

# Remembering Mary, Shaping Revolt: Reconsidering the Stono Rebellion

By MARK M. SMITH

ON SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 1739, SIXTY-ODD SOUTH CAROLINA SLAVES took up arms and revolted, killing, as one terrified contemporary styled it, “twenty-three Whites after the most cruel and barbarous Manner.”<sup>1</sup> While there is no direct testimony regarding the insurgents’ motives in the Stono rebellion, an analysis of some hitherto unexamined sources, bolstered by logic, forensic reconstruction, and a detailed understanding of the insurgents’ African and Catholic background, as well as by recent historical work by colonial specialists and Africanists, may offer an answer to a neglected question: Why did the slaves revolt on the particular Sunday of September 9, 1739? The answer has implications beyond the immediate concern of chronology, for it highlights the importance of the rebels’ memories of Catholicism generally and of the Kongolese veneration of the Virgin Mary specifically—memories that not only prove to have been crucial factors in the insurgents’ timing and iconographic shaping of the rebellion, but that also have broader consequences for historians of eighteenth-century American slavery.

This article will carefully examine the timing of the Stono rebellion in order to better reconceptualize and reevaluate our understanding of African acculturation in colonial North America. Stono’s timing and

<sup>1</sup> “Report of the Committee Appointed to Enquire into the Causes of the Disappointment of Success in the Late Expedition Against St. Augustine,” July 1, 1741, in J. H. Easterby, ed., *The Colonial Records of South Carolina: The Journal of the Commons House of Assembly, May 18, 1741–July 10, 1742* (Columbia, S.C., 1953), 78–93 (quotation on p. 83). An earlier version of this article was presented as “Questioning Colored Peoples’ Time: The Importance of Punctuality for Black Resistance in the American South, 1739 and 1955,” at a conference entitled “On Time: History, Science, Commemoration,” held at the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside, Liverpool, England, and sponsored jointly by the British Society for the History of Science and the Royal Historical Society, September 16–19, 1999. For their comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this article, I thank Ronald R. Atkinson, John Basil, Walter Edgar, Eugene D. Genovese, Daniel C. Littlefield, Philip D. Morgan, Robert Olwell, and the anonymous readers for the *Journal of Southern History*.

---

MR. SMITH is an associate professor of history at the University of South Carolina, Columbia.

religious geography expose the shortcomings of an older debate on the extent to which transplanted slaves retained elements of their “African” culture, and they also lend credence to recent work that examines the historically specific ways in which Africans who had already been exposed to Europeans prior to their forced relocation to the New World incorporated aspects of this culture into their own cosmologies. This more recent emphasis helps avoid an essentialist and temporally static notion of what is or is not “African” and instead allows for the possibility that pre-enslavement, European-African contact might have helped shaped cultural systems and values in the context of New World slavery. The interpretation offered here helps us move beyond the familiar and unhelpful binary established years ago in the debates between Melville J. Herskovits and E. Franklin Frazier, as well as some of their subsequent supporters and detractors. Herskovits and his followers stressed the continuity of broadly conceived West African culture in shaping Afro-American values under slavery, particularly in the Caribbean and South America. While certainly important for alerting historians, anthropologists, and ethnographers to enslaved African Americans’ retention of West African culture under New World slavery, Herskovits’s model was too static and sweeping, as several subsequent critics have pointed out. Because it paid insufficient attention to change over time within specific pre-enslaved African societies, Herskovits’s argument tended to slight and simplify the process of cultural exchange and syncretism between Africans and European colonizers. In this context it makes little sense to talk of Africanisms and retentions in the New World without understanding how Africans adapted, rejected, or accommodated elements of European colonizers’ culture prior to their forced relocation to the Americas.<sup>2</sup>

Work by Stanley M. Elkins and Jon Butler notwithstanding, subsequent scholars tended to support Herskovits’s broad conclusions while avoiding the pitfalls of his model. Historical and, especially, anthropological studies by Lorenzo Turner, Norman Whitten and John

<sup>2</sup> Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York and London, 1941); E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (Boston, 1963). Their debate is usefully summarized in Joseph E. Holloway, “Introduction,” in Joseph E. Holloway, ed., *Africanisms in American Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1990), ix–xxi. For a critique of the timeless character often attached to African religions and the need to remain sensitive to the evolution of African cosmologies over time and place, see T. O. Ranger and John Weller, eds., *Themes in the Christian History of Central Africa* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1975), 5–8; and the helpful discussion offered in Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill and London, 1998), 1–3, and esp. 35–62.

