Seeing African and Indigenous States and Societies:

Decolonizing and De-grouping Race Scholarships' Narratives of Conquest and Enslavement in the Early Modern Atlantic World

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Abstract

Race scholars often refer to the colonization of Indigenous peoples in the Americas and the enslavement of Africans as a founding moment in the making of today's racial hierarchies. Yet their narrative of this initial moment often mischaracterizes early European states, erases Indigenous and African states, and naturalizes racial group belonging. Such practices are counter-productive to the anti-racist project. Following the lead of decolonial scholarship, much recent work by historians has sought to recover and reconstruct the institutions, social structures and agency of African and Indigenous peoples, as well as revisit assumptions about European power, institutions and agency in their historical encounters with their continental "others." I highlight the potential of this approach for sociologists of "race" by narrating two significant historical events in the making of the modern Atlantic world: the conquest of Tenochtitlán, the capital of the Aztec empire, and the transatlantic enslavement of subjects of the kingdoms of Kongo and Ndongo (in today's Angola) in the 16th and 17th centuries. I analyze how particular European, Indigenous and African actors made decisions in the context of their own and others' historically situated and dynamic political and social structures. I read these historical events through the lens of decolonial scholarship, and sociological literatures on group-making, state formation and the emergence of capitalism, to make sense of the violent social process that led to the breakup of African, Indigenous and European political and social structures and the making of colonial and racially hierarchical social structures in the Atlantic world.

Keywords: colonialism, slavery, Angola, Mexico, race, racism

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Introduction

In 1621, Nzinga Mbandi, sister of Ngola Mbandi, King of Ndongo, arrived with a large entourage of soldiers, servants and slaves in the Portuguese colonial settlement of Luanda, to negotiate a peace agreement.[1] Upon arrival at the meeting place with the governor, she noticed that there was a golden chair for the governor to sit, and only cushions for her on the floor. Nzinga Mbandi called one of her servants, who crouched down and Nzinga sat on the servant like a chair. This way, she sat at the same height as the governor, establishing herself as an equal.

While the Portuguese governor wanted to establish that all Africans were inferior to the Portuguese, Nzinga Mbandi, a powerful princess (soon to rule as queen for thirty years), rejected this narrative. She demanded an equal status between her people and the Portuguese by rejecting colonizers' attempts to homogenize all Africans. Instead, she highlighted status differences *amongst* Africans. Just as the Portuguese differentiated between nobility, commoners, servants and slaves, so did Nzinga Mbandi request that the Portuguese recognize this differentiation among her people.

In the long view of history, the Portuguese governor's classification project prevailed, but in the days that Nzinga Mbandi spent in Luanda after this meeting, the Portuguese colonial officials temporarily accepted Nzinga's definition of the situation (Heywood 2017). Through war and diplomacy, she fought for the next thirty years to maintain her power and the control over which Africans from her region could or could not be enslaved, and to limit the ravaging effects of the transatlantic slave trade on her subjects.

[1] See Heywood (2017) for a detailed account of Nzinga Mbandi's life and trajectory, including this particular event.

While European colonizers might have *wanted* to homogenize Africans and Indigenous peoples, they had to contend with the reality that their power was far from established. They had, at least initially, to learn how Africans and Indigenous peoples organized their institutions and made social distinctions amongst themselves. To resist the Portuguese colonial encroachment, Nzinga Mbandi would also strategically harness social divisions between Europeans (particularly between the Portuguese and the Dutch), and make local allegiances (in particular with the powerful Kingdom of Kongo to the North).

Structuralist theories of race in sociology and other present-oriented disciplines often explain contemporary racial hierarchies as originating from histories of slavery, colonialism and institutionalized racism around the Atlantic. However, these theorists' historical narratives often inadvertently portray African, European and Indigenous peoples and their descendants (or people labelled as "black," "white," and "Indian") as natural social groupings; overstate European power and the presence of modern institutions at the beginning of the colonial process; and erase the existence of institutions and social organizations created and led by African, Indigenous and Afro-diasporic peoples.[2]

But Indigenous, African and Afro-diasporic people were not passive recipients of this process, nor were Europeans and Euro-diasporic people able to, in the beginning, single-handedly unleash it. Nor did the subjects and perpetrators of colonization and enslavement necessarily see themselves or organize their lives around these racial or continental divisions. The history of colonization and enslavement in the Atlantic world should be understood in the context of pre-existing, changing and increasingly

[2] While recognizing that the label "Indigenous" has been claimed more broadly by different peoples of Europe, Asia and Africa, I use the term "Indigenous" here to talk about the original peoples of the Americas and their recognized descendants (unless noted otherwise). I use the word "Indian" in quotes to referred to the racial category created by European colonizers

interconnected European, Indigenous and African institutions and relationships that organized political, economic, military and social power, and the gradual emergence of colonial and trans-continental institutions and relationships (Alencastro 2000; Green 2019; Heywood & Thornton 2007; Matthew & Oudijk 2007; Monteiro 2018; Murphy 2018; Rodney [1972] 2018; Sidbury & Cañizares-Esguerra 2011). This dynamic— which was also connected to Asia in important ways not explored in this paper—ultimately led to the disproportionate concentration of economic, political, military and other forms of power in the hands of Europeans and Euro-descendant elites in the Americas. Following sociological theorizing, this process of social transformation can be understood as a violent breakup and re-organization of communities, of which I highlight: the (fictitious and unstable) commodification of peoples' lives and livelihoods; the re-organization of military and political power; the re-organization of status groups under new criteria; and the destructive creation of (post-)colonial racial hierarchies.

To understand the *making* of colonial states and racially divided societies, we should first investigate how social relationships that held pre-colonial states and societies together were *unmade* and *transformed*, and how particular historical actors affected and reacted to these transformations. Drawing on recent historiography, I recount this unmaking in the context of two major historical events in the history of Atlantic slavery and colonization: the conquest of Tenochtitlán, the capital of the Aztec empire; and the social processes that led to the destruction of the Kongo and Ndongo kingdoms (in today's Angola) and to the massive enslavement of the populations of this region. When describing these historical events, I pay particular attention to how Indigenous, African and European

participants (and emerging hybrid and diasporic ones) navigated their own and others' political and social cleavages and relationships to achieve complex political goals.

Structural race theories and their historical assumptions

Structuralist theorists of race that are influential in sociology argue that modern society and its institutions are built on historical legacies of slavery and colonialism, which continue to reproduce racial inequality. They add that a racist ideology, which includes a Eurocentric historical narrative, permeates and structures contemporary institutions and worldviews, so as to obfuscate and perpetuate a racially unequal distribution of material and symbolic resources (e.g., Feagin 2013; 2020; Mills 2014; Omi and Winant 2014; Winant 2001). However, some of these works' historical descriptions are not only inconsistent with contemporary historiography, but can undermine some of their authors' own arguments and anti-racist goals. These narratives are often Eurocentric, reproduce the idea that Europeans have always been modern, and erase the agency and institutions of Indigenous and African peoples in the early modern period.

Mills (2014), for instance, describes the establishment of white supremacy this way:

> In the early phase of establishing global white supremacy, overt physical violence was, of course, the dominant face of this political project: the genocide of Native Americans in the conquest of the two continents of Aborigines in Australia, the incredible body counts of slaving expeditions, the Middle Passage, "seasoning," and slavery itself; the state supported seizures of lands and imposition of regimes of forced labor (p. 83).

