



Figure 1. African brass figurine of Mami Wata. Unlike many other representations of her, she is shown here in her human form. She is sitting on another half woman, half fish. From the author's personal collection, photograph by Matteo Dawson

Liquid Motion: Reimagining Maritime History through an African Lens

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Abstract

“Liquid Motion” examines how African women and men perceived, understood, and interacted with oceans and rivers through swimming, underwater diving, surfing, canoe-making, and canoeing. Africans inspire us to rethink assumptions about maritime history, by considering maritime traditions absent in the Western lexicon, like harnessing wave energy to transport goods through the surf or swimming into the depths to salvage goods from shipwrecks or harvest pearl oysters. Enslaved Africans carried these traditions to the Americas, where they used them to benefit their exploited lives and enslavers exploited them to generate wealth.

Keywords

African diaspora, aquatics, dugout canoe, surf-port, surf-canoe, swimming

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Introduction

Atlantic Africans have cultivated maritime traditions on rivers and seas since the Neolithic age. Extending from Senegal in the north to Angola in the south, Atlantic Africa is embraced by the Niger River in the northwest, the Congo plunges through its southern heart, while numerous other rivers plunge through its expanse. Most Africans live near navigable waterways. Atlantic Africans did not just live along freshwater and saltwater, they were water-facing people who actively engaged with water to create “human shores.”¹ Atlantic Africans seamlessly merged land and water into *waterscapes*, creating places of meaning and belonging as they crafted aquatic traditions in coastal plains, rainforests, savannahs, and Sahel to understand their diverse hydrographies—marine geography and how tides, currents, and winds inform navigation. Aquatics set African humanity in liquid motion through intimate, daily immersionary engagements with water while swimming, underwater diving, surfing, canoe-making, canoeing, and fishing. Many people were fishing-farmers who fished one season, farmed another, and used dugout canoes to transport goods to market, interlacing spiritual and secular beliefs, economies, social structures, political institutions—their very way of life—around relationships with water.

Most of the enslaved people forcibly transported to the *new world*² were from Atlantic Africa. Enslaved Africans recreated and reimagined relationships with waterscapes to maintain cultural ties with home communities, while forging new communities of belonging that provided their exploited

lives with a sense of meaning, purpose, and belonging. Many employed aquatics in attempts to realign their stars, stealing their bodies and dugouts in attempts to regain ancestral waters. While there were ethnically specific traditions, many practices transcended ethnic differences, enabling us to consider the shared ways in which African-descended people were not just on the water, but in the water and of the water.

Africans unsettle assumptions about maritime history and Western maritime supremacy, inspiring us to rethink traditional approaches that center men, ships, and seaports. During an age when most white people were not proficient swimmers, African-descended women and men swam and dove into the depths for work and recreation. Unlike white women, African women were not precluded from aquatic activities, enabling many to pursue lucrative occupations.

Atlantic Africans require us to reconsider seaports and how they were accessed. While Africa is four times larger than Europe, its coastline is shorter (18,950 miles or 30,500 km long, compared to Europe’s 24,000 miles or 38,000 km) because it has few natural harbors, inlets, bays, or gulfs.³ Surf breaks upon most of its shores. Thus, mariners had to cross surf-zones—that space where waves break—to go from shore to sea, developing surf-canoes and surf-ports as environmental solutions. Dugouts were ubiquitous throughout the world, with Amerindians, Oceanians, Indigenous Australians, and Europeans developing designs to meet environmental challenges and particular uses. Africans charted unique designs for equally

unique uses. Responding to environmental challenges, Africans designed surf-canoes, which were, and remain, singular in their ability to slide over and slice through waves when launching into the sea and surf waves ashore while loaded with several tons of cargo. They simultaneously imagined *surf-ports*. Surf-ports are ports that lack harbors—providing all the same shipping, storage, and distribution functions as a seaport but requiring people to pass through surf-zones to reach offshore fisheries, shipping lanes, and, with the eventual arrival of Europeans, ships.

Surf-canoes and surf-ports were central, though typically overlooked, components of the Atlantic trade system. Exports like gold, ivory, palm oil, timber (mahogany, ebony, teak), malaguette pepper, and violently enslaved African bodies, were important commodities. The Atlantic slave trade was the most lucrative sector of this commercial complex, while enslaved labor drove colonization and plantation slavery. Most goods exported out of and into Africa from the fifteenth century through the 1950s, when seaports were constructed, were lightered between ship and shore in surf-canoes.⁴ Slave-trading records suggest that probably eight to nine million of the twelve million people funneled into the Atlantic slave trade were taken from surf-ports to slave ships in surf-canoes, punctuating their central functions in overseas commerce, colonization, and the development of *new world* slavery.⁵

Unfortunately, assumptions pivoting around notions of race, civilization, and modernity have discouraged sustained scholarly analyses of African maritime traditions. Erik Gilbert, a maritime historian of East Africa and the Indian Ocean, explained that many scholars bind themselves to the “tacit belief in the triumph of modernity over tradition,” assuming Western vessels were superior to those of non-Western people.⁶ Such assumptions prompted generations of twentieth-century scholars to ignore sub-Saharan African maritime traditions, relegat-

ing them as primitive and unworthy of scholarly deliberation. Discussions of African maritime history were dismissive, as epitomized by an influential anthropologist in 1966, who, after examining one French document, concluded that Africans only engaged in “subsistence fishing.”⁷ Similarly, early twentieth-century misconceptions that Africans were uncivilized and offered nothing of value or merit to the rest of the world long discouraged the study of African-descended peoples, especially their accomplishments. In 1918, a leading American historian, who continues to inform the field, claimed the Atlantic slave trade and slavery rescued captives from Africans’ savagery by civilizing and Christianizing them, averring that Southern “plantations were the best school yet invented for the mass training of . . . backward people.”⁸ While such assertions plunged African maritime history into an intellectual abyss, it is ready for exploration.⁹

Canoes and Wet Bodies: Experiencing African Waterscapes

Built by Africans for at least 8,000 years, dugout canoes epitomize the conjoining of aquatic and terrestrial spaces.¹⁰ They were more than material objects. They were living entities that embodied and expressed generational wisdom; charted community expertise; and were engrained with cultural, spiritual, and social meaning. Canoes were companions, collaborators, and members of communities of belonging, transporting canoeists safely across liquid expanses, returning them home with fish and incomes.¹¹ Canoe-making was a widely held skill. Non-professionals made smaller dugouts, while professionals crafted war and merchant canoes that could be over 120 feet long and carry over 100 people. Professional canoe-making was widely regarded as a sacred vocation, as reflected in the Senegambia proverb: “The blood of kings and the tears of the canoe-maker are sacred things which must not touch the ground.”¹² A canoe’s worth was not solely measured by construction

costs, but by its ability to safeguard mariners and embody community valuations.¹³

Dugouts were versatile vessels, with their shallow draft (the distance a boat descends beneath the waterline) enabling them to navigate waters one foot deep while carrying several times their own weight. Unlike Western framed boats, dugouts will not sink, even when filled with water. Design nuances enabled them to better negotiate particular waterways while performing specific functions, like fishing, shell-fishing, transporting cargo, and waging war. There were probably several thousand types of dugouts, with each ethnic group assigning discrete names to the various dugouts they crafted.

