



RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE DESCENDANTS OF ENSLAVED BAMILEKE IN AMERICA: COPING WITH INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA OF THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

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ABSTRACT

Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS) refers to a state characterized by the presence of multigenerational trauma among a community, stemming from prolonged periods of enslavement spanning centuries, and persisting due to ongoing experiences of oppression and institutionalized racism in contemporary society. This paper examines the physical, mental, and socioemotional consequences of institutionalized oppression from the 1600s to the present day. It focuses on the impact of this oppression on the Bamileke community in America, analyzing various sectors of society. "The Descendants of Enslaved Bamileke in America: Coping with Intergenerational Trauma of the Transatlantic Slave Trade" was to enable the target audience to express their responses of historical trauma in their own words- phenomenological interviews and observation were used in this study. Ethnographic data collection in Cameroon and in the USA was conducted. The results of the study indicate that participants are still engaged in a coping process in response to previous trauma, with a predominant focus on restoration-oriented coping that can shift to loss-oriented coping when triggered by current events.

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INTRODUCTION

The institution of slavery has existed on the majority of the world's continents and has been a part of human history since ancient civilizations, long before the forced abduction and migration of people out of Africa (Burnside, 1997). Ani (1994) utilized the Swahili concept of "Maafa," which means "great disaster," "calamity," or "great tragedy," in place of historically employed terms such as Triangular Trade, Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, and African Diaspora to describe the devastating impact of the commercialized slave trafficking system on Africans. In addition to Maafa, the term "African Holocaust" has been acknowledged by many African scholars, educators, authors, and historians to describe the catastrophe caused by chattel slavery that persisted for countless hundreds of years (Shahadah, 2012). Consequently, these terms will be used interchangeably throughout the remainder of this paper. In the early 16th century, with the fall of the feudal structure across much of Europe, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, often known as the African Holocaust, started (Shahadah, 2012). "The European slave trade across the Atlantic marked a radical break in the history of Africa, most especially because it was a major influence in transforming African society (Lovejoy, 1989). What may have led to the emergence of a commercialized type of slavery in which Africans were no longer judged deserving of their freedom as human beings and were instead branded as tradable commodities? Principal contributors to the marketing of Africans as commodities were their desire and lust for riches and power (Franklin & Moss, 2000).

Humans were commodified for commercial benefit as a result of the European Commercial Revolution, which was prompted by a desire for economic dominance and power and ushered in a ruthless and avaricious capitalism society (Franklin & Moss, 2000). With the massive and quick collapse of the Amerindian population throughout the 16th century, English, French, Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, and Danish invaders resorted to kidnapping Africans to tend their plantations against their will (Burnside, 1997). Although the precise year is debatable, most historians agree that the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade was well underway by the early 1500s (Eltis & Richardson, 2010). Many Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade voyages were filled with rebellion, insurrection, and uprisings (Richardson, 2010), and 10 percent of slave voyages had deadly uprisings led by indomitable Africans who revolted against being kidnapped and enslaved (Richardson, 2010). However, many more Africans who were unable to endure the cruel and savage treatment tried to end the pain by ending their lives by hunger (Huggins, 1990; NYPL, 2005). Some tried to starve themselves to death during the treacherous journey across the Atlantic, but the crew forced them to eat by beating them, burning them with hot stones and burning coal, forcing their mouths open with special tools, or shattering their teeth (NYPL, para 38). Many Africans who did not commit suicide died as a result of the dreadful, intolerable circumstances aboard the ships (Burnside, 1997). During this trip, an unfathomable number of Africans perished as a result of being crammed into dirty cargo holds, exposed to limited air, denied food, and dying of thirst. The exact number of enslaved