Here, you have a description of an inexorable advancement of European and white power over 300 years.

In Winant's (2001) abstract discussion of the historical relationship between race and modernity, he argues that race and modernity were constituted together. However, in this historical description, he places the development of modern European states as prior to the colonial encounter:

> Thus nascent states constructed their key instrumentalities, institutions, and capabilities for action, particularly their own political and military apparatuses. Thus they worked out the beliefs and collective identities that would allow imperial activities to be launched and organized. (pp. 22-23)

Feagin (2020) also views early modern European colonialism and transatlantic slavery as foundational to the making of the modern, racialized world, but his description is contradictory. While he argues that "European colonialism took on its exploitative wealth-generating form in concert with enslavement of Africans and other indigenous peoples across the growing north and south Atlantic economies," later he contradicts this by adding that "[f]rom its beginnings, European colonialism relied heavily not only on a growing entrepreneurial bourgeoisie but also on these nation-states, most especially upon their well-equipped military organizations" (p. 24).

In these authors' narration of the early modern period, the agency is almost entirely attributed to Europeans and their white descendants in the Americas. Non-Europeans' only agency is to resist, usually in vain. Accounts of resistance, within this framework, may also contain their own forms of reification. Winant (2001) reveals some of this problem when he recounts some of the challenges to resistance:

> But confusion and division also characterized the subjugated. Amid the Africans and African-Americans of the New World, for example, many (intra-racial) divisions emerged from differences in national origin and the temporal/generational dimensions of exile from the African motherland. (p. 24)

Embedded in Winant's account of the challenges to a mobilization of resistance by Africans and African-Americans is a naturalization of group belonging, which leads divisions within members of these categories to be labelled as "confused."

The point here is not to deny that enslavement and colonialism were experienced as overwhelming and resistance-crushing by many, perhaps most, colonized and enslaved people, nor that racial ideologies and identities were historically important, or that African, Afro-American and Indigenous people reflexively mobilized around these categories to resist. But we should be more precise about exactly *when*, *where* and *how* particular identities, institutions and power structures matter. Doing so is central to debunking racist myths about the natural superiority of Europeans, and of the passivity, cultural inferiority of African and Indigenous peoples. To overcome these myths, we need alternative narratives that de-center Europe and Euro-Americans and that examine race, ethnicity and nation-states as socially and historically constructed categories.

Shifting the sociological gaze: some general principles

To understand the role of colonialism and slavery in the formation of racial hierarchies in the Atlantic World, we need to consider how colonization and enslavement initially happened *in the context of* pre-existing African, Indigenous and European social

and political structures, all of which were different from today's social and political structures. Doing so requires us to shift some of our assumptions about the past.

First, following the lead of decolonial scholarship, our analysis should "provincialize Europe" (and Euro-diasporic people) and pay attention to the histories, institutions, agency and subjectivities of colonized peoples (Chakrabarty 1992).[3] Provincializing Europe allows one to analyze social transformations that created the modern world as deriving from mutually influential relationships between Europe and other world regions, rather than the product of a simple diffusion of European ideas, institutions and technologies elsewhere. This, in turn, helps challenge racist narratives of inherent European modernity and superiority (Bhambra 2014; Go 2013; 2018). Similarly, Pan-Africanist and Indigenous scholars (e.g., Borrows 1997; Coulthard 2014; Du Bois 1947; Rodney 1972] 2018), as well as more recent historiography of Africa and the Americas (e.g., those cited in the historical narrative below), have sought to recover the histories, institutions and agency of African, Afrodescendant and Indigenous peoples, and their interactions with the process of colonization and enslavement.

Second, we should abandon the assumption that Europe had, from the beginning of the colonial encounter, the institutional makeup of later centuries. Here, we can draw on comparative-historical sociologist' and historians of European institutions' insights about what Europe was like before the colonial encounters of the last 500 years, and how it was transformed during and through these colonial relationships.

[3] While some authors have drawn distinctions between postcolonial and decolonial scholarship, I use the term broadly to include postcolonial, decolonial, Pan-Africanist and Indigenous resurgence scholarship under this heading.

Finally, we should leave aside, for a moment, the *categories* that we as analysts use to divide the social world, and our assumptions about social cohesion and mutual identification and mobilization around these categories ("groupness"), and understand how *participants* divided and organized their social world in particular socio-historical contexts (Loveman 1999; Brubaker 2002). If we do not start from the premise that people initially organized their actions, relationships and identities primarily around categories like "African", "European", "Indigenous", "white", "black", "Indian" etc., we are able to investigate how categories became consequential *through* the process of enslavement and colonization and its aftermath.

The making of the modern world as a violent re-organization of communities

This paper analyzes the process of enslavement and colonization that helped constitute the modern world through an analysis the historical reconfiguration of communities, where particular social structures, and the practices of social affiliation and differentiation that hold them together, break down and reconstitute themselves into a different form. I highlight below four aspects of this re-configuration that sociological theories describe: the transition to capitalism through the (fictitious) commodification of lives and livelihoods; the re-organization of military and political power; the re-configuration of status groups; and the destructive creation of racialized, (post-) colonial hierarchies.

Capitalism and the (fictitious) commodification of life: Marx and Polanyi describe the onset of capitalism as a historical and ongoing process of violent disruption that removes people from their communities and livelihoods and transforms labor, land and

money into products to be sold on the market. Because labor, land and money are abstractions for relations that humans have with other humans and with nature, Polanyi calls them fictitious commodities. This (fictitious) commodification of labor, land and labor is highly disruptive and unstable. Therefore, a re-organization of society is necessary to newly regulate social life, either through the development of class consciousness which will ultimately lead to a communist revolution (for Marx) or (for Polanyi) through introduction of new regulations that impose constraints on the market economy (Marx [1844]1978; [1848]1978; 2004; Polanyi [1944] 2001).

Similarly, other scholars have described the transatlantic slave trade and settler colonialism as violent processes of dispossession, displacement and dehumanization, where humans and nature (viewed as "slaves" and "land") are treated as commodities (see below). In the case of slavery, this tendency toward commodification is in constant tension with tendencies to re-form characteristically human (non-commodified) social relations amongst enslaved people, and even (to some extent) between the enslaved, enslavers and other members of slave-based societies (see Rinehart 2016).

The re-organization of political and military power: Comparative-historical sociologists have described historic changes in the social organization of political and military power. They describe pre-national states, particularly in Europe in the middle ages and early modern period, as being run by dynastic families, whose power was legitimized through religious and kinship logics, and whose realms of rule had no clear boundaries. Military, political and administrative power was often separate or decentralized. Local lords and, later, colonial entrepreneurs, controlled military and economic power, while kings and queens haphazardly attempted to collect taxes and get

military support in case of war, and to regulate colonial endeavors, often after conquest had taken place. The transition between old and new forms of rule that led to the emergence of modern nation-states happened through a centralization of military and political power of the ability to tax, conscript and collect information on inhabitants of large territories (Adams 2005; Mann 2012; Scott 1998; Tilly [1992] 2017). Recent work has shown how European centralized states, and much of their subsequent military and economic power, originated, at least in part, among colonial organizations, which later took over or transformed ("modernized") the traditional European central state (e.g., Adams 2005; Go 2013). While ostensibly rationalized and democratic, modern states use categories of race, ethnicity and nationhood to created new exclusionary practices that delimit legal or substantive citizenship (Anderson 2006; Mills 2014; Loveman 2014; Omi and Winant 2014; Wimmer 2002).