Canoes were, and still largely are, hallowed objects. Most were carved from sacred silk-cottonwood trees, as they are widely distributed throughout tropical Africa and their timber is resistant to rot and bug infestation. Other trees were used in regions where cottonwoods did not grow. Over one hundred feet tall, cottonwoods had a soul and they connected heavens, earth, and water. Their spreading branches and buttress roots embraced the sky and earth; thus dugouts made from cottonwoods coupled the here-and-now to the spirit world. The souls of generations waiting to be born resided in their trunks, as Chinua Achebe expressed in his fictional representation of Ibo life in Nigeria: “the spirit of good children waiting to be born lived in a big ancient and sacred silk-cotton tree located in the village square. So women who desire children go to sit under its shadow so as to be blessed with children.”¹⁴ Members of many ethnic groups performed spiritual ceremonies beneath their spreading branches. For instance, cottonwoods and canoes figured prominently in initiation ceremonies that transitioned children into adulthood at the Bullom/Sherbro village of Thoma in Sierra Leone. During rites of passage, the spirit of the sacred grove gave birth to new adults. Cottonwood leaves were used to produce a gelat-

inous substance simulating afterbirth, which was rubbed upon initiates. As the forest birthed inductees, community members “beat on the ‘belly’ of the forest spirit (beat on buttress roots of the cotton tree or an up-turned canoe), announcing its labour has begun.”¹⁵

Canoes had a gender that determined how they rode, while the souls of the trees that dugouts were carved from continued to reside in their hull.¹⁶ Canoemen formed bonds with dugouts, performing welcoming ceremonies that included placing offerings on the bow of newly purchased canoes and calling them “bride” to symbolize symbiotic relationships. Well-treated canoes guided fisherwomen and -men to shoals of fish and merchants on safe passages. Charms were placed inside the hull, while elaborate figureheads and spiritual motifs, carved in high and low relief, articulated canoes’ relationships with water and the spirits residing therein.¹⁷

Water was a sacred space populated by deities and spirits whose voices were heard in the sound of moving water. People from Senegal to South Africa and as far inland as Mali believed in deities who were half woman, half fish, with Mami Wata being the most celebrated of these finned divinities. Shape-shifting between a woman and half woman, half fish, Mami Wata embodied dangers and desires while slipping between discrete elements and circumstances: water and earth; the real and surreal (Figure 1). She safeguarded followers from drowning, rewarded them with success, and healed people of physical and spiritual maladies.¹⁸ Canoes communicated with the water and aquatic deities, with dugouts and spirits guiding mariners to schools of fish and safe passages.

Many believed the realm of the dead lay at the bottom of or across the ocean or a large river, lake, or lagoon. For Africans, life was cyclical, and water channeled one’s soul across the Kalunga, a permeable divide between the living and dead, to the supernatural world, where it was reunited

with ancestors waiting to be reborn.¹⁹ Members of several ethnic groups buried the dead with a miniature canoe to facilitate transmigratory voyages to home-waters, a tradition carried to the Americas. While enslaved in South Carolina during the early nineteenth century, Charles Ball helped an African-born father and American-born mother bury their young son. The father made “a miniature canoe, about a foot long, and a little paddle, (with which he said it would cross the ocean to his own country).”²⁰

Africans’ bodies, like canoes, were living entities that possessed a soul and were enshrouded in spiritual and cultural meaning. People used aquatic fluencies to transform their bodies into watercraft, sculpting them just as canoe-makers carved dug-outs, allowing people to enjoy and take pride in their wet bodies while connecting with deities in sacred waters. Bodies were gifts from the creator, muscularly accentuated through aquatics, while ritual scarification, applied during a rite of passage, consecrated and ornamented them to visibly express clan, lineage, and ethnic membership. Bodies were to be proudly displayed; thus semi-nudity and nudity in certain settings, including aquatics, was not stigmatized. Indeed, Shaka, ruler of the Zulu Kingdom, told an English merchant, “the first forefathers of the Europeans had bestowed on us many gifts . . . yet had kept from us the greatest of all gifts, such as a good black skin, for this does not necessitate the wearing of clothes.”²¹

Swimming was valued as a life-saving skill and a means of personal cleanliness, with many incorporating it into work and recreation.²² Parents began inculcating aquatics into children’s lives between the ages of ten months and three years, transforming waterways into safe play spaces.²³ After teaching children the fundamentals, parents promoted expertise through play. Boyrereau Brinch, who was raised along the Niger River in what is now Mali, explained that the Bobo, a Mende people, held swimming in high regard,

saying his “father and mother delighted in my vivacity and agility.”²⁴ Recognizing the dangers of gliding through this potentially deadly element, parents created charms to guard against drowning and marine creatures, with Brinch’s father giving him protective “ornaments,” while encouraging them to use buddy systems as they explored their liquid worlds.²⁵

Africans’ bodies enabled many to descend over one hundred feet deep to harvest seabeds and riverbeds. Coastal and interior women and men gathered oysters for their meat, while shells were burned to produce lime for construction. Carpenter Rock, Sierra Leone was “celebrated for its excellent rock oysters, which are brought up in quantities by divers.”²⁶ Scottish explorer Mungo Park documented interior Senegambian people’s aquatic proclivities during two overland treks (1795-1797 and 1805). For instance, near the Bambara capital, Segou, located over five hundred miles (800 km) inland, Park observed a fisherman dive underwater to set fish traps. His lung capacity permitted him to remain submerged “for such a length of time, that I thought he had actually drowned himself.”²⁷ Peoples of the Upper Congo River were equally expert, with one explorer noting “[r]iverine people can remain under the water for a long time while attending their fish-nets, and this habit is gained from those infantile experiences.” Another observed ivory merchants hide tusks underwater to prevent theft, penning: “It was curious to see a native dive into the river and fetch up a big tusk from his watery cellar for sale,” requiring considerable ability since tusks could weigh over one hundred pounds.²⁸ Asante living around Lake Bosumtwi in Ghana, located about one hundred miles inland, incorporated swimming into fishing as the “anthropomorphic lake god,” Twi, prohibited canoes on the lake. Hence, people used paddleboards, called *padua*, or *mpadua* (plural), and dove underwater to catch fish with different types of nets and to set and collect fish traps.²⁹

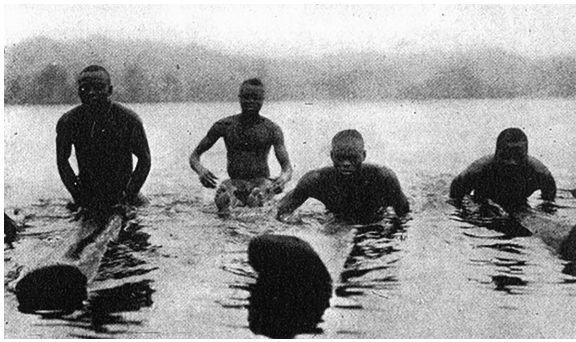


Figure 2. This is one of several images of mpadua in Robert Rattray's study of the Asante. These men used mpadua, which were eight to ten feet long and about sixteen inches wide, to traverse Lake Busumtwe and for fishing. While women swam, fished, and employed mpadua, Rattray did not detail or photograph their aquatic traditions.³⁰

Divers played a central role in some states' economic development by obtaining forms of currency and export commodities. On Luanda Island, which was part of the Kongo Kingdom, women harvested *nzimbu* (cowrie) shells for circulation as Africa's most common non-specie currency. Sixteenth-century "women dive under water, a depth of two yards and more, and filling their baskets with sand, they sift out certain small shellfish, called Lumanche."³¹ Elsewhere, people dove into rivers to collect gold nuggets, with gold being Africa's primary medium for exchange by which other things were valued, as well as a major export.³²