Africans who perished during the while on the ship headed to the Americas over 400 years may never be known, but historians and scholars estimate close to six million Africans perished before reaching the coasts of the Americas (Eltis, 2007; Eltis & Richardson, 2010). What awaited African slaves after they reached in the New World if this was only the first phase of their journey? Burnside (1997) said, "For the enslaved Africans, it was only the next step in a never-ending descent into misery" (p. 146). The stolen African cargo in human form that survived the Middle Passage was unloaded and held in cages until they were auctioned and sold for money into chattel slavery or traded for commodities (Burnside, 1997; UNESCO). Frequently, Africans were sold in bulk; nevertheless, they were often separated from their relatives and sold individually in the American colonies (Burnside, 1997). When enslaved Africans arrived in the United States, their life expectancy was just five to six years and a third of them perished within the first three years (Franklin & Moss, 2000). Africans enslaved in the United States were forced to produce tobacco, rice, coffee, sugarcane, among other crops, on plantations that spanned thousands of miles and were compelled to cultivate the agricultural products of stolen land. They labored from sunrise to sunset (Franklin & Moss, 2000). The fruits of the arduous work of the African enslaved in the Americas were sent to Europe and sold for profit (Eltis & Richardson, 2010). The mistreatment of Africans enslaved in America did not cease when they reached the plantation that would force their labor. Africans were prohibited from openly conversing with one another, if they spoke the same language. They were not even allowed to keep their names given to them by their parents. Instead, the white man renamed them forcing upon them Anglicized names. These Africans were denied to practicing their own spiritual beliefs and Christianity was forced upon them where this doctrine taught them the foundation of White Supremacy- the worship of a white deity and the white man (Franklin & Moss, 2000) while they lived in substandard housing and in a constant state of chronic starvation.

Violence against Africans enslaved in American colonies consisted of floggings, whippings, and other violent activities, and more severe transgressions of an African's disobedience to their enslaver frequently resulted in being stabbed, burned or boiled to death, hanged, or having fingers, toes or legs and arms severed as punishment (Franklin & Moss, 2000). Parallel to the unwanted advances and violent rapes that transpired on slave ships during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, these European plantation overseers and enslavers routinely threatened to sell off the children and family members of enslaved Africans in order to coerce African women, men, and children into complying with molestation and rape (Burnside, 1997). According to historian Huggins (1990), African children, women, and adults endured significant psychological and physical trauma. They had been severed from all that had previously given them significance...that had previously been seen as all-powerful and all-knowing. They were now trapped and enslaved in the hands of white men and women. Nearly 400 years of African enslavement in the United States were fueled by covetousness and the pursuit of white supremacy, dominance, and financial gain. Although this economic system of enslaving Africans pumped rich blood through its arteries for hundreds of years, numerous Africans created internal bleeding in the system via successful revolts and uprising against the evil and oppressive European and American powers that tore them away from Africa.

Around the start of the nineteenth century, Toussaint L'ouverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines orchestrated the Haitian Revolution, one of the most successful known rebellions against slavery (Andrews, 2013). L'ouverture and Dessalines, through successful revolts, forced the French to end slavery and founded the Republic of Haiti as an independent nation of Africans (Andrews, 2013). Other Africans covertly opposed their servitude by stealing food for their starving children, burning down the homes of their white enslavers property, and by destroying work equipment to reduce labor output (Andrews, 2013). MukasaAfrika (2005), scholar, and activist, described the African struggle as follows:

Slavery was very deadly, not just for the Africans but also for the slaveholders. Slavery was a very perilous enterprise, and resistance was a daily occurrence. On the ships, Africans resisted. In Africa, they resisted. In Africa, they fought for the lives of their families and for their very own. They continued this combat against their white oppressors, rapist, murderers and enslavers in America (Afrika, 2005, as cited in Shahadah, Mitchell & Asante, 2005).