Szwed, and Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price refined Herskovits's work by showing that Africanisms survived in the New World (the Caribbean particularly) in a bewildering array of forms, including family, kinship, language, and ethnic identity. Mintz and Price offered a more sophisticated interpretation of African-European cultural exchange, not least because they were rightly sensitive to change over time and the specificity of African geography and identities.<sup>3</sup>

In the past thirty years, historians of the American colonial and antebellum South have further refined our understanding of the ways that African cultural identities survived and adapted in the New World. Although a good deal of this work has focused on the antebellum period, several pioneering studies have helped to shape our current conceptions of African American culture in British North America, particularly in colonial South Carolina. Peter H. Wood and Daniel C. Littlefield, for example, offered interpretations that were as sensitive to the specificities of African origins as they were to the ways those origins were identified and subsequently resurrected and reconfigured in colonial South Carolina.<sup>4</sup>

More recently, historians have built on these insights and attempted to further the debate by scrutinizing pre-enslavement cultural exchange within African societies colonized by Europeans. In one sense, such work tries to explore more fully the ways in which European colonization shaped certain African cultural practices and how Africans in turn incorporated those values into a preexisting cosmology to produce

<sup>3</sup> Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago, 1959); Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1990), esp. 157; Lorenzo Dow Turner, *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (Chicago, 1949); Norman E. Whitten Jr. and John F. Szwed, eds., *Afro-American Anthropology: Contemporary Perspectives* (New York and London, 1970); Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *An Anthropological Approach to the Afro-American Past: A Caribbean Perspective* (Philadelphia, 1976).

<sup>4</sup> Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York, 1974); Daniel C. Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina* (Baton Rouge and London, 1981). See also: on Virginia, Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Princeton, 1987); on the North, William D. Piersen, *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Amherst, Mass., 1988); on Louisiana, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge and London, 1992); and, in general, Michael Mullin, *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736–1831* (Urbana and Chicago, 1992). On the antebellum South see Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974); Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1977); Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Urbana and Chicago, 1984); and Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York and Oxford, 1987).

a syncretic African culture. By examining the nature of contact and cultural exchange in West and Central Africa itself, these historians have sought to go beyond the reductionism of some earlier work by arguing that the development of slavery in the colonial and antebellum United States was shaped not only by the interaction and acculturation of blacks and whites in America; in addition, they have emphasized the importance of European-African contact in Africa itself prior to Africans' forced relocation to the New World. In particular, the role of religion in shaping African and African American culture now commands considerable attention. Michael A. Gomez, for example, has analyzed the role of Islam in West Africa prior to enslavement, showing how the Islamic faith transcended the specific ethnicities of its followers once in colonial America. Here, Gomez builds on the work of Wood and Littlefield in particular in an effort to establish a more "satisfactory dialogue between historians of Africa and North America."<sup>5</sup>

So too with the work of the Africanist John K. Thornton, who has explored the role of Afro-Catholicism and examined in detail the nature of Kongolese Catholicism prior to West Africans' transportation to South Carolina. Thornton builds on a fairly rich body of work dedicated to tracing Kongolese survivals in the Americas as well as on some earlier work on remnants of Kongolese Catholicism in the New World. For the most part, however, Afro-Protestantism has been the focus of most recent work, and historians have yet to develop in detail Thornton's analysis of Afro-Catholicism in shaping African American behavior in colonial America.<sup>6</sup> By examining the role of Kongolese

<sup>5</sup> Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill and London, 1998), chap. 4 (quotation on p. 60); Gomez, "Muslims in Early America," *Journal of Southern History*, LX (November 1994), 671–710. On religion see also Margaret Washington Creel, "A Peculiar People": *Slave Religion and Community-Culture Among the Gullahs* (New York and London, 1988); Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Princeton, 1979); and Paul E. Johnson, ed., *African-American Christianity: Essays in History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> John K. Thornton, "African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion," *American Historical Review*, XCVI (October 1991), 1101–13. On Kongolese legacies see Robert Farris Thompson and Joseph Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds* (Washington, D.C., 1981); Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York, 1983); Thompson, "Kongo Influences on African-American Artistic Culture," in Holloway, ed., *Africanisms in American Culture*, 148–84; Dena J. Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War* (Chicago, 1977), esp. 95–96; and Roger Bastide, *The African Religions of Brazil: Toward a Sociology of the Interpenetration of Civilizations*, trans. by Helen Sebba (Baltimore and London, 1978), esp. 347. See also John F. Szwed and Roger D. Abrahams, *Afro-American Folk Culture: An Annotated Bibliography of Materials from North, Central, and South America and the West Indies* (Philadelphia, 1978). For work on

Catholicism in shaping the form and deciding the timing of the Stono rebellion in 1739, the argument advanced here will expand on Thornton's work in order to lend further meaning to his interpretation and will conclude with an assessment of how the analysis of Afro-Catholicism can help historians studying the cultural values, temporal consciousness, and modes of resistance of the enslaved in both colonial South Carolina and the Americas more generally.