Diving with only the air in their lungs, Africans perfected what is now known as free diving. Free divers spent years honing their minds and bodies to submarine challenges, a process beginning during youth. Limited medical research suggests that the physiology of free divers adapted to prolonged submersion, water pressure, and oxygen deprivation. Free divers develop large lung capacities and their bloodstream possesses elevated levels of oxygen and reduced levels of carbon dioxide. Oxygen deprivation decreases heart, breathing, and metabolism rates, making divers more proficient. Prolonged, recurring submersion changes

the eye's lens shape, sharpening underwater vision up to twice the normal range.³³ European travelers observed these physiological changes. During the 1590s Dutch merchant-adventurer Pieter de Marees recorded that Gold Coast peoples

are very fast swimmers and can keep themselves underwater for a long time. They can dive amazingly far, no less deep, and *can see underwater*. Because they are so good at swimming and diving, they are specially kept for that purpose in many Countries and employed in this capacity where there is a need for them, such as the Island of St. Margaret in the West Indies.³⁴

Coastal and riverine states used aquatics to thwart European aggression. Africans experience the same symptoms from colds, flus, and many other diseases as Europeans while typically experiencing less severe symptoms from malaria than Europeans, including a lower mortality rate. Africans also produced iron since roughly 2,000 B.C. and possessed iron weapons and capable navies, enabling them to largely dictate the terms of commerce into the nineteenth century. States could defend home-waters, while some navies projected power against rival states and European trade facilities. Naval battles between African states fought on rivers, lagoons, and lakes could include hundreds of war canoes that could be upwards of 180 feet long, and tens of thousands of naval warriors and marines.³⁵ African forces could defeat and capture European ships. In 1456, the Portuguese endured an early example of African naval strength. Responding to a prior Portuguese raid, Africans, who were probably Diola (or Jalo), dispatched 150 warriors in seventeen canoes to attack two Portuguese ships on the Gambia River. Firing arrows as they darted about, the warriors inflicted casualties, while Portuguese musket and cannon fire proved ineffective. The battle ended when interpreters aboard the Portuguese ships convinced

the Africans that they sought peaceful trade. Similarly, in 1787, Africans on the Gambia, who were probably Diola, captured three British ships, and “killed most of their crews” after English slave traders kidnapped community members. Africans continued to defeat ships, including steamships, into the early twentieth century.³⁶

African rulers employed male and female salvage divers to transform sunken and grounded ships into hinter-seas of production where they harvested the debris of Western commercial capitalism. Europeans wanted Africans to adopt Western salvage traditions dictating that ship owners retained possession of stricken vessels while permitting salvagers to collect compensation for recovering goods. Instead, rulers claimed Europeans’ inability to maintain control of their vessels caused them to forfeit the right to own shipwrecks, granting them the right to appropriate wrecks, their cargos, and crewmembers, who were ransomed. Rulers dispatched divers to salvage shipwrecks, often recovering goods they had sold to Western merchants. In 1615 a Portuguese official bemoaned that the Bijago in what is now Guinea-Bissau averred “what arrives on the beaches belongs to the first who seizes it.” If a vessel “wrecked on any of their islands, they consider it fair gain; and . . . retain the unfortunate individuals whom they may have taken with it in captivity, until ransomed by friends.”³⁷

The earliest written account of surfing was penned on the Gold Coast, now Ghana, during the 1640s.³⁸ Surfing was independently developed throughout Atlantic Africa, though members of some ethnic groups, like the Fante and Ahanta (both part of the larger Akan language/culture group) and *Kru* from Liberia, as well as West Central Africans, transplanted it along the coast. Sixteenth-century captives from Ghana and West Central Africa (Congo-Angola) introduced surfing to the island of São Tomé, off equatorial Africa. Surfing was only developed by societies with deep aquatic connections who can gauge understand-

ings of fluid environments. Africans used surfing to understand how to navigate surf-zones in surf-canoes. While seventeenth-century accounts are confusing, later ones are unequivocal, suggesting many learned to surf when about five years old. For instance, in 1823, an Englishman documented Fante children “residing” around Cape Coast surfing, saying they

paddle outside of the surf, . . . they place their . . . [boards] on the tops of high waves, which, in their progress to the shore, carry them along with great velocity . . . while their more dexterous companions reach the shore amidst the plaudits of the spectators, who are assembled on the beach to witness their dexterity.”

Here, we see the connection between surfing and surf-canoeing as the children’s surfboards were crafted from “broken canoes.”³⁹

Coastscape—the area bounded by the surf and seashore’s inland reaches—were important playgrounds and places of learning. Youth played *with* the sea, learning its movements and patterns through experiential play that entailed interacting with surf, currents, and tides; *seeing* and *feeling* the ocean’s rhythms. Youth learned the physics of breakers and wavelengths (the distance between two waves), by seeing and feeling how the ocean pushed and pulled their bodies. They learned that to catch waves one needed to match their speed, something Westerners did not comprehend until the 1880s. While at Elmina, Ghana, during the early eighteenth century, a French slave trader watched “several hundred . . . [Fante] boys and girls sporting together before the beach, and in many places among the rolling and breaking waves, learning to swim” and surf, concluding that Africans’ dexterities “proceed from their being brought up, both men and women from their infancy, to swim like fishes; and that, with the constant exercise renders them so dexterous.”⁴⁰

