiro where he bought his freedom and opened a series of healing centres, Domingos was both sought after and feared. So clear was the double-edged power of healing that local people, former clients or their kin repeatedly turned on him, suspecting him of witchcraft, and expelled him from their neighbourhoods. As much as he ever brought together a community, he could also split one apart.

When the professing of African knowledge – plants, incantations, exorcisms – was impossible or inappropriate in the places where he found himself, Domingos had an uncanny sense of local circumstances and how to adapt. So nimbly did he reinvent himself that it is tempting to see him as an outrageous charlatan, a con man. Occasionally, Sweet uses the word ‘trickster’, but he never unravels the West African meanings of trickster or seriously questions Domingos’s authenticity. Why not enlarge on the competing, oppositional qualities by which vodun spirits acquired expansive and complex powers, and which were extended to earthly healers? Why not take the opportunity to acknowledge and explore the multiple, and perhaps contradictory, aspects revealed in Domingos’s practices?

If, as Sweet says, healing was the ‘best way to regenerate communities and restore rightful rulers’ (227), and that was the larger purpose of healing, then who were the healed? They were Africans, yes, but also mulattos, Europeans and, among those who were of mixed race, there was a woman who begged her husband to buy Domingos so that she might be cured of an illness that had long resisted Portuguese cures. Seemingly, they were not mainly West Africans waiting for a new religious leader to appear. Domingos’s best chance of forming a community around vodun ritual practices was in Rio de Janeiro, where he enjoyed freedom of movement and a considerable reputation until, once again, trust turned to denunciation and Domingos wound up in the hands of the Holy Office. Accused of dealing with the Devil, transported to Portugal, tried twice and both times sentenced to banishment in remote corners of the country, he could not expect to find many clients drawn to African healing, but more who feared the Devil, and too few to give him paid work. He was on the lam, walking long distances across southern Portugal either in search of work or to avoid denunciations. This hardly seems the stuff of lasting community regeneration or the deep planting of African institutions and ideas in foreign places. What Domingos achieved in Rio de Janeiro seems closer to a ‘therapeutic community’ – a phrase Sweet uses in referring to Domingos’s terreiro in Glória – something more transient and ambivalent, in which clients were more connected to Domingos than to each other (111–112).
Sweet’s research is meticulous and extensive. The two Inquisition trial records are enviably rich, although also profoundly skewed, as Sweet, of course, knows better than anyone. The sources for much of what he wants to know are either fragmented or circumstantial. But he is intrepid in evaluating and interpreting difficult sources. So I am puzzled when, at the end of the book, he veers away from the historian’s firm grounding in the sources, however problematic, into a realm of imagined symbol and metaphor that is more appropriate to the writing of fiction. Sweet offers a pair of metaphors. The first is ‘losing sight’ – blindness, darkness, invisibility, isolation – because, he says, it captures the broad experience of enslavement. The other side of blindness is healing, which offers not only health, but community and communal well-being. This may be, but the evidence more often points to fear and suspicion.

By elevating Domingos to hero in a drama of ‘triumph over tragedy’ (223) and casting him as the ‘intellectual catalyst and mediator for a diffuse community of African slaves and freedpeople’ (233), Sweet actually diminishes him. Domingos, he says, ‘embodied the stunning and terrifying potential of their [African slaves’ and freedpeople’s] spiritual and social unity. Domingos was quite literally power incarnate’ (233). Now we have moved away from Domingos the man, away from anything historical sources can confirm or explain. We have moved away from contemporary descriptions of him, away from the ways Domingos described himself. The shift seems regrettable for, to my mind, the historical Domingos is larger and more revealing, more fascinating, more compelling than the invented mythic hero.

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Note

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In From Africa to Jamaica, Audra Diptee seeks to define the ways in which the transatlantic connection to West Africa shaped society and culture in Jamaica during the period between 1775 and 1807. In this period, about 370,000 enslaved Africans survived the middle passage across the Atlantic to make landfall in Jamaica, and the vast majority of them were destined to labour in the booming sugar plantation