Although we know a lot about the ethnic, religious, and strategic dynamics of the Stono rebellion, the slaves' motivations for revolting when they did remain as inscrutable now as they were to the colony's white population then. The main reason for our frustratingly opaque understanding of the rebellion is obvious: The story of the revolt has been reconstructed mainly from elite, white sources. The slaves themselves (or, rather, the records) are silent on why they revolted when they did. Little wonder that one recent observer has concluded that the slaves' "precise motives and reasoning lie beyond historical inquiry."<sup>7</sup>

Given the dearth of slave testimony on the insurrection, historians who have examined the Stono incident have had to rely on hard logic, historical reasoning, and a good deal of speculation in an effort to uncover the slaves' motivations. Thornton's seminal 1991 reinterpretation of the Stono rebellion is a case in point. He shows that "we can see the rebellion from a new angle if we consider the African contribution as well as the American one." His evidence is compelling and his argument powerful. Slaves involved in the revolt—particularly the leaders—were not from Angola, as most earlier interpretations had it, but from the heavily Catholic Kongo, which for many years had been under the influence of Portuguese and Italian clerics. Moreover, "the Kongoleses were proud of their Christian and Catholic heritage." Thornton demonstrates how this Catholic-Kongoleses background manifested itself during the Stono rebellion. Kongoleses slaves in South Carolina responded to Spanish offers of freedom should they escape to St. Augustine. Thornton makes clear that these Portuguese-speaking

---

Afro-Protestantism that offers a few remarks on the Catholic backgrounds of some enslaved Africans, see Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, 15–20. For recent thoughts on revolutionary Afro-Christian theology in shaping Denmark Vesey's plot, see Douglas R. Egerton, "Why They Did Not Preach Up This Thing': Denmark Vesey and Revolutionary Theology," *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, C (October 1999), 298–318. For a work that recognizes the importance of Catholicism to the slaves' cosmology in the colonial South, see Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York and other cities, 1978), 87–89, 111–14, and 271–75.

<sup>7</sup> The main primary sources, which say little about the matter of motivation, are noted in Robert Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Low Country, 1740–1790* (Ithaca, N.Y., and London, 1998), 21 (quotation), and *ibid.*, n. 8.

slaves were literate and understood some Spanish. He also suggests that several of the rebellion's leaders may have been Kongolesse soldiers. During the insurrection, they demonstrated their facility with guns (a skill developed in Kongo), Kongolesse military tactics, and their martial use of banners or flags and drums. They danced and drilled like Kongolesse warriors, fought like them, and struck out for religious as much as for political freedom. Most recent historians have tended to accept Thornton's general point that the Stono rebels were Kongolesse Catholics.<sup>8</sup>

But does Thornton's emphasis explain the slaves' motivations and actions as fully as it might? On one important matter—the timing of the Stono rebellion—Thornton accepts the prevailing wisdom advanced by Peter Wood that “the actual rebellion broke out on Sunday (normally a slaves' [sic] day off), September 9, 1739,” but neither Thornton nor Wood offer wholly convincing explanations for why slaves rebelled on this Sunday in particular. Thornton's silence is ironic, for the explanation of the revolt's timing may be found by scrutinizing both the slaves' Catholicism and their unwitting temporal adaptation to their Protestant environment in the New World. In short, the interpretation advanced here builds on both Wood's and Thornton's pioneering works in an effort to uncover the slaves' precise motivations for insurrection on the particular weekend of September 8–9. It suggests that they revolted when they did because of their specific veneration of the Virgin Mary, their general commitment to and understanding of the Catholic calendar developed in the Kongo, and because their temporal understanding of that calendar had necessarily undergone a silent (but ultimately incidental) transformation in their forced relocation to a predominantly Protestant plantation society.<sup>9</sup>

Put another way, this article seeks to answer a question posed by George Cato, the supposed “[great?]-great-great-grandson of the late Cato slave who commanded the Stono Insurrection,” during an often-overlooked interview with a Works Progress Administration worker in

<sup>8</sup> Thornton, “African Dimensions,” 1113 (first quotation), 1103 (second quotation). On the acceptance of Thornton's basic argument see Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill and London, 1998), 386, 455–56; Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1998), 72–73; Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects*, 21–25; Jane Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida* (Urbana and Chicago, 1999), 34. See also Landers, “Gracia Real de Santa Terese de Mose: A Free Black Town in Spanish Colonial Florida,” *American Historical Review*, XCV (February 1990), 9–30, esp. 27.