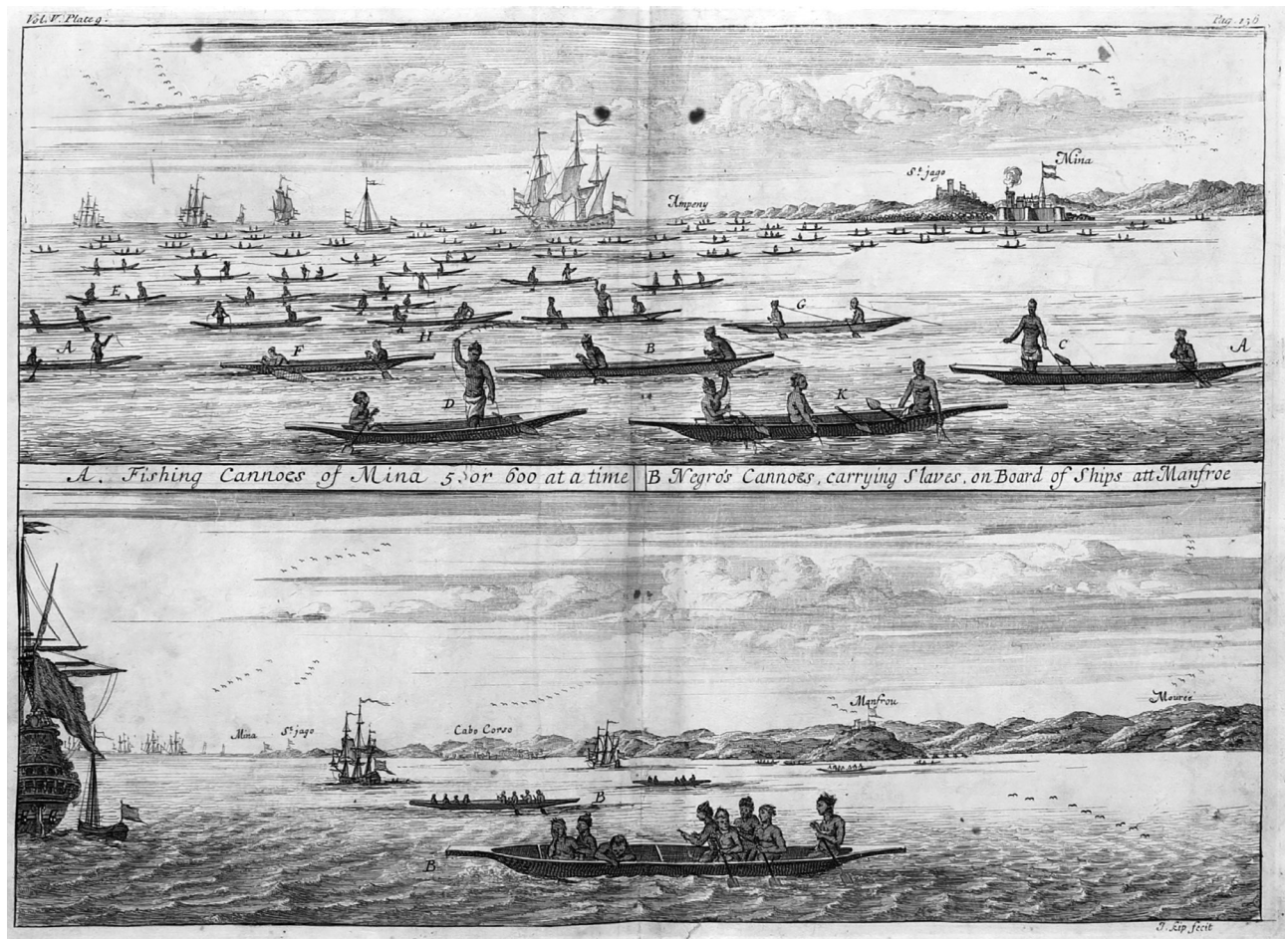


Figure 3. This image illustrates some aquatic activities related to the Fante surf-ports. The top image shows Fante fishermen, who sometimes comprised fleets of up to 800 canoes catching fish sold in local markets, shipped into the interior, and sold to English officials at Cape Coast Castle to feed English officials and soldiers. There are also captives in the dungeons. In the background is the Fante surf-port of Elmina (about seven miles or 11 km west of Cape Coast), with the Dutch slave-trading castle of St. Jago. The bottom image depicts surf canoemen transporting enslaved Africans to a slave ship. In the background are the Fante surf-ports of Elmina (St. Jago Castle), Cape Coast, Mount Monfro, or Amanful (Fort Frederiksborg, later Fort Royal), and Moree (Fort Nassau), illustrating the concentration of surf-ports that created "human shores" that oriented people seaward.⁴¹

Surfing opened seas of possibilities, with Atlantic Africans being the only known people to harness wave energy as part of their daily labor practices. Many Atlantic Africans had to pass through the surf to access coastal fisheries and shipping lanes, using *waves* to slingshot surf-canoes laden with fish or tons of cargo ashore. Surf-canoes were modified dugouts up to thirty feet long and eight feet wide. They were fast and responsive, capable of catching and surfing waves up to eight feet high. Sources suggest youth used surfing to develop the sophisticated understandings necessary to crew surf-canoes. When about fifteen years old, men and, to a lesser extent, women began applying youthful surfing experiences as they took up surf-canoes paddles, with women harvesting littoral waters while men fished up to twenty miles (32 km) offshore.⁴²

Surf-canoes were innovative vessels crafted by expert canoe-makers with probably hundreds of variations distinct enough to warrant their own name. Canoeists and canoe-makers used rivers, lagoons, and mangrove swamps as calm-water nurseries where they developed maritime architecture, technology, and techniques, before testing them in churning surf-zones. Developed long before the arrival of Europeans, surf-canoes continually evolved as fishermen and merchants from diverse ethnic groups exchanged design elements, making them strong enough to withstand being slammed against sandbars, while remaining lightweight and maneuverable. Surf-canoes were cut in half lengthwise and keels inserted. Keels remained flush with the surf-canoe's underside to retain a shallow-draft. Cross-thwarts reinforced hulls while providing brackets for securing cargo while knees, which are curved rib-like braces, radiated from the keel and up the interior sides, providing additional support. Wave-breakers, which are triangular beams, were attached to the bow to deflect the force of oncoming waves. Additionally, planks, called weatherboards, were added to gunwales (the top edge of a vessel's sides) to elevate their sides, while bows and sterns were further elevated to keep water from splashing into hulls.⁴³

Surf-zones remained the realm of surf-canoes. Western mariners explained that rowboats were too slow to catch waves and regularly capsized in the surf; causing them to conceptualize Africans' spaces of pleasure and profit as a "surf-bound coast," and barriers of fear where white people drowned or were eaten by sharks. Thus, Westerners were compelled to hire surf-canoemen for over four hundred years. Royal Africa Company records extensively documented England's reliance on surf-canoes to float its inhuman trade in human bodies, as did an American naval officer commissioned to suppress the slave trade during the 1850s, writing: "Uncle Sam's boats are not built

for beaching, we have to trust ourselves again to a big dug-out . . . to bear us through the surf; for which we pay an English shilling, or an American quarter, each." Into the mid-twentieth century, the British and American navies repeatedly advised ship captains against entering surf-zones but to instead hire surf-canoemen. For example, in 1893, the British Hydrographic Office described the skill of Batanga surf-canoemen of southern Cameroon, noting, "nothing can exceed the skill with which these people launch through a heavy surf which would prove fatal to ordinary ship's boats."⁴⁴

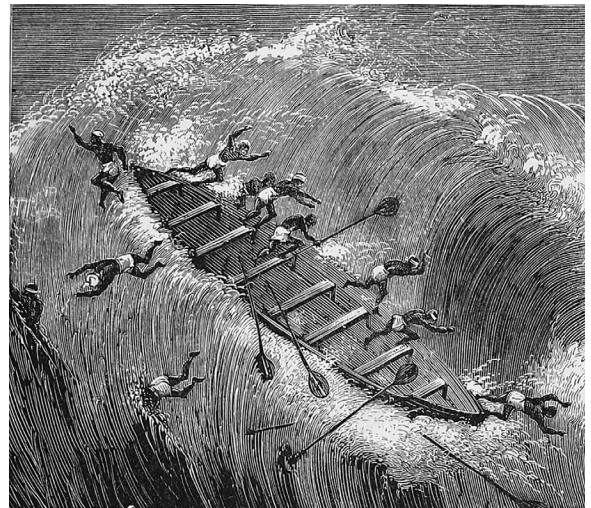


Figure 4. In 1774, William Smith of the Royal Africa Company described England's reliance on "dexterous Canoe-men" to "carry the Passengers and Goods ashore," through breakers, "which to me seem'd large enough to founder our Ship." Conveying European fears, Smith expressed it was "barely possible, that a [white] Man may, if [a canoe] overset here, save his Life by swimming, but it is not very probable, for there are such numbers of Sharks here."⁴⁵