The reconfiguration of status groups*:* Weberian historical theorizing contains an account of the breakup and reconfiguration of status groups (*Stände)*. Status groups are formed when people mobilize subjective understandings of affinity, difference and hierarchy, as well as institutions, resources and power, to delimit communities of belonging and to restrict access to material and symbolic resources to outsiders. Later theorists, such as Tilly (1998), also elaborated on how these practices of exclusion can work to enable exploitation of group outsiders by insiders, integrating Marxist and Weberian frameworks.

Weber's analysis of modernization is sometimes interpreted as a transition from traditional forms of social regulation based on personal relations and/or culturally informed status hierarchies (status groups, or *Stände*) to a system based on purely

economic and rational bureaucratic relations. However, a closer reading of his work suggests that he regarded these pure market and rational forms are highly unstable and rarely existing in isolation. Instead, modern society constructs new status groups, where capitalist and bureaucratic elites manipulate the law, use new categories and subjective criteria for social distinction and develop associations that exclude others from membership and/or from access to material and symbolic resources that these groups monopolize (Weber [1921] 2010; see Waters and Waters 2016).

Race theories that focus on how whites organize to exclude people of color and monopolize resources, such as Harris's "whiteness as property" or Du Bois's idea of the color-caste and the wages of whiteness, are consistent with this framework (Harris 1993; see Itzigsohn & Brown 2020 and Morris 2017). But because the Weberian framework does not *presuppose* that status groups are formed around whiteness, it allows one to see other categories and mechanisms of status distinction that preceded or co-exist with racial ones.

The destructive creation of racialized, (post-) colonial hierarchies. Countering dominant Eurocentric narratives, Du Bois (1947) and Rodney ([1972] 2018) use a Pan-Africanist framework to describe the emergence of capitalism and of modern states. Starting with Marx's insight that primitive accumulation was also a colonial process, they elaborate on how the global economic system that emerged in the 16th century profited from the violent destruction of African political, social and economic structures, the plundering of Africa's human and natural resources, and the exploitation of African and Afro-descendant peoples in the Americas. Hence, the same process that generated wealth for Europeans and Euro-diasporic peoples generated poverty for Africa and its diaspora.

Similarly, scholarship on settler colonialism shows how settler capitalism has relied, and continues to rely, on the dispossession of Indigenous peoples in the Americas (Coulthard 2014; Murphy 2018).

But these literatures do not simply portray African and Indigenous people as passive and powerless victims of enslavement and colonialism. They also pay attention to the working and dynamics of African and Indigenous institutions, and to the agency of African and Indigenous people before and during the processes of European colonization and enslavement. This, in turn, allows for a more nuanced understanding of historical dynamics of colonialism and slavery itself.

Du Bois' and Rodney' description of Africans' political, social and economic systems and institutions before and during the process of enslavement and colonization, for instance, allows them to describe both the *agency* and *potential* of African and Afrodescendant peoples, while also making sense of the process by which they eventually became disempowered. By paying attention to the organization of African economies and their participation in long-distance trade before the advent of the slave trade, they stress that Africa had the potential to participate in the global economy on more equal terms. But this potential was thwarted by the transatlantic slave trade and, later, the European occupation of Africa, which destroyed or radically transformed African economic and political systems. Rodney argues that, since enslavement meant hunting people through war and violence, the export of enslaved human beings led to political splintering and economic isolation in Africa. The opposite happened in Europe, where trade in non-humans led to greater political and economic integration.

The Conquest of Tenochtitlán and the Enslavement in West Central Africans

The historical narratives that follow examine how particular African, Indigenous and European peoples were organized and re-organized socially and politically during the initial stages of the colonial encounter, and how particular actors made decisions *in the context* of these changing structures. I focus on a period *before* colonial and racial social structures around the Atlantic had been fully created. In analyzing the events in this period, I attempt to (momentarily) "unsee" colonial, national and racial categories and institutions. This does not mean an analysis of colonialism and enslavement "without groups" (Brubaker 2002), but one that recognizes locally and historically situated forms and criteria for social identification, differentiation and organization.

I recount below two historical events: the conquest of Tenochtitlán, the capital of the Aztec empire, where now stands Mexico city; and the social process that led to the massive enslavement and transatlantic shipment of the peoples of the Kingdoms of the Kongo and of Ndongo, in the region historians often label West Central Africa, where today is the Republic of Angola. The description of the first event is based secondary sources (Matthew and Oudijk 2007; Restall, Souza and Terraciano 2005; Townsend 2003), as well as commented and translated primary accounts from Nahua and Spanish eyewitnesses to the conquest (Schwartz and Seijas 2018). The description of the second event is based on secondary sources, cited in the narrative.

In these narratives, I highlight the following interrelated sets of factors:

1. *categorization and group belonging*, i.e., the social categories that are relevant for understanding political and social divisions and historical events at particular

times, places and for particular people, and how these systems and categories change over time;

2. *power and politics,* i.e., how political and military power are organized, sustained and re-organized in particular times and places, how political rivalries and allegiances are structured and how they change over time; and
3. *agency*, i.e., changing social interactions between different European, African, and Mesoamerican actors, and emerging hybrid, creole or outsider actors, including how actors adapt, take advantage of, resist, or succumb to changing circumstances.

I highlight the different levels of analysis whereby these processes can be studied by reading the two cases through different optics: the narrative the conquest of Tenochtitlán privileges micro-interactional and local events during the siege of the city, while the narrative of West Central Africa encompasses a broader spatial and temporal frame.

The two historical events are central to the history of slavery and colonialism in the modern Atlantic world. The conquest of the Aztec empire (in combination with the conquest of the Inca empire) helped consolidate Spanish power in the Americas and allowed the Spanish, through the large-scale mobilization of forced Indigenous labor under the encomienda system (and African slave labor), to extract precious metals that would provide the main global currency (the Spanish dollar) until the early nineteenth century. West Central Africa was the largest and longest-lasting origin of enslaved Africans brought to the Americas (Eltis 2001). Hence, by focusing on these cases, I provincialize the Anglo-American colonial project in our understanding of enslavement and colonization.

Mesoamerica and West Central Africa had larger populations, more hierarchical social structures and more centralized political power compared to many other Indigenous and African peoples of the early modern period. Nonetheless, prior historical work suggests that the main observation drawn from the analysis of these cases holds elsewhere: colonialism and enslavement depended on complex and changing interactions between European, Indigenous and African social and political structures (e.g., see Alencastro 2000; Green 2019; McNab, Hodgins & Standen 2001; Monteiro 2018; Murphy 2018; Sidbury & Cañizares-Esguerra 2001).

The Conquest of Tenochtitlán

In 1519, when the Spanish conquistadors arrived in Tenochtitlán, the capital of the Mexica (Aztec) empire, they encountered a city of 300,000 inhabitants, the size of Paris and Naples. Some compared it to Venice: it was in the middle of a lake, with many canals and bridges crisscrossing the city, with large palaces, temples, and a huge market. The local nobility was covered in gold and precious stones. The inhabitants of the city were also curious to see the Spaniards arrive: particularly noteworthy were the "deer" (horses) that the newcomers were mounted on, and also their guns, which created noise, smoke and an unpleasant smell.