<sup>9</sup> Thornton, “African Dimensions,” 1102 (quotation). For Wood's discussion of Stono's timing, see *Black Majority*, 308–15.

the 1930s: “How it all start? Dat what I ask but nobody ever tell me how 100 slaves between de Combahee and Edisto rivers come to meet in de woods not far from de Stono River on September 9, 1739.” George Cato asked a deceptively simple question: Why *did* the slaves meet on that particular day? After they gathered, they coordinated by sound of drum—but how did they coordinate mentally before the point of meeting? How did their decision to revolt shape the iconological and physical features of the rebellion itself, and what can these temporal and iconological features tell us about the revolutionary potential of Afro-Catholicism and the larger process of acculturation among enslaved, colonial African Americans?<sup>10</sup>

Wood, the only historian to have considered the timing of the Stono Rebellion in any detail, believes that July 1739 was an important month for creating an atmosphere of suspense and anticipation propitious for revolt. July, after all, saw a suspicious visit to several of South Carolina’s coastal towns by a Spanish captain, a priest, and “a Negro . . . who spoke excellent English.” Contemporaries agreed that such activity was suspect, and after the revolt they considered the priest in particular to have been “employed by the Spaniards to procure a general Insurrection of the Negroes.” Also important, maintains Wood, was the yellow fever epidemic that swept through Charlestown in August and September, which proved sufficiently virulent to close the *South Carolina Gazette* and some schools for several weeks. Lieutenant Governor William Bull prorogued the Assembly because of the epidemic, and about six people a day perished during the late summer of 1739. “The confusion created by this sickness,” argues Wood, “. . . may have been a factor in the timing of the Stono Rebellion.” Indeed. With so many whites sick, revolt was plainly easier and stood a greater chance of success. But Wood sees two other factors as important influences in the timing of the revolt. First, slaves’ calculations “might also have been influenced by the newspaper publication, in mid-August, of the Security Act which required all white men to carry firearms to church on Sunday or submit to a stiff fine, beginning on September 29. It had long been recognized that the free hours at the end of the week afforded the slaves their best opportunity for cabals . . .” A literate slave involved in the rebellion, according to this reasoning, read of the Act on or shortly after August 18, 1739,

<sup>10</sup> George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, supplement, ser. I, Vol. XI: *North Carolina and South Carolina Narratives* (Westport, Conn., 1977), 98–99 (quotations).

(presumably in the *Gazette*) and realized that revolt had a better chance if it were to take place before Saturday, September 29. "Since the Stono Uprising, which caught planters at church, occurred only weeks before the published statute of 1739 went into effect," concludes Wood, "slaves may have considered that within the near future their masters would be even more heavily armed on Sundays." Second, he writes that "one other factor seems to be more than coincidental to the timing of the insurrection. Official word of hostilities between England and Spain . . . appears to have reached Charlestown the very weekend that the uprising began." This news, argues Wood, probably constituted "a logical trigger for rebellion."<sup>11</sup> It seems very likely that slaves knew illness had debilitated the white population; it is also clear that the Spanish had infiltrated the colony and promised freedom to slaves who escaped to St. Augustine. Although Wood shows that news of the hostilities between England and Spain did not reach Georgia until September 13 "with Letters of the 10th [a day after the revolt], from the Government at Charles-town," it is possible that rumors of war were heard earlier.<sup>12</sup> Certainly, Wood is right to suggest that slaves probably decided to revolt on a Sunday or weekend between August 18 and September 29: Churchgoing whites were distracted, and slaves had a little more room for maneuver on Sundays. Slaves also wanted to revolt before the provisions of the Security Act came into effect. But while most of this reasoning helps explain why the Stono rebellion happened on a Sunday during the late summer of 1739, it cannot explain why it happened on Sunday, September 9, in particular. Between August 18, when news of the Security Act was published, and Saturday, September 29, when the Act was to go into effect, there were six Sundays on which the slaves could have revolted (August 19 and 26; September 2, 9, 16, and 23). Most of the conditions sufficient for revolt—the epidemic among whites, rumors of war, Spanish offers of freedom—were still in place during these Sundays. Granting that rumors of war between England and Spain could have circulated in the week leading up to the Stono rebellion, it is still reasonable to ask whether there were reasons in addition to those offered by Wood that

<sup>11</sup> Wood, *Black Majority*, 312–14 (all quotations).