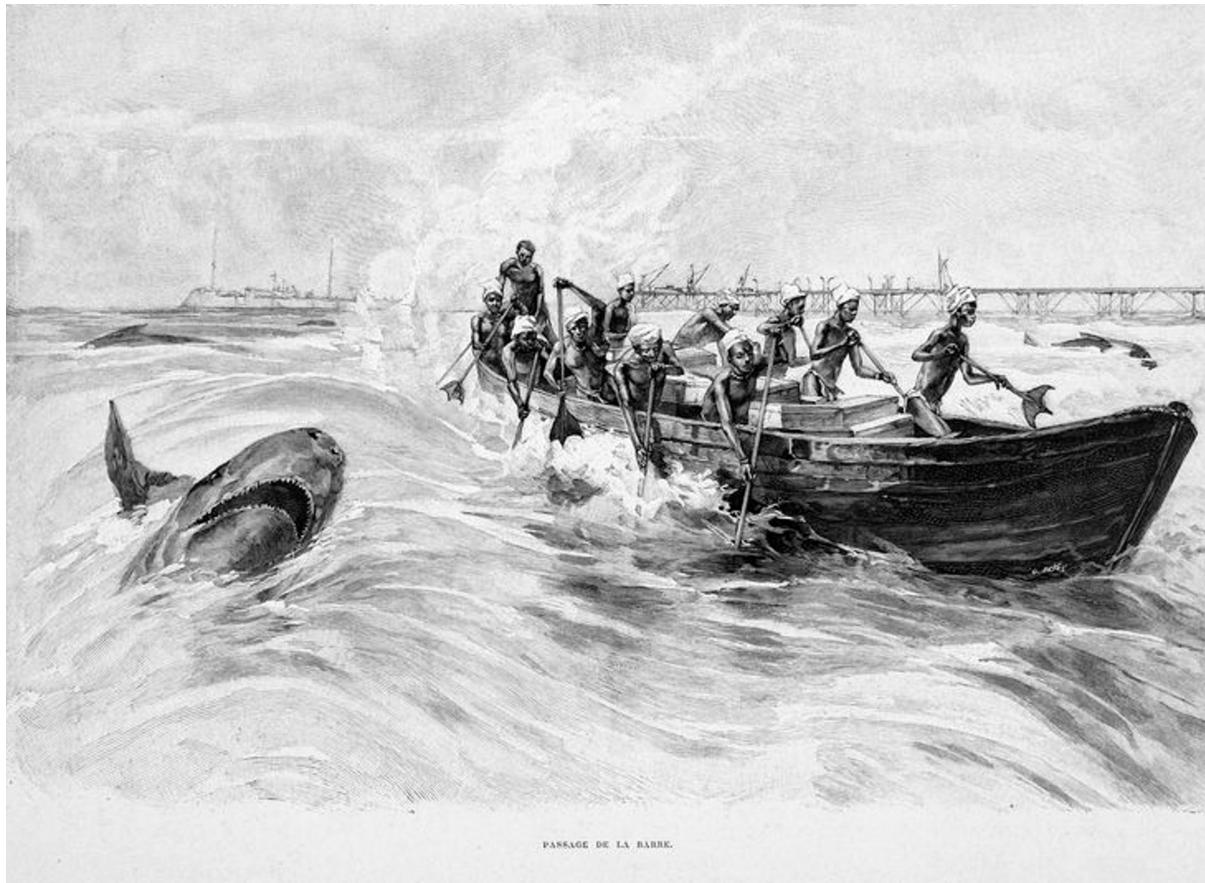


Figure 5. This stylized image of Fante surf-canoemen landing in what is now Benin illustrates trident paddles, while capturing white people's fear of being devoured by sharks if they fell overboard from surf canoes. Note the trident-shaped paddles discussed below.⁴⁶

Surf-canoemen's paddles further illustrate their ability to derive environmental solutions. They were designed to provide rapid acceleration necessary to catch waves while minimizing resistance when the blade accidentally struck chop during the forward stroke. The Fante developed an array of paddles, including the distinctive three-pronged, trident-shaped paddle. While there are numerous variations to this paddle, its three slightly spread fingers increase the blade's surface area, as little water passes between the fingers when paddled rapidly.⁴⁷ Most paddles seemingly had long narrow blades that widened dramatically near the handle. For instance, the bottom twenty-eight inches (71 cm) or so of *Kru* paddle blades was roughly six inches (15 cm) wide, broadening to about eighteen inches near the handle. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Fante paddle became widely disseminated, with many *Kru* adopting it.⁴⁸

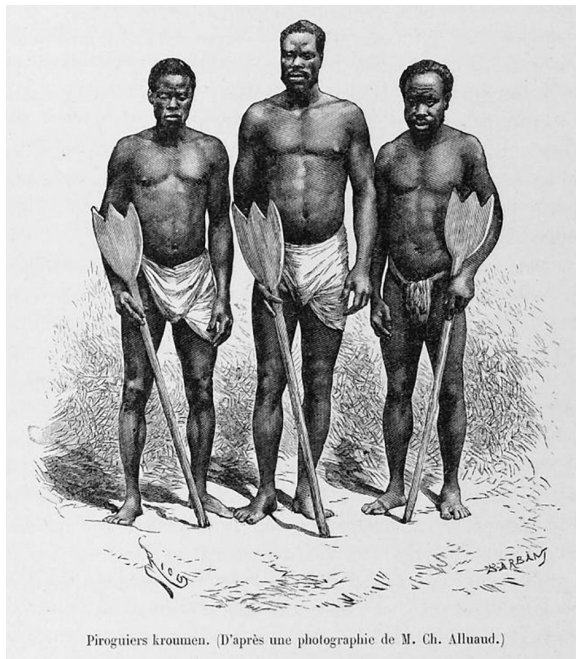


Figure 6. This 1880s image provides an example of variation of the Fante trident-shaped surf-canoe paddle and how *Kru* mariners, who were highly skilled in their own right, adopted this paddle design.⁴⁹

African sailing traditions predate European arrival, and surf-canoes could, as de Marees reported, “sail very well with” the wind, to “develop a great speed” and could sail against, but not close to, the wind. The morning air over tropical seas and large rivers warms faster than over land, causing it to rise and cooler overland air to blow seaward, creating offshore breezes that fishermen rode to fisheries and merchants to shipping lanes.⁵⁰ Merchants harnessed prevailing and seasonal winds and currents, sailing and paddling across coastal seas and up rivers. Senegambians seasonally traversed hundreds of miles of coastline while Fante canoemen voyaged “to all parts of the Gulf of Ethiopia [Guinea], and beyond that to Angola.” Riding the Guinea Current southward they traveled along the coast, during return voyages, they cut across the Gulf of Guinea as they rode the Benguela Current.⁵¹