Hernán Cortés, the captain of the Spanish expedition, dismounted his horse when he saw the emperor, Montezuma, approaching. Montezuma, surrounded by his court, descended from his litter. People swept the ground ahead of the emperor and put cloths for him to step on. Montezuma welcomed Cortés and dressed him with flowers, gold necklaces and other presents. Cortés offered Montezuma his right hand, which Montezuma took after

some hesitation. Cortés then put a gold necklace full of colourful glass stones around Montezuma's neck. Cortés tried to hug Montezuma but the emperor's staff held him back. Montezuma invited Cortés to stay in the city.

In reality, the two men were playing chess. The game had started long before their first meeting. Since Cortés and his men had arrived at the beach, he had been in constant interactions with Montezuma's informants, whom the Aztec emperor had purposely sent as lookouts. Informants had painted detailed pictures of them, their weapons, their horses — all of which Cortés had been sure to show off — and carried messages back and forth. Cortés had more powerful weapons and horses, but there were only 500 Spaniards compared to thousands of subjects of the Mexica empire. To carry out the expedition, Cortés had broken away from the governor of Cuba, Diego Velásquez, who had told Cortés to stick strictly to trading with the peoples of Mesoamerica.

Here, we can observe how Spanish colonialism worked at the time. While the Spanish crown funded Columbus's initial expedition and invested some funds into the settlement of Hispaniola, the bulk of the early colonial expeditions were organized by private or fairly autonomous individuals, who put together their own private armies and sought to establish themselves in, exploit, and administer new colonies. Only slowly, after the conquests over Mesoamerican and Andean polities were already established and the new colonies became profitable, did the Crown become interested in implementing a regular structure of colonial administration. Even then, local administrations were fairly autonomous until at least the 18th century and often incorporated pre-existing social and political arrangements (Cañeque 2013; Kicza 1992; Irigoin & Grafe 2008;).

But luckily for him, Cortés did not arrive to Technotitlán with just Spanish men. He also arrived with many enslaved Africans; Doña Marina, an Indigenous woman, Cortés's translator and future mother of one of his children (plus another translator); and an army of thousands of Indigenous soldiers. The majority of the Indigenous soldiers came from Tlaxcala, a place that had maintained independence from the Aztec empire, despite the Aztec conquest of the surrounding area. Tlaxcala had a less hierarchical power structure and had served as refuge for dissidents from the empire (Fargher, Blanton & Espinoza 2010). After initially fighting the Spaniards in a bloody battle, the Tlaxcalan elites decided to become allies with the Spaniards against the Mexica. Together, on the way to Tenochtitlán, the Tlaxcalans and the Spaniards jointly massacred the population of another city, Choulula.

The story so far shows how the conquest depended as much on effective communication as on force. At that moment, Spanish conquistadors were not powerful enough to afford a homogenization of the peoples they invaded: they had to take the trouble to understand some of the intricacies of the local political and social structures and relationships, and to be able to communicate with the people they encountered. When Cortés arrived at the coast of Mexico, he immediately sought translators and proceeded to try to figure out the politics of the place. Cortés and his people also used their own understanding of the status system then prevalent in Europe (the division between nobility, commoners, slaves, etc.) to make sense of the stratification system in Mesoamerica. Also noteworthy is the theatrical display of force, wealth and power on both sides, even before the violence happens in the city.

Cortés and his troops arrived in a place with its own political history of relatively recent expansion and conquest by the Mexica and their allies. Mesoamerica, the region that now comprises of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, was divided between several ethnolinguistic groups: the Nahuas, the Mixtecs, the Mayans and the Zapotecs. Each of these groups were divided into many small states. For the Nahuas, the dominant linguistic group in central Mexico, these states were called altepeme (in singular, altepetl). The most powerful atlepetl was that of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, which, together with the alepeme of Texcoco and Tlacopan, formed a Triple Alliance. The Alliance had conquered many other altepeme, which now paid it tribute and provided it with military support. It was this system of tribute and political allegiances and subordination between atlepeme that constituted the Aztec empire. When the Spanish arrived, the dominance of the Triple Alliance in the region was relatively recent and always contentious.

Similar to Europe at the time, the Aztec empire did not monopolize military power. Montezuma relied on the allegiance of lower nobility who controlled much of the military power and means of subsistence at the level of the altepeme. The altepetl also provided an important source of identity, which lasted beyond the conquest. In Tenochtitlán itself there were members of altepeme, that of the city's original inhabitants, the Tlatelocans, and that of the Mexica, their conquerors. Tlatelocans still controlled the city's commercial sector, and viewed Montezuma with suspicion (Schwartz & Seijas 2018). Several nobility from Montezuma's family also competed for power and the chance to succeed him. Besides, the city had 300,000 inhabitants whose consent to power Montezuma could not take for granted. Montezuma's political strategy had to take not only Spaniards into account, but

also this broader range of threats to his power (see Townsend 2003). The Tlaxcalans, who were resisting the Mexica's rule, used the Spaniards' allegiance in the conquest to help shift the balance of power in their own favor. To see Tlaxcalans as "traitors" would be to impose our own contemporary understandings of group belonging onto historical participants.

Historians disagree whether Montezuma was plotting a surprise attack on the Spaniards from within the city, or whether he was afraid of waging an all-out war inside the city due to the risk of losing the support of the population, the local nobility and Tlatelocans.[4] While staying in Tenochtitlán, Cortés's initial strategy was to behave diplomatically toward Montezuma until he managed to amass enough reinforcements from the Spaniards and to make further allegiances with other Nahua people, so that he would eventually be able to win militarily. But after some months staying in Tenochtitlán as guests, the Spaniards decided to imprison Montezuma in his own palace, before Montezuma had the chance to imprison Cortés and his group. Meanwhile, perhaps warned by Montezuma's emissaries, Velásquez sent Pánfilo de Navárrez with 900 soldiers to punish Cortés for his disobedience. Cortés left the city with some of his people to meet Navárrez, leaving others behind. The Spaniards left behind became violent: as Mexica and Tlatelocan warriors and elites were celebrating a festival, unarmed, these Spaniards mounted a surprise attack, and killed all the dancers and almost everyone at the scene. The people of the city learned of the attack and revolted. Montezuma tried to dissuade them but the people were angry, especially Tlatelocans. When Cortés and some of Návarrez's soldiers returned to the city, Montezuma was already dead. Nahua accounts say that the

[4] See Townsend (2003) and Schwartz and Seijas (2018)

Spaniards killed him, and Spanish accounts say his own people stoned him to death while he tried to dissuade them from fighting. Under new leadership, the Mexica and Tlatelocan soldiers and population sieged the Spaniards inside a palace in the city. The Spaniards fought back with their guns, horses, and with the help of their Tlaxcalan allies, but gunpowder and food were running out. They had to leave the city. As Spaniards and Tlaxcalans were leaving, the Mexica and Tlatelocan soldiers and population attacked them constantly with arrows, stones and swords from the top of buildings and walls, and from thousands of boats on the lake that surrounded the city. They destroyed various bridges, drowning Spaniards, Tlaxcalans and horses. Spaniards fought back with guns and ran away on portable bridges, aided by Tlaxcalan soldiers. Despite losing much of his army, Cortés escaped to Tlaxcala. Here, we can see substantial resistance to the conquest by the population and soldiers of Tenochtitlán, who eventually revolted and charged the Spaniards and their Tlaxcalan allies out of the city. City inhabitants were also resisting their own rulers, whom they saw as being complicit with Cortés and his followers.

