

***Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship and religion in the African Portuguese World, 1441-1770.* By James H. Sweet (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003)**

James H. Sweet analyzes the exchange of religions, rituals, peoples, and ideologies which occurred in the African Portuguese world between 1441 and 1770. Sweet's main questions he proposes include; how did African cultural practices disperse and transfer along with the general diaspora, and what roles did religion play in creating opportunities and purpose for slave communities? Sweet's main argument is that Africans in seventeenth-century Brazil used a multitude of specific "Angolan," as well as Mbundu, ritual practices, burials, and beliefs in order to acknowledge their situations.<sup>1</sup> This includes the ways in which whites would adopt African religions and ritualistic practices, enabling them to undermine the systems put in place by the colonial world. Sweet is able to answer the questions he proposes as well as proving his general argument through the evidence he provides, which includes specific accounts of witchcraft and rituals as well as Jesuits and Benedictians accounts. Sweet was drawn to the topic because there was a lack of evidence regarding how cultural practices in Africa moved with the diaspora. Oftentimes scholars would rely solely on attempting to find parallels between African religions and Christianity, a mold that Sweet aims to break through his book. The book provides an extensive amount of information, background, and evidence in order to illustrate the ways Africans not only recreated Africa but also heavily empowered themselves through witchcraft and ritualistic acts in Portuguese Brazil.

Sweet evaluates the political, social, and religious climate of the African-Portuguese world in order to implement a backbone to his claims regarding the

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<sup>1</sup> James H, Sweet, *Recreating Africa : Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441-1770*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003, 16

ways kinship and its adoption was reflective of the lives Africans would lead. Sweet focuses primarily on Brazil due to its ties with Portugal, and allocates a small portion of the book to Africa. Geographically, there was a broad diaspora of Africans to other places in Latin America, including Mexico. However, one may speculate that Sweet emphasizes the African-Portuguese world since there was a considerable amount of Africans who were transported to Brazil since it was incredibly difficult to enslave the nomadic peoples who resided there due to their semi-sedentary lifestyles.<sup>2</sup> The large amounts of communities that formed as well as the capabilities for religious freedoms allowed Sweet to focus on the African people, their cultures, and the ways their customs directly worked against the colonial attitudes which ran rampant throughout Latin America. These thoughts are supported by Sweet through his use of first-person accounts as well as court, Jesuit, and Benedictine records. He presents readers with the fact that many whites were influenced by African witchcraft, and it became used as a vehicle of power to the multitude of Africans who resided in Brazil. This is evident through the *calundu*, or divination ceremonies including human possession, which were used to cure people in Central Africa.<sup>3</sup> Sweet cites the account of Branca, who was called upon by Felicia Pires, a Spanish woman, to remove the *calundu* which was causing her blindness. Branca conducted this by calling a spirit into her body and allowing it to possess her.<sup>4</sup> This illustrates the ways in which witchcraft allowed slaves to have spiritual and judicial authority. Since Africans were called on by whites to conduct rituals which were fervently frowned upon by the Catholic

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<sup>2</sup> Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441-1770*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003, 30

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 130

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 134

church, it allowed Africans to assert their own power in society, while removing authority from the hands of colonizers.

Sweet formulates the general idea that witchcraft was a form of resistance, commonly frequented by slaves and free blacks in order to protect their brothers or to defend themselves. In many ways, Sweet proposes the idea that the use of witchcraft was a reaction or result of the worst evil Africans had to face —The Atlantic Slave Trade. Sweet explains the injustices and temporal conditions which resulted from slavery, this included death, disease, hunger, and a large gender imbalance, all of which were able to be acknowledged through traditions of kinship. Sweet mentions the ways love, romance, and marriage mixed with witchcraft, reflecting on the struggles they were facing in Portuguese-Brazil. In order to have enough women, or wives for communities, men and women both would utilize witchcraft to fight for mates.<sup>5</sup> This illustrates the way witchcraft was used in African communities, as well as the ways Western ideals of marriage were not applicable within these communities.

Sweet is able to propose a convincing argument that witchcraft and ritualistic practices transcended religious meanings since they also heavily influenced social and economic ways of life. The format of the book allows readers to understand the background of colonial life in Portuguese Brazil, the impacts of slavery as well as the history of the slave trade. The ideas presented are able to ensure that Africans in Portuguese-Brazil were able to assert their power, not because of the parallels they shared with Christianity, but because of their incorporation of witchcraft in daily life. Despite Sweet asserting obvious biases regarding the influence rituals and witchcraft had in Portuguese-Brazil, this allows him to critique past scholarship on the topic,

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<sup>5</sup> Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441-1770*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003, 45.

disproving that Africans assimilation to the colonial world was due to parallels with Christianity.

Sweet's *Recreating Africa: Culture Kinship and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441-1770* provides information on the cultural and religious impacts the Atlantic slave trade had on colonial Brazil. At a time where the Americas were being colonized and occupied by Western superpowers, Africans were able to mix their own cultural and religious influences into colonial ways of life.

Maya C. Ramirez