Surf-Ports

The absence of natural harbors inspired the creation of surf-ports, which provided the same shipping and distribution functions as seaports, but, since they lacked sheltered waters, required canoeists to pass through surf-zones when traveling between land and sea. There were hundreds of surf-ports, as most coastal towns were home to seaward-facing communities whose residents owned at least a few surf-canoes. Indeed, many surf-ports were a few miles, or even a few hundred feet, from each other. Beached canoes were meeting places and marketplaces where people of diverse ethnicities met to exchange news, information, and maritime techniques. Seafood processing, marketing, and distribution were primarily performed by women, most of whom were related to fishermen. On beaches, women organized goods for sale, discussed market prices, and created coastal and overland trade networks extending hundreds of miles. For instance, during the 1590s, de Marees noted hammerhead sharks were “dried and taken to the Interior, and constitute a great Fish-present.”⁵² Market women collaborated with and functioned independently of men, reinvesting earnings in surf-canoes and fishing gear, thus women could own twenty-five to sixty percent of the surf-canoes at any given surf-port, and employ numerous fishermen, making relationships between women and men reciprocal.⁵³ With the arrival of Europeans, surf-ports quickly became central nodes in overseas trade. While never rivalling Amsterdam, Marseille, Lisbon, or Bristol in size, the number of surf-ports enabled African states to construct economies of scale. The Fante, for instance, controlled roughly 150 miles (240 km) of coastline, with eight larger and some thirty smaller surf-ports that were home to probably 4,000 surf-canoes during the seventeenth century.⁵⁴ In 1482, Kwamin Ansa, the Fante ruler of Anomansah, which became Elmina, permitted the Portuguese to build St. Jago Castle, linking this surf-port to the Port of Lisbon. Over

the centuries, many rulers allowed the Portuguese, Dutch, English, French, Danes, Swedes, and Germans to construct what came to be known as slave forts and castles, where they imprisoned Africa's humanity before shipping them through the surf to slave ships. Some, like Fante leaders at Anomabu, did not permit Europeans to construct forts, preferring, instead, to trade with all comers. Regardless, the Gold Coast's roughly 300-mile (480 km) shoreline quickly became home to some 60 slave-trading forts which exported roughly two million captives from 1501 to 1867, and over 100 surf-ports without these facilities.⁵⁵

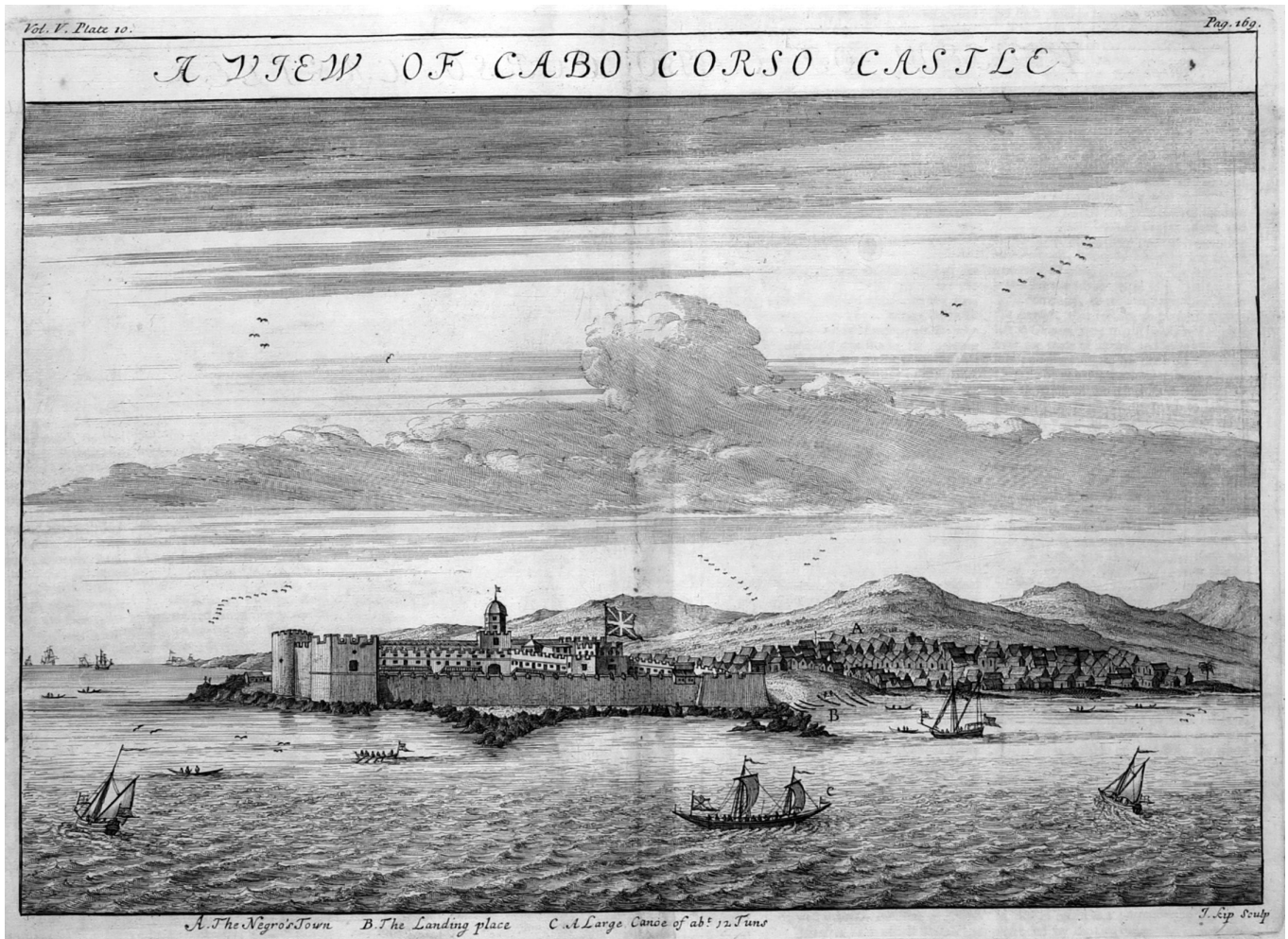
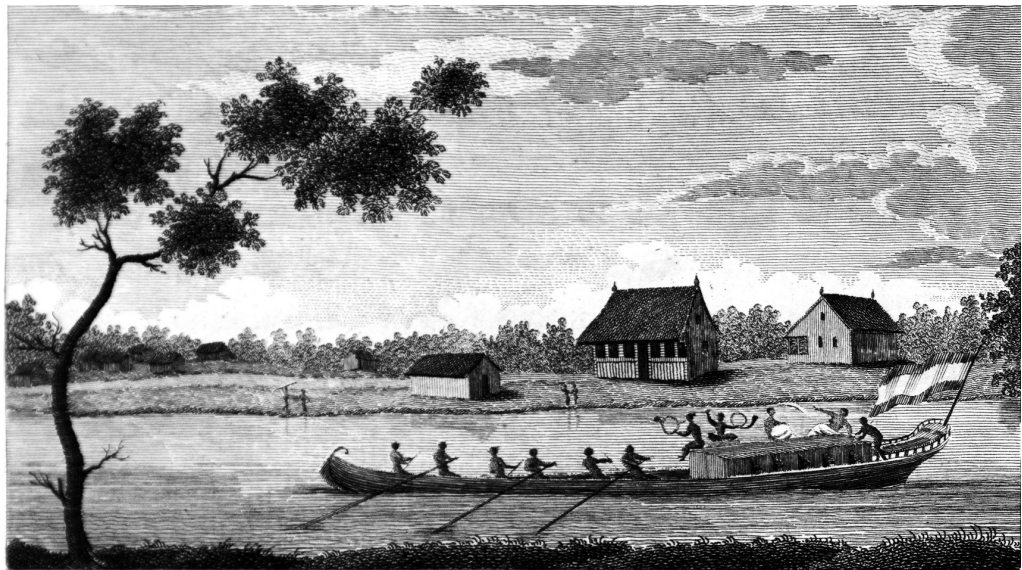


Figure 7. The Fante allowed the English to build Cape Coast Castle, which was a major slave-trading facility, at their surf-port to attract overseas trade. To the right of the castle is the beach where surf-canoes launched and landed. In the foreground are several surf-canoes, including one rigged with double masts and sails.⁵⁶

Maritime Maroons

Even as slave ships' wake disrupted relationships with waterscapes, Africans remained in liquid motion, recreating and reimagining aquatic traditions in the Americas as a method of cultural resistance and a means for forging communities of belonging, as illustrated by maritime maroons who liberated themselves by escaping across water. Their experiences are but one example of how the enslaved explored and charted waterscapes, transforming the waters of bondage into places of meaning and value.⁵⁷ As maritime maroons slipped their terrestrial moorings, they used islands to chart routes to new lives in communities of belonging in this life and the next.