In the next few months, both the Spaniards and the Mexica planned for war, forging alliances with various altepeme. Meanwhile, a smallpox epidemic, which the Spaniards brought and were immune to, ravaged the region. Millions of Mesoamerican people died, including the Mexica emperor who had replaced Montezuma. While the disease favored the Spanish side, it was not decisive by itself. The Spaniards were still vastly outnumbered. Many surviving communities regrouped, re-organized politically, and resisted. The Mexica emperor was replaced again. And the disease also infected the Nahua allies of the Spanish. But the increased prospect that the Spanish would win enabled them to attract even more

local allies. The Spaniards and their Indigenous allies finally took over Tenochtitlán, destroying bridges and temples, burning palaces and houses, killing soldiers and civilians.

The conquest of Tenochtitlán was not the product of Spanish inherent superiority, not even of their superior technology or immunity to diseases. While technology of warfare, particularly gunpowder, helped tip the balance in favor of Spanish colonizers, a group of 500 Spaniards were no match for the thousands of Aztec soldiers, nor even for the thousands of inhabitants of Tennochtitlán, who eventually (though temporarily) managed to expel Spaniards and their allies from the city. Rather, the Spaniards arrived at the city with thousands of Tlaxcalan soldiers. Amongst the conquerors were also enslaved Africans. The European conquest of the Americas was, from the beginning, intimately connected with Europe's engagement with Africa and enslavement of Africans. The colonization of the Americas, in turn, through mechanisms that we will discuss below, enhanced European economic and military power in Africa itself. European power emerged from their control of the Atlantic Ocean, and of the movement of peoples and resources across it in both directions.

The Kingdoms of Kongo and Ndongo and the Atlantic Slave Trade

When Portuguese explorer Diogo Cão arrived at the mouth of the Congo river in 1483, he was received by the Mwene (lord, count) of Soyo, a vassal to Nzinga a Nkuwu, the king of the Kongo. The count took some Portuguese explorers to Kongo's capital to meet the king, but the explorers did not return. In retribution, the Portuguese took some Kongolese citizens to Lisbon. Kongolese and Portuguese captives lived for two years in the capital of each others' kingdoms. The Kongolese king talked to his Portuguese

captives and became interested in learning more about Portuguese religion and technology. He converted to Christianity, asked the Portuguese to send missionaries and artisans to build a Portuguese-style church and people who could teach them European agricultural techniques, sent Kongolese children to study in Portugal, and Kongolese who returned created a school to teach writing and Christianity to Kongolese elite children.

But the Kongolese did not uncritically adopt Portuguese ways. They celebrated the King's baptism with their own traditional dances, music and games. European agricultural techniques were soon deemed ineffective in the tropical climate. Afonso I, Nzinga a Nkuwu's son and successor, considered but rejected most of the Portuguese legal system as inferior to the existing one. Well-read in Christian doctrine, Afonso helped spread Christianity in the kingdom, and sent his son to study theology in Portugal. But he merged Christianity with Kongolese religious traditions: African deities became Christian saints, and as a church was built on their elite ancestors' cemeteries, the Kongolese continued to worship these ancestors (Heywood & Thornton 2007; Heywood 2009).

In 1518, Ngola Kiluanje, king of Ndongo, sent embassadors to Portugal asking for missionaries, and said that he wanted to get baptized. Ngola Kiluanje was establishing a powerful kingdom that was politically independent of the Kongo, and this included having unmediated relationships with the Portuguese. But the Portuguese missionaries were arrested upon arrival. Kongo also sent an ambassador and a priest to baptize Ngola Kiluanje, but that mission was also expelled after a fight with local Portuguese and Luso-Africans. While the Kongolese priest stayed, Ngola Kiluaje never became Christian.

Because the Ndongo's ruling dynasty was called the Ngolas, the Portuguese would later refer to Ndongo as the Kingdom of Angola (Heywood & Thornton 2007).

The two kingdoms had different initial relations with the Portuguese. Kongo's kings initially allied with the Portuguese crown and adopted Christianity, while Ndongo's elites confronted and resisted, from the beginning, attempts by the Portuguese to conquer and impose Christianity on the kingdom. Nonetheless, both kingdoms' elites also initially consented to participating in the slave trade with the Portuguese, while retaining control of who could be enslaved. Over time, however, both kingdoms became splintered through the logic of warfare generated by the transatlantic slave trade, and indiscriminate and widespread enslavement ensued.

But to fully understand how this happened, one needs to explore in more detail the political and social structures of these kingdoms, and how they interacted with those of European colonizers and enslavers. Similar to what Spaniards did in the conquest of Tenochtitlan, Portuguese colonial officials, missionaries and slave traders were effective because they learned about, and enmeshed themselves into, the political and social contexts of West Central African societies. Ndongo and Kongo elites also sought to learn about Europeans and to find ways to benefit from these relationships. They used these new connections to leverage their power and influence within the local and regional political context. Over time, new and hybrid actors also entered the scene and became important to the story.

The social and political structures of the Kongo and Ndongo kingdoms in the 16th and 17th centuries

The populations of Kongo and Ndongo spoke different but mutually intelligible Bantu languages: Kikongo and Kimbundu, and were referred to as the Makongo and the Mbundu peoples. They shared similar religious beliefs and practices before (and also after) the adoption of Christianity. But to understand the historical process that led to mass enslavement and to the disintegration of these kingdoms, we need to pay attention to status differentiations *amongst* the subjects of these kingdoms, and their relationship to the organization of political, military and economic power.

As in Europe and in Mesoamerica at the time, political power in West Central Africa was kinship-based and familial, and military power was decentralized. Much of the military power was controlled by local landed nobility. Monarchs' extended family members also competed for power. Initially, rulers in these kingdoms permitted slavery for particular kinds of people: war captives and convicts. This was a common criterion for enslavement also in Europe and many other parts of the world at the time. (Interestingly, these are categories of people to whom we still legally deny freedom today.)

In 1535, the Kongo kingdom ruled directly over 350,000 subjects, and more tentatively over a larger area. The king's appointed governors ruled some of the territories or three-year-terms, while traditional local families ruled others. When a king died, a council of Kongo's nobility elected a new king, usually from among the kings' relatives. The kingdom's capital, Mbanza Kongo, was a political, legal and religious center. The king sent judges and inquisitors to provinces to investigate legal infractions, hold courts and make decisions about punishments. In the capital, there was a major temple that hosted deities and a sacred cemetery where the kings' ancestors were

venerated. When Kongo rulers adopted Christianity, Kongolese missionaries, priests and churches spread a Christianity merged with local practices and beliefs (Heywood 2009; Heywood & Thornton 2007).

Slavery existed in Kongo when Europeans arrived, but on a small scale, and was restricted to convicts and foreigners captured through war or bought already as slaves. By the late sixteenth century, as the kingdom became more involved in the Atlantic slave trade and expanded militarily, slavery became more common. But until the end of the 17th century, Kongo's kings still managed, when political stability permitted, to limit to the scope and manner of enslavement (Green 2019; Heywood 2009; Heywood & Thornton 2007).