The initiation of the local slave trade within the broader context of long-distance trade in Cameroon can be traced back to approximately 1620. The transportation of slaves primarily occurred from the Eastern Grassfields region, passing through Yabassi, and ultimately reaching Duala, where they became part of the Atlantic Slave Trade (Fomin, 1995). By the year 1650, the establishment of this slave route had reached a significant level of development. In what is now known as Cameroon, numerous Bamileke rebelled against the injustice of slavery and demanded freedom, but the advantages of their revolts were not realized throughout the lives of many of them. Bamileke still battled. Shareef (2005) said, "Neither colonization nor slavery were accepted by the Bamileke." They battled at every turn" (Shareef, 2005, as quoted in Shahadah et al., 2005). The economic capitalization and enslavement of Africans as property did not begin to encounter significant hurdles for many centuries and remained widespread until large movements against the inhumanity of slavery began (Franklin & Moss, 2000). As the United States acquired independence from Great Britain during the Revolutionary War, hostilities between northern and southern colonies within the United States started to increase (Robinson, 1997). In 1807, the United States and England outlawed the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, but this prohibition was not enforced; hence, the importation of Africans proceeded as usual for many years (Franklin & Moss, 2000).

In 1807, the United States and England outlawed the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, but this prohibition was not enforced; hence, the importation of Africans proceeded as usual for many years (Franklin & Moss, 2000). Midway through the nineteenth century, the antislavery movement reached its zenith when the United States became split between antislavery northern areas fighting for the abolition of slavery and pro-slavery southern states supporting its continuation (Franklin & Moss, 2000). By composing music, singing, dancing, and sharing stories from home (Africa), freed Africans in the northern colonies fought racism, discrimination, and enslavement and maintained their belief systems and attempted to restore or reconnect with their family in America and in Africa (Andrews, 2013). Frederick Douglass, an orator, writer, and social reformer, was born into slavery in Maryland. He published antislavery literature in his North Star newspaper (Potter & Claytor, 1994), traveled the country speaking out against slavery and demanded liberties owed to Africans in the United States under the protection of the U.S. Constitution (Robinson, 1997). Equally defiant, conductor Harriet Tubman engineered the Underground Railroad, an ingenious network of safe houses that led tens of thousands of Africans to freedom in the North (Robinson, 1997). Why was all of this required? Where did the suffering and trauma that contemporary Africans endured originate? According to SlaveVoyages.com, the majority of those carried to the West and enslaved were of Bamileke. The grass fields of Cameroon were perfect area for the abduction of Grassfield people, particularly children, in what is now known as Cameroon. Insofar as it is related with the slave trade, the forest that towers over the steep terrain of the Grass field recollection is significant (Argenti 2007). In myth, ritual, and masked performance, the woodland is the liminal location where people from the Bamileke chiefdoms depart toward the plantations and slave ships on the coast. The forest represented the boundary between the chiefdoms of the Bamileke, a region that was kept purposefully uninhabited since slave catchers often attacked it (Argenti, 2005). To the Bamileke, the forest was a big beast's maw that consumed their people, enslaving them in the Americas (Argenti 2001).

METHODS

Data collection was based on observations, Semi-structured interviews and Informal Conversational interviews. We identified Bamileke communities and individuals in the United States that were victimized by the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Victims, in this context, are Bamileke families within communities whose ancestors were forced into the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. There was a need for an oral historian in Bamileke communities to serve as a type of oral history archive. Therefore, we enlisted Fons (Bamileke kings) who are seen as the guardians of their ancestors' traditions and heritage. Most importantly, the Fons of the selected villages should be able to identify those families whose members were taken away, including those in their own family or villages. Though efforts were made to ensure the study's reliability, the technique itself does not permit broad dissemination of the results. The researcher's journaling was the major technique of establishing credibility. Among these steps was creating a timeline, keeping a notebook to record one's thoughts and feelings after important interviews, and referring back to those thoughts and feelings as often as was necessary. Furthermore, the researcher aimed to collect rich descriptions through in-depth interviews. Through taking these measures, she increased the reliability, validity, and verifiability of the results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Although the worst moments are behind them, the Bamileke still face difficulties and even threats in the here and now. This became evident when each participant related experiences of prejudice, from innocuous micro aggressions to violent altercations with openly racist strangers that left them wondering what had happened but they need to find a way to cope with the situations. These are tremendously challenging scenarios that, on the surface, appear more at home in a history book, but which have actually occurred in the lives of Bamileke today.