For Africans, *belonging*, not freedom, was the antithesis of slavery. Traditionally, African slavery was, in many ways, a temporary punishment for transgressions, compelling offenders to work off debts to individuals and communities or a way of integrating conquered people into conquering societies (with the Atlantic slave trade changing how Africans treated the enslaved). This differed from racial slavery in the Americas, where enslavers owned one's body and everything they produced, both through their labor and natural reproduction, while forced sales destroyed communities of belonging—including nuclear families—by selling people away from loved ones. Africans in the Americas responded to enslavement by continually seeking to regain their humanity, often through cultural recreation that linked them to communities of belonging in Africa, the Americas, and the spirit realm.⁵⁸



Representation of a Tent Boat, or Plantation Barge.

Figure 8. Enslavers forced enslaved canoemen to build and crew canoes and modified canoes used for pleasure cruises. This image shows how waterside slaveholding provided waterscapes where captives recreated and reimagined African aquatic traditions.⁵⁹

The structures and contours of slavery—indeed, its very hydrography—facilitated the recreation of aquatic traditions and maritime maroonage. Many enslavers established slaveholdings along seashores and riverbanks to facilitate the shipment of slave-produced staples to seaports or ships lying at anchor, regularly clustering captives into ethnic enclaves to facilitate communication and plantation production. The tropical and semitropical waterscapes of much of the Americas were akin to the ones captives were stolen from, providing familiar places to nurture uprooted traditions. Much of the flora and fauna was familiar, including sea turtles, crocodiles, manatee, and many types of fish and shells, while cottonwoods grew throughout much of the tropical Americas, housing the souls of future generations of dispossessed Africans. Where cottonwoods were not found, other trees, including pine, cypress, oak, and poplar, served as substitutes when crafting dugouts. Accounts indicate that by the eighteenth century Mami Wata and other deities populated waters alongside Indigenous spirits.⁶⁰ Waterscapes were playgrounds where enslaved children learned aquatics. Near Frederick Douglass' boyhood home in Maryland "was a creek to swim in . . . a very beautiful play-ground for the children." Likewise, John Washington recollected how Virginia's Rapahannock River was the favorite play spot for Virginian youth. They slipped off "to the river to play with some boat or other which I could always get or swim."⁶¹

Adults equally found pleasure in aquatics. After working for enslavers most of their waking hours, saltwater and country-born captives slipped into coastal waters and rivers to cool off, soothe aching muscles, and wash away the dirt of plantation slavery. "We wucked in de fie'ls from sunup ter sundown mos' o' de time, but we had a couple of hours at dinner time ter swim or lay on de banks uv de little crick an' sleep," recalled Bill Crump of North Carolina.⁶²

During their free time, the enslaved fished to augment meager rations, selling surpluses. Fathers and sons carved family canoes that mothers and daughters paddled to weekend seaport and riverport markets to sell seafood, fruit, vegetables, and craft items, providing white residences with most of their fresh food. Women regularly used canoes as bumboats, which were, in essence, floating huckster stalls. As newly arrived ships entered port, women and men paddled out to sell crew members and passengers produce, seafood, and poultry, as well as tropical curiosities, like monkeys, parrots, and baby alligators. Revenues from these sales were used to purchase necessities, like soap, clothing, and small livestock that made their exploited lives more comfortable and enjoyable while restoring a sense of humanity.⁶³

Figure 9. (right) Oil painting, which was rendered post-emancipation, titled *Bum Boat in Carlisle Bay, Barbados*. While the husband and wife are free, this painting captures how the enslaved used aquatics to restore a sense of humanity to their lives as they sold fruit and vegetables to a newly arrived ship. The monkey seems to be their domesticated pet and not for sale.⁶⁴

Enslavers realized African aquatics could generate substantial capital for financing colonization and plantation slavery, prompting slave traders to target members of ethnic groups known to possess certain aquatic proclivities, with Spaniards being the first Europeans to do so. In 1526, Spaniards imported enslaved divers to harvest pearl oysters off Venezuela's coast, making this the first significant source of wealth for colonizers. During the 1540s, free Africans were hired and brought to English waters to salvage shipwrecks, including Henry VIII's flagship, the *Mary Rose*. As early seventeenth-century English colonizers sought natural resources to exploit, they imported enslaved divers to harvest pearl oysters before they began salvaging Spanish treasure shipwrecks later that century. English colonists, primarily from Bermuda, Barbados, Jamaica, Antigua, the Bahamas, and South Carolina, employed teams of divers capable



of recovering upwards of forty tons of silver and gold in roughly six weeks. Returns were invested in plantations, enslaved Africans, livestock, and ships, while colonial administrators invested in infrastructure, like fortifications and harbor facilities. Importantly, white salvagers valued enslaved divers over technological options, like diving bells, as divers could easily enter ships' hulls, while bells were heavy, cumbersome, got snagged on ships' masts and rigging, and did not allow divers to enter hulls.⁶⁵

Likewise, enslaved canoemen became key to the success of plantation slavery. Enslavers compelled captives to craft dugouts, which were used by enslaved fishermen. Less desirable types of "trash fish" were used as a cheap source of protein for agricultural laborers and to fertilize fields, while prized fish were served at enslavers' dinner tables. Enslaved canoemen used dugouts to transport slave-produced cash crops to seaports. During return voyages they carried Africa's humanity, freshly disgorged from slave ships, to the fields of bondage.⁶⁶

Even as slavery required canoemen to paddle upwards of ten hours per day, they infused their toils with African cultural meanings, layering familiar soundscapes onto *new world* waterscapes, providing themselves with manageable African cadences. African canoemen set their paddling rhythm to call-and-response paddling songs. Captives continued this aural tradition, singing in African, Arabic, European, and creolized languages. In the 1790s, while on Guyana's Demarara River, an Englishman recorded the lyrics of Akan canoemen (the Fante are part of the larger Akan language/culture group) from Ghana, writing that the helmsman

invented extempore lines for a favorite African tune, finishing each verse with '*gnyaam gnyaam row*,' '*gnyaam gnyaam row*,' in which all were to join by way of chorus; and we found

that '*gnyaam gnyamm row*,' never failed to give additional force to the oar—and consequent headway to the boat.⁶⁷

Gnyaam, or probably *Gye Nyame*, indicates membership in the Akan cultural group, for it means "except God," or, more precisely, "except for God, I fear none." Here, the line seemingly translated to "for the creator I row," motivating the canoemen as they reflected upon their Akan past. Actions simultaneously articulated communities of belonging. The helmsman traded places with fatigued paddlers, allowing them to rest upon the steering paddle, which demonstrated surprising equity within slavery's racialized hierarchies of power. Such songs and comradeship served maritime maroons well during freedom voyages.⁶⁸

Fishing equally provided would-be maroons with lessons on collaboration.⁶⁹ While touring Jamaica in 1823, Englishman Cynric Williams encountered "ten or twelve" enslaved men and women "preparing to haul the seine," a rectangular fishing net. Taking one end of the seine out to sea in an arching motion, the canoeists surely synchronized their labors to call-and-response songs. On the beach, they sang again while hauling their catch ashore. One fisherman was a Muslim member of the "Houssa" ethnic group and friends with Williams's enslaved guide, Abdallah. These two Hausa men were enslaved together in what is now inland Nigeria. Both crossed the Atlantic together. The Hausa fisherman synthesized his abilities with those of fisherwomen and -men of other ethnicities and spiritual persuasions, using shared skills to catch an "immense quantity of fish."⁷⁰ Such experiences surely helped captives understand how maritime cooperation could facilitate escape.