The Ndongo kingdom was made up of smaller independent territories called *murindas* or *kandas*, whose local rulers were called *sobas*. By the time he invited the Portuguese to establish diplomatic relations, Ndongo's king Ngola Kiluanje had expanded his rule by conquering and forging alliances with neighboring *sobas.* These *sobas* paid taxes and provided military assistance in case of war, but had autonomy to govern their own territories. The king and his extended family nonetheless concentrated authority, resources and population in the capital. Children of *sobas* and of the royal family often inter-married to seal allegiances. But as *sobas* were often related to the royal family, they could dispute rights to succession (Heywood 2017; Heywood & Thornton 2007).

Ndongo's status divisions formed a continuum between bondage and freedom, and between power and subjection. There were officials in charge of running the affairs of the kingdom, collecting taxes, commanding warfare and managing the royal families' estates.

There were male and female priests, including the *mwene ndongo* (great priest), the kingdom's religious leader. There were free, tax-paying, subjects of the *sobas*, called *ana murinda*. There were *kijikos*: enslaved war captives who (similar to serfs in Europe) were tied to the *murinda* and could not be sold. Between the 16th and 17th centuries, Ndongo rulers increased their power relative to the *sobas* through their placement of *kikijos* in administrative and military positions. Finally, there were *mubikas*: slaves who could be bought and sold. Although most *mubikas* were war captives, people bought in slave markets or condemned judicially could also become *mubikas.* Similar to Kongo, Ndongo also regulated who could be enslaved, to avoid the enslavement of free people and *kikijos*. As the overseas slave trade developed, the category of the *mubikas* became more numerous (Heywood 2017; Heywood & Thornton 2007; Pantoja 2000).

Displacement, hybridity, and new and changing social categories: Luso-Africans, New Christians, Tomistas, Lançados, Imbangalas

Originally uninhabited, in 1485 the Portuguese crown established a colony in São Tomé. An island on the Gulf of Guinea, São Tomé is located conveniently (for early modern slave traders) between West Africa and West Central Africa. Portuguese sugar planters settled and brought enslaved people from West Africa and West Central Africa. Other settlers included *lançados*, i.e., Portuguese outcasts including convicts condemned to exile and people escaping poverty or religious persecution; children of Jewish people expelled from Spain into Portugal, which the Portuguese government separated from their parents and shipped to São Tomé (most of whom died soon thereafter); New Christians (Europeans of Jewish or Muslim origin who had been forced to convert to Christianity);

and Portuguese, Genovese, French and Spanish traders and missionaries. Some of Kongo's nobility also acquired sugar plantations there. Some of the Portuguese settlers married African women, and their descendants and social and cultural affiliates that some historians label Luso-Africans (e.g., Heywood & Thornton 2007). Because Portuguese clergy and officials did not want to live there due to the presence of diseases, many of the elite positions in São Tomé were occupied by local Luso-Africans (Alencastro 2000; Henriques 2000; Newitt 2010).

New and hybrid categories of people also emerged within and around the Kongo and Ndongo kingdoms, where they played various roles. There were Luso-African descendants of Portuguese who settled in the Kongo and Ndongo kingdoms and married local African women, and Luso-Africans who moved from São Tomé into the continent. Luso-African mercenaries and slave traders from São Tomé helped Ndongo's rulers militarily in the establishment of their kingdom and traded in slaves directly with Ndongo, breaking Kongo's monopoly. It was Luso-Africans from São Tomé who first settled in Luanda, in order to contraband *nzinbu* shells (used as money) into Kongo, and slaves out of Kongo (Henriques 2000; Heywood & Thornton 2007; Newitt 2010).

New Christians were also common in the Portuguese colonial empire beyond São Tomé, where they acquired varied roles and statuses. A few prominent slave trading families were New Christian. The inquisition of the 16th century increasingly persecuted New Christians as potential "crypto-Jews." In Africa, New Christians might come in conflict with European missionaries and church officials, and be protected by African rulers. In 1555, for instance, Kongo's King Diogo I expelled Jesuit missionaries from Kongo and helped protect New Christians living in the kingdom from religious

persecution. Some Luso-Africans were of New Christian origin. Heywood & Thornton attribute Ngola Kiluanje's refusal to accept Portuguese missionaries to the resistance by his New Christian Luso-African allies (Henriques 2000; Heywood & Thornton 2007; Newitt 2010).

Another important and new social grouping that emerged in West Central Africa in the 17th century were the Imbangalas. Imbangalas were itinerant groups which included thousands of soldiers, and who most likely originated from outside the Ndongo and Kongo kingdoms. They sustained themselves through plunder of communities they invaded. They raided crops of palm trees to make alcohol, and captured teenagers to made them into soldiers. Over time, they would become important allies in the wars of enslavement (Macedo 2013; Heywood & Thornton 2007).

The role of the political structure of Early Modern Europe

Rather than separate nation-states that competed for and monopolized power, European political structures of 16th and 17th centuries were constituted through kinship-based relationships (Adams 2005). Until the 1580s, the Netherlands and Spain were both governed by Hapsburg kings, who had inherited a wide range of European territories through various intermarriages and dynastic political moves. In the 1580s, at the same time that the Dutch became independent of the Hapsburgs, a crisis of succession in Portugal led the Spanish king Phillip II, to inherit the Portuguese throne, to which he was related by blood.

These shifting relationships had important consequences for the slave trade from West Central Africa. From 1580 to 1640, the unification of the Portuguese and Spanish

crowns caused an increase in demand for enslaved Africans to work in the Spanish colonies in the Americas. Meanwhile, the newly independent Dutch became competitors in the Atlantic slave-based economy (see below).

Even within the Portuguese empire, there was an emerging fissure between the crown and the new colonial and slave trading elites in the diaspora. In the 17th century, a conflict emerged between the Portuguese crowns' desire to establish a stable colonial power structure in Angola and interests of slave traders and slaveholding elites in São Tomé and Brazil, who wanted to capture and enslave as many Africans as possible. Over time, the Portuguese governors of Angola increasingly represented the interests of creole slave trading and sugar planting elites from São Tomé and, then, Brazil. Dutch power also shifted over time to colonial elites. These diasporic European elites increasingly created a system of labor and military power that bridged the Atlantic Ocean, strengthened the colonial enterprise, and weakened African and Indigenous polities (Adams 2005; Alencastro 2000; Heywood & Thornton 2007; Newitt 2010).

The changing politics of warfare, enslavement, and resistance

During the 16th century, Portuguese officials and missionaries tried many times to subjugate Ndongo rulers and to convert them into Christianity, and failed. The Portuguese colonizers faced not only substantial resistance from Ndongo's king's armies, but also had to navigate the complicated politics of the *sobas*, a shifting relationship between Kongo and Ndongo, and the varied relationships and interests of Luso-Africans. King Sebastião of Portugal, who ruled from 1557 to 1578, aimed to settle the land and make African nobility into vassals of the crown. He sent Paulo Dias de Novais twice to

ostensibly negotiate with Ndongo, but with a secret mission to conquer the kingdom. The first time, in 1563, Ndongo's king Ndambi a Ngola arrested Novais and his missionaries, after King Bernardo of Kongo warned Ngola in a letter that the Portuguese had come to take his land. In 1564, Novais temporarily allied with Ndongo's new king, Njinga Ngola Kilombo kia Kasenda, to crush rebellion by *sobas* of old royal lineage, who disputed the new kings' legitimacy. But a Luso-African from Kongo who was aware of Novais' charter to "conquer and subjugate" warned both the Kongo and the Ndongo kings of Novais's secret plan. Kia Kasenda declared war against the Portuguese.