Ambivalence: Modern racism is often less overt than it was in the past, which might leave individuals with suspicions of discrimination despite a lack of obvious, verifiable evidence. The affected party will have a harder time raising awareness in light of this. It may also restrict the individual's ability to seek redress for the incident. Prejudice and racism are real but not always easy to spot. As an example of what she called "perceived racism," a 35-year-old female from Nde, described being subjected to more scrutiny when returning an item to a store while traveling in Brussels, Belgium. Attempting to return an unused item for which she had a receipt turned out to be more complicated than she had anticipated. She elaborated on her thoughts after the return was finally finished.

"Then I get in my car and I call two friends who help me get through tough times and say something like "I think this happened because I'm Black so, you know, so... certain cases you just can't, you just can't, I think that's what's aggravating, you can't determine whether it is racially motivated."

Unfortunately, not even a school is a safe haven from the prejudice and bigotry of its students and faculty. Teachers are supposed to assist in developing the minds of young people, but sometimes they use discriminatory practices themselves. A11 said that one of his English teachers in high school had wrongfully highlighted one of his assignments for plagiarism], perhaps due to the teacher's own biases about how effectively a Black kid is capable of writing:

Comforts through Common Connections

Additionally, the importance of social support in participants' lives appeared. The more intriguing feature of this finding, even though it may not be unique in and of itself, is how passionately numerous people felt about having support that looked like them. Ethnic identification was interpreted as a sign of common experience since

shared experience was thought to be the basis for true empathy and understanding. Some informants spoke of their conviction that ethnic identity plays a significant role in developing gratifying, encouraging relationships with other people. One informant asserts that "at its core level, it doesn't really matter how much money anybody has," despite the fact that she and some other participants acknowledged emotions of feeling somewhat isolated from other African Americans due to socioeconomic position or education. The informant continues by describing how her closest friends are Bamileke and the part they play in supporting her as she navigates racially heated situations:

"Considering that my two closest friends in the world and I have such different experiences of race and of being Black and Bamileke, we chat a lot about these topics. It is something that our group enjoys and appreciates, because we can support each other in our unique journey. When someone says things that are anti-Black or anti-Bamileke we talk about the best way to confront the person. Do you get what I'm trying to say? If you keep it all bottled up, you won't be able to handle it properly. This is why it is great to have people around you who understand your experience. They can better help you strategize."

The proliferation of online and social networking spaces has given people unique opportunities to connect and interact with people who share their interests and values. Some people now use social media as a novel way to meet new people, find lasting friendships, and deal with difficult emotions like discrimination. Another informant has spoken highly of podcasts produced by Bamileke in America who descend from slaves, praising their "stories and media that kind of continue to tell our stories and tell the tales of our life..." This is what he calls a "coping device". Connecting with others in real life or online who share or understand their perspective appears to be an important coping mechanism for the Bamileke. Haven said that, many alternative methods of dealing with stress caused by the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade were also discovered. Following the use of self-care oriented activities (spirituality, social-emotional therapy, meditation, and sleep) and activism was the next most common method used by the survey participants.

Representation of Others: Another sub-theme among the participants was that their responses or behavior will be taken as emblematic of the entire population. In addition to serving as a voice for the Bamileke, participants affirmed a notion that they should serve as a model for other African ethnic groups that may face similar challenges. Overall, it seemed like some participants prepared themselves up for a life full of challenges, but that they would find significance in those adversities if they could assist and ease the hardships of others. In all circumstances, alertness and deliberateness are essential while acting as a de facto spokesperson for others. On the job, the pressure to exhibit oneself favorably to other members of one's ethnic group can be intense. A 38-year-old female respondent from Koung-Khi, has a very deep desire to accurately represent her Bamileke heritage. Not only did she achieve leadership status at a bank where Bamileke were underrepresented, but she did so with an unconventional educational background. She revealed her current goal of increasing the likelihood that her organization will take a chance on someone who doesn't fit the typical employee profile but has potential.