Self-liberation has long been a topic of intellectual inquiry with scholars recognizing that maritime maroons were not just fleeing one place; they were deliberately navigating to particular places that afforded belonging. Maritime maroons fled as

passengers aboard Western framed vessels, finding freedom and belonging throughout the Americas, Europe, Africa, and even the Kingdom of Hawai'i.⁷¹ Many more departed as mariners who took control of their destiny.

As in Africa, captives employed maritime connectivities to create a network of communities, stretching from New England to Brazil, with historian Julius Scott calling this expanse the "Greater Caribbean."⁷² A "common wind,"⁷³ churned by the tongues of rootless and restless free and enslaved Black sailors, as well as white sailors and army deserters, spoke of opportunities across seas, across imperial borders. Maritime maroons used this grapevine of information to identify destinations, employing African aquatic techniques, including dugouts, surfboards, and their swimming bodies, to expand their horizons far beyond the dry places enslavers sought to chain them to.⁷⁴ In 1840 a Scottish abolitionist reported how enslaved Africans, inspired by this "common wind," unmoored their fettered bodies:

Several thousands of the slaves of Martinique had previously been driven by the severity of their treatment, or incited by their innate love of liberty, to embark in canoes, or on rafts formed for the purpose, in the hope of reaching St. Lucia or Dominica, where they had been informed that their natural rights as men would be respected.⁷⁵

We can consider how "salt-water" (or African-born) captives connected themselves to home-waters and spiritual realms by examining maritime marronage through an African lens. The number of captives in liquid motion was impressive, far greater than scholars previously assumed, with perhaps tens of thousands escaping.⁷⁶ Compared to horses, enslaved feet, and ships, canoes were unique in that they enabled captives to flee en masse, sending waves of self-liberated

humanity rippling out from islands and continents of enslavement. A handful of skilled canoe women and -men could instruct two to four times their number of less skilled canoeists. Thus, escapees used canoes to escape as families and communities, taking young and old, as they crossed imperial borders.⁷⁷ At times, entire plantation communities escaped in fleets of dugouts. For instance, on St. Croix, in the Danish West Indies, several planter families were financially "ruined, when in a single night, 20 to 25 of their slaves, indeed sometimes more, deserted to" Puerto Rico. No other form of escape permitted such exoduses.⁷⁸

When dugouts could not be had, captives swam or used paddleboards, completing crossings ranging from one to 30 miles (1.6 to 48 km). Some swam when dugouts were intercepted. In 1840, five captives fled St. Jan in the Danish West Indies for the British island of Tortola where slavery had been abolished. A pursuing Danish patrol boat fired upon their canoe in British waters, killing a woman; they captured a mother and child, while two others swam to freedom.⁷⁹

Spiritual beliefs infused the *Greater Caribbean* with alternate—even sub-alternate—routes to belonging. Runaway advertisements indicate that many salt-water captives were inspired to strike out for home-waters soon after being disgorged from slave ships' hulls. In February 1734, "Hector, Peter and Dublin, all of Angola" stole a neighbor's "Canoe" as they fled Wando River, South Carolina for Angola. Likewise, in September 1771, Step, who had "Country Marks on his Temples," and "Lucy" departed South Carolina with "several others, being persuaded that they could find their way back to their own Country." While enslavers reported that escapees were seeking homelands, we must ask if Africans were pursuing physical or spiritual redemption. Having crossed the Atlantic in a slaver's hull, salt-water captives knew return passage would be difficult. Routes to belonging probably entailed metaphysical voyages across

the Kalunga, as captives used aquatics to generate undercurrents of power that challenged enslavers' hegemony as they charted courses to spirit realms where they reunited with loved ones waiting to be reborn in ancestral lands.⁸⁰

Conclusion

Atlantic Africans were not just on the water, they were in the water and of the water, employing aquatics to create "human shores" on both sides of the Atlantic. Aquatics offer new horizons for examining maritime history, while canoes and African bodies invite scholars to reconsider the alleged triumph of modernity over tradition. Canoes were more than cultural expressions; they were environmental solutions, with surf-canoes enabling Africans to thrive in turbulence, while making Westerners dependent on surf-canoemen from 1444 into the 1950s.⁸¹ Even today, as we seek clean energy sources, Atlantic Africans remain the only people to harness wave energy as part of their daily labor practices. Minds and bodies were crafted into seaworthy vessels capable of surfing waves, skimming surface waters, and descending into the depths. During the early modern period, African bodies, not European diving bells, were the most reliable means for salvaging shipwrecks.

Surf-ports illustrate why we must avoid using Western practices as the standard for determining the significance of African practices. We assume the size of watercraft and seaports reflect their ability to inform global circumstances. Like coral reef-making polyps, surf-ports seem diminutive, but, despite their supposed smallness, they demonstrated outsized influence. Just as coral polyps can, in "aggregate" and through "collective labor" construct reefs capable of sinking ships and lifting islands from seafloors, surf-canoemen and market women transformed beaches in economic archipelagos that informed global events for some 500 years.⁸²

Maritime marronage extends our understandings of aquatic traditions. Daring to paddle and swim across slave ships' wake, escapees recharted their destinies and redefined the ocean according to African valuations. Even as enslavers transformed dugouts into mechanisms of oppression that furthered plantation slavery, captives retained symbiotic relationships with canoes and water-scapes. Trees needed canoe-makers to undergo their metamorphosis into dugouts. African-descended canoe-makers on both sides of the Atlantic peeled away dugouts' cocoons, enabling trees to transform into swift-winged vessels. Canoeists honored canoes and, in return, canoes safeguarded them. This interdependence took on new meanings under slavery where dugouts and escapees maintained reciprocal relationships. Both were maritime maroons. Both needed the other to escape. Escapees needed canoes to carry them away from enslavers; to speak with aquatic deities; to guide them on physical and spiritual passages. Canoes needed escapees to navigate them away from the waters of bondage; to free them from transporting slave-produced cash crops to market and newly imported Africans from slave ships to fields of subjugation. Both needed the other to reach communities of belonging in this life or the next.

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- 16 Beliefs about canoes changed over time and vary between people. Fante and Ahanta fishermen told the author that canoe-makers determined the gender by the shape of the tree or canoe-makers determined gender by how the canoe rode. More graceful canoes that slid over waves were female, while those that plowed through waves were masculine. Verrips, "Canoe Decorations," 47, 55-56, 63n14.
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