The situation shifted somewhat in favor of the Portuguese after they helped the Kongo kingdom expel the Jagas, a foreign group that had invaded the kingdom. In return, Kongo's King Alvaro I consented to assist Novais in his fight against Ndongo, and also gave the Portuguese access to the geographic area near the coast where nzimbu shells could be harvested, and which provided the basis for the Portuguese colony of Angola. But while he now counted on the joint armies from Kongo, allied Luso-Africans and *sobas*, and his own Portuguese forces, Novais could not defeat the Ndongo king's forces. Some *soba* allies of the Portuguese strategically switched over to kia Kasenda's winning side (Heywood 2017; Heywood & Thornton 2007; Newitt 2010).

While the Portuguese could not subjugate Ndongo's rulers, these wars enhanced Portuguese power in the region and benefitted the transatlantic slave trade. Slave traders followed armies and indiscriminately captured war refugees and displaced people. Ndongo rulers punished rebel *sobas* for treachery by enslaving them, their families, and their subjects. Ndongo's rule became weaker, as more *sobas* joined the Portuguese side,

either voluntarily or by force. The Portuguese colony of Angola expanded near the coast, reducing Ndongo's territory.

In the 17th century, Portuguese governors allied with the recently arrived Imbangalas to attack Kongo and Ndongo. But the Imbangalas had agendas of their own, and would sometimes pillage the Portuguese or ally with their enemies. The Portuguese also allied with local dissident nobility, especially during periods of dynastic conflict. Eventually, Ndongo split into two factions that claimed the throne, both of which had Imbangala armies on their side. Nzinga Mbandi, who became queen of one of Ndongo's factions (the one that was not allied with the Portuguese), went further and married Imbangala leaders and then became and Imbangala leader herself (Heywood 2017; Heywood & Thornton 2007).

The wars of the 17th century further benefitted slave traders, who captured and sold thousands across the Atlantic. Some managed to escape slavery, for instance by running from the Portuguese to join Nzinga's army, or by fleeing to the interior. Combined with drought and a smallpox epidemic, these movements of people caused a demographic decline in the region (Pantoja 2000; Heywood 2017; Heywood & Thornton 2007).

Meanwhile, the Kongo kingdom was also being ravaged by an interaction between civil war, external wars and the slave trade. Between Alvaro II's death in 1614 and the reign of Garcia II (1641-61), dynastic conflicts brought civil wars and social instability to Kongo. As the slave trade became more profitable and internal political competition expanded, different factions competing for power in Kongo increasingly found legitimate ways of enslaving the local freeborn population, through convictions for treason. Portuguese and Dutch colonial officials involved themselves and their various African

allies in these conflicts. They also brought troops from Brazil, consisting mostly of enslaved or formerly enslaved African and Afro-descendant soldiers (Heywood & Thornton 2007; Heywood 2009).

In the 17th century, warfare was intensified by presence of slave trading interests and power tied to the expanding colonial enterprise on the other side of the Atlantic. Moreover, shifts in Hapsburgs' realm of rule in the late 1500s temporarily merged Portuguese and Spanish colonial interests, while and adding the competition from the Dutch West India Company. The Spanish empire sought enslaved Africans to supplement Indigenous labor in the growing mining-based economy in the Andes and Mesoamerica. In 1595, the crown gave *asientos*, long-term contracts for trading in slaves, to people with Angolan connections, and also required that all financial transactions be paid in slaves. In the 1590s, the Dutch invaded São Tomé. There was also a large revolt by enslaved people and maroon communities, destroying many sugar plantations. Many Portuguese sugar planters moved their operations to Brazil. There, planters joined an increasing number of immigrants from Portugal and the Azores and Madeira islands, and took advantage of an expanding frontier into Indigenous land. The expansion of sugar planting from São Tomé to Brazil, and within Brazil itself, further encouraged the African slave trade. In 1630, the Dutch conquered Pernambuco, the main sugar colony in Brazil, and became increasingly involved in the African slave trade and hence, in the political and military struggles in Angola (Alencastro 2000; Monteiro 2018; Heywood & Thornton 2007, Newitt 2010).

This new configuration of power provided both the opportunity and the motivation for African elites to organize new forms of resistance. Realizing the destructive effects of Portuguese colonial presence and of the slave trade on their

societies, Ndongo's queen Nzinga Mbandi and Kongo's kings eventually united in their struggle against the Portuguese. While their joint forces were still significant on land, they lacked control of the Atlantic Ocean. To counter this disadvantage, these African rulers leveraged intra-European political divisions. Kongo's king Pedro II's attempted at a military alliance with the Dutch in 1623. This was not initially successful, but Dutch commercial presence in the region grew in the 1630s. By the early 1640s, Kongo's king Garcia II and Nzinga Mbandi allied with the Dutch to expel the Portuguese. In exchange, Nzinga and Garcia helped the Dutch conquer the Portuguese colony of Angola in the 1640s. Afterwards, however, the Dutch disappointed their African allies by signing a treaty of non-aggression with the Portuguese (Green 2019; Heywood & Thornton 2007).

As the Portuguese and Dutch fought each other in Africa, they brought reinforcements from Brazil, which relied on their strong Brazilian connections. Because of the soldiers that both sides brought to Africa from Brazil were African or of African descent, the wars that they fought in this period became known as "guerras pretas". The influence of Brazilian interests on West Central African affairs became even stronger after the Portuguese retook Luanda from the Dutch, in 1648. The new governor of Angola, Salvador de Sá, was ex-governor of Rio de Janeiro, leading a long line of "Brazilian" governors who had a highly aggressive policy of waging war and capturing people for the transatlantic slave trade. After using their Imbangala and Brazilian armies to recapture Luanda, the Portuguese proceeded to use these same forces to wage continuous war against Nzinga Mbandi, and to stir up Kongo's internal power struggles (Alencastro 2000; Heywood & Thornton 2007; Heywood 2017; Pantoja 2000).

During his reign, from 1641 o 1661, Kongo's king Garcia II reduced the civil war and controlled discontented nobility and their Portuguese allies, thereby limiting the enslavement of Kongolese citizens. He initially drew on his allegiance with the Dutch to establish social and political stability. After the Portuguese and their allies took back their colony and became more aggressive toward the Kongo, Garcia expelled them with his armies. While Garcia punished those who rebelled against him with enslavement, over his twenty year rule, he reduced the number of enslaved people exported from the kingdom (Heywood 2009; Heywood & Thornton 2007).