"Because of my success, I hope that more people look like me will be given the chance to prove that they are worthy of the positions they seek, even if their resumes don't make it seem like it."

She said that a new leader at the bank has been chosen and he is Bamileke. Although that was encouraging to hear, she also mentioned feeling constant pressure to put her best foot forward in all aspects of her life to avoid being judged negatively. It seems like she agreed with the necessity to protect Bamileke's reputation when he said:

"Knowing that I am Bamileke has influenced how I conduct myself professionally because I feel I not only have to be competitive for myself, but I must be aware that a misstep on my part could be taken as a representation all Bamileke people negatively."

It was discovered that others will try to project their own desire to be a good representative for their ethnic group onto others. A7 expressed her dissatisfaction with a Black coworker who, in another respondent's opinion, acts in a stereotypically African-American way by:

"...being extremely boisterous, brash, and unprofessional. And I think that negatively affects a lot of other Black individuals in the company who don't really play into those stereotypes. They don't expect us to be refined and there she is acting unrefined. And I worry that we aren't taken seriously as a whole because we have one person in office who reinforces those unflattering stereotypes."

Spiritual Belief: Many participants believe that their ancestors' spiritual belief system helped them cope with or find consolation in the face of discrimination over the four centuries of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. This group of participants saw the Abrahamic religions as a historical trauma because they felt they had been coerced into rejecting the beliefs of their forefathers in favour of those of their slavers and colonial rulers. One claimed, "the worship of a white Jesus which promotes white supremacy and Black inferiority is directly produced by the relationship between Bamileke experiences with trauma and psychological suffering." It was the opinion of these participants that religion was used as a tool of control to make us more submissive and easy to enslave. It was believed that having the enslaved believe in the Christian biblical verse Ephesians 6:5 "Obey your earthly master with respect and fear, just as you would Christ" made many Africans good slaves or decent colonial people because they obeyed the White man fearing retribution from God. One participant stated, "This made us commit treason against our ancestors by calling their belief system witchcraft and wicked and instead worshiping the picture of a white man instead of honoring our ancestors. Our people's psyches have been severely damaged as a result of this". The Bamileke honor the lives of their Bamileke ancestors who were taken into the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade by remembering them through the telling of their tales. They believe that by teaching their children of their ancestors' tales of both glory and despair that they will not only honor their ancestors, but also find healing.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to investigate how Bamileke people in Cameroon who had family members and/or people taken from their village into the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and how Bamileke people in the United States of America, who are descended from those enslaved Bamileke, perceive and make sense of the historical traumas caused by the slave trade experienced by earlier generations, as well as how they cope with these realities today. Participants supported a wide range of resiliency practices in light of the persistence of prejudice. Participant responses overwhelmingly highlighted the importance of social support and their belief system, particularly the indigenous Bamileke spiritual system of Craniologie as a sort of ancestral worship.

Respondents strongly preferred that their social supports came from other Bamileke people. "Comfort Through Common Connections," emerged as a result of the above. Many participants felt that they could confide in someone of their own race or ethnicity because they would better understand the difficulties they experience on a daily basis and the larger structural problems inside their society. This is in line with the finding that "in 2004, just 15% of U.S. adults reported having a friend of another ethnic group with whom they talked important subjects" (Kim, Park, & Koo, 2015, p. 59). It's only natural to confide in a trusted friend or family member when dealing with something as emotionally taxing as a possible act of prejudice. However, many people live in fundamentally segregated societies before leaving the safety of their village or family groupings, which can lead to a lack of diversity in their social support system as adults (Kim, Park, & Koo, 2015). Then, it's up to the individual's college, career, and/or city-living decisions whether or not they'll have the chance to meet people of different ethnicities. This finding suggests that when confronted with discrimination, people turned to the people with whom they already had strong bonds, in this case, their closest Bamileke friends and family members, as well as those who appeared to "look" like them. Although it is difficult to generalize based on phenotypic features, participants said that race and ethnicity provided a stronger bond than other factors such as socioeconomic standing and professional interests.

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