Eventually, the interests and power of Portuguese colonizers and slave traders prevailed. In 1656 Nzinga again negotiated with the Portuguese governor: she would re-convert to Christianity and renounce her Imbangala lifestyle, as well as her claims to Ndongo's rule, and in return the Portuguese would recognize her de facto rule over the territory of Matamba and would not charge her tribute or taxes. With the depopulation of the region and at the age of over 75, it became harder for Nzinga to fight. With Nzinga's death in 1663, the Portuguese took over Matamba, Ndongo, and several *sobas* in the region became vassals of the Portuguese, and paid taxes in slaves (Heywood 2017; Heywood & Thornton 2007; Pantoja 2000).

When Garcia II's reign ended, Kongo's nobility again competed for succession, and civil war again ravaged the kingdom. As the central state collapsed, contenders to the throne punished each other (plus their subordinate populations) by enslaving them. Taking advantage of the chaos, the Portuguese governor of Angola sent an invading army of 400 European soldiers and 4,000 enslaved African soldiers, and captured and enslaved thousands of people, and killed Kongo's new king, Antonio I. By the 18th century, the

Kongo state collapsed, and local rulers selected kings that had little power and short reigns. These local rulers vied for power by enslaving each others' subjects, as well as anyone who supported their rivals, selling slaves to Europeans and retaining large armies of enslaved people. Warlords and European traders took advantage of the lawless situation and frequently kidnapped people to sell as slaves. Kongo's kings were no longer in control of the slave trade. As the kingdom disintegrated, most enslaved people exported were Kongolese citizens (Heywood 2009).

Lessons for present-oriented, but historicizing, race scholars

Race scholars often explain today's symbolic and material inequalities between people labelled "black," "Indigenous" and "white" in the Atlantic world as rooted in legacies of slavery and colonialism that originated with Europe's colonial encounter with Africa and the Americas in the 15th and 16th centuries. Because today's racist ideologies obscure this history and hence legitimize and naturalize white supremacy, uncovering this history is essential to the anti-racist project. Doing so can accomplish two tasks for race scholars: the first is to debunk assumptions about racial superiority that permeate today's dominant ideologies; the second is to provide a better theory of the processes of enslavement and colonization that have helped create the racial hierarchies of today.

Countering racist ideologies

Structuralist theories of race are concerned not only the violent history and ongoing reality that built today's racialized institutions but also the ideologies that continue to legitimize racial hierarchies. Embedded in racist ideologies are historical narratives that

erase or distort the presence of political and social organization of peoples of non-European descent. Mills (2014), for instance, discusses how Enlightenment discourse, still influential today, divides social spaces and bodies between barbaric/savage and civilized, deeming only those "civilized" as eligible to be equal participants in the social contract. As Mills explains, this view portrays Indigenous peoples and people of color as being incapable of political and social organization, so as to justify the presence of the colonial racial state. And yet in their accounts of the early development of transatlantic slavery and colonialism, structuralist scholars of race that are influential in Sociology often reproduce this ideology by erasing the agency and the political and social institutions of Indigenous, African and Afro-descendant peoples, and by also de-historicizing European institutions.

Another important and related characteristic of racial ideologies is the tendency to homogenize and reify diverse people(s) into purportedly homogenous and externally defined racial groups. Indigenous scholars in particular have been critical of race theories' tendencies to reduce diverse Indigenous peoples, with specific social identities, cultural traditions, and political histories into homogenized and depoliticized racial categories (e.g., Andersen 2014). Racial ideologies also tend to naturalize the social cohesion and mutual sense of belonging of diverse African and Afro-descendant peoples.

Countering these tendencies of erasure and simplification, and following the lead of decolonial (especially Pan-Africanist and Indigenous) scholarship, as well as that of recent historiography, I sought to tell a story that challenges assumptions of Indigenous and African peoples as peoples without history, agency and political and social organization. Drawing on historical research and using the lens of historical sociology, I examined how political institutions and social structures of particular Indigenous and

African peoples were organized and changed over time and in relation to European ones, and how particular African and Indigenous historical actors negotiated changing and complex political and social contexts. I located Europe and Europeans in the appropriate historical context, showing that the political and social structures of Europe, West Central Africa and Mesoamerica were more similar to each other in the 16th and 17th centuries than conventional narratives convey. Finally, drawing on Weberian and other "groupness" approaches, I paid attention to the ways that historically and socially situated categories of belonging worked to organize social action and the changing political and social structures that actors inhabited.

Toward an explanation of the making of racial and colonial social structures

Besides offering a correction for historical misrepresentation, the above approach allows for a better explanation of the historical processes of colonization and enslavement that eventually shaped the contemporary racial hierarchies around the Atlantic. We can, then, examine how particular actors, embedded in particular institutional and political configurations, mobilized human and non-human resources to build, channel or resist different kinds of power (political, economic, military, symbolic etc).

In the above historical narratives, I described how, in early modern Europe, Mesoamerica and West Central Africa, political power was organized around kinship structures of ruling families, and military power was decentralized and controlled by lower nobility. As colonial processes unfolded, other actors such as conquistadors, colonial officials, slave traders and independent warlords emerged. European colonizers and enslavers recognized Mesoamerican and West Central African structures as similar to

their own, and directed their efforts into participating in the politics of the places they interacted with, making allegiances with some groups against others, and taking advantage of dynastic crises, foreign invasions and local political power struggles. Similarly, African and Indigenous elites, when they could, exploited European presence to further local political goals.

Early modern Europe, Mesoamerica and West Central Africa had similar systems of stratification into status groups: higher and lower nobility with relations of vassalage, tribute and taxes; religious authorities, merchants, craftspeople and administrators; free citizens; and citizens in varying situations of bondage and dependency. Initially, enslaved people that could be bought and sold were a minority of the population, which was derived from situations of captivity and conviction. The transatlantic slave trade changed the character and scale of slavery, making all Africans, regardless of status, eligible for commodified enslavement. While I did not analyze this development in this paper, the mobilization of Indigenous labor in Mesoamerica took a different path, where Spaniards initially relied on, re-directed and intensified pre-existing political and social structures to mobilize and extract tribute labor to help produce silver for the emerging global currency.

What can we say about the process by which colonialism and enslavement around the Atlantic *made* race? Categories such as "black" or "Indian" can be found in records of earlier encounters of Europeans with peoples of Africa and the Americas, and race-like logics of social distinction *within* Europe can be traced to earlier periods (Loomba 2009; Blackmore 2009). While a longer historical timeline and a broader geographic scope would be required to fully answer this question, some tendencies toward social divisions that we now recognize as racial can be observed in the analysis of enslavement of West

Central Africa above. First, we see racial or color distinctions increasingly determining the fate of individuals in the emerging transatlantic colonial and enslavement system. We see the beginnings of this process, at the moment when the Ndongo and Kongo states splinter and become unable to control who gets enslaved. Second, we observe the moment when West Central African elites become aware of this common fate and unite against European presence. Finally, the narrative shows a narrowing of intra-European and intra-African differences through the divergence in the fate of convicts and outcasts from Europe vs. Africa. Convicts from both places were increasingly expelled and sent to the frontiers of European colonial expansion. Many did not survive the process. But for those who survived, their fates diverged. Portuguese convicts and outcasts could make a new life for themselves as colonizers. Meanwhile, convicts from West Central Africa were increasingly sold across the Atlantic, to be integrated as chattel slaves into the Euro-American colonial economy. We begin to see, then, in the emerging transatlantic colonial system, not only a flattening of intra-African differences in people's fates, but also an equalization, in the diaspora, between of Europeans from various statuses back home.

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