<sup>12</sup> "The Journal of William Stephens," in Allen D. Candler, ed., *The Colonial Records of the State of Georgia: Vol. IV: Stephens' Journal 1737–1740* (Atlanta, 1906), 412 (also cited in Wood, *Black Majority*, 314 n. 25). The *Charleston South Carolina Gazette* for September 8, 1739, carried news, via Boston, of the outfitting of English privateers to attack Spanish merchant ships, which, while not a declaration of war per se, could have helped spread the rumor that war was imminent.

help to explain why slaves revolted on the particular weekend of September 8–9 and not on the following two weekends instead.

The interpretation advanced here does not so much refute Wood but rather expands on the context-specific and immensely helpful framework he established nearly a quarter-century ago. In fact, the argument not only helps pinpoint the timing of the rebellion within Wood's broad temporal parameters but also builds on his discussion of the resonance of Africanisms throughout colonial South Carolina. The Stono rebellion itself may be added to Wood's list of African influences because a syncretic version of Portuguese-Kongolese Catholicism played an important role in the timing and iconology of the rebellion. Even during a bloody insurrection, Kongolese-Catholic theological values found room for expression and helped empower its participants.

Thornton has produced a wealth of evidence to suggest that "the Kongolese of the eighteenth century regarded their Christianity as a fundamental part of their national identity . . ." Beginning with the kingdom's voluntary conversion upon the baptism of King Nzinga Nkuwu as João I in 1491, Kongo maintained independent relations with Rome. While "the elite carefully maintained chapels and sent their children to schools . . . the ordinary people learned their prayers and hymns, even in the eighteenth century, when ordained clergy were often absent." Catholicism, by virtue of the catechism, promoted literacy, most obviously among the Kongolese elite but also, believes Thornton, among the "ordinary people." He suggests that Kongolese slaves in South Carolina, including those involved in the Stono insurgency, retained their commitment to Catholicism, and contemporary observers agreed.<sup>13</sup> On the whole, then, while acknowledging arguments that stress the syncretic nature of Kongolese Christianity, Thornton sees a purer, voluntary Kongolese Catholic tradition that remained remarkably close to the Portuguese and Capuchin ones. For Thornton, Catholicism was widespread in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Kongo. Saints and their days, catecheticalism, and myriad other aspects of Catholicism were understood by priests and laity alike. This was, in other words, a thoroughgoing Catholic society.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Thornton, "African Dimensions," 1106–7 (quotations). For a corroborative contemporary account of the rebels' Catholicism see "Extract of a Letter from S. Carolina, dated October 2," *Gentleman's Magazine*, X (March 1740), 127–29. See also Landers, *Black Society*, 34; and Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 111–12.

<sup>14</sup> John K. Thornton, *The Kongolese Saint Anthony: Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684–1706* (Cambridge, Eng., 1998), 1–35, esp. 27–29. Anne Hilton makes the

The Kongolese knew their Catholic calendar. For example, "the community would assemble on Saturdays and say the rosary, their principal regular religious observation." The educated elite led such meetings. But everyone, according to Thornton, observed the regular holidays. In addition to Easter and Advent-Christmas-Epiphany, "the biggest and most important holidays were Halloween-All Saints' Day and the day dedicated to Saint James Major, 25 July." Kongolese customs were at work here, thus reflecting a degree of cultural and religious syncretism: "Halloween and All Saints' Day provided Kongolese with a good opportunity to pay appropriate respect to their ancestors in a Christian tradition." On the whole, then, Kongolese were good Catholics. They were also punctual, albeit on their own terms.<sup>15</sup> Anne Hilton has explained that "they kept Lent fifteen days before Europe because they regulated it according to the moon. They kept the normal forty days." For non-movable feasts, "the Capuchins gave them calendars so that they could warn the people of vigils and feasts." Plainly, these were calendar-conscious people. Whatever the degree of syncretism involved, though, one thing remains clear: Kongolese adhered to a Catholic calendar spotted with precise, important affective days and dates. They knew these dates and apparently remembered them. According to historian Albert J. Raboteau, this tendency should not surprise us. Catholicism, he maintains, lent itself easily to incorporation into African religions: "The nature . . . of Catholic piety with its veneration of saints, use of sacramentals, and organization of reli-

---

point that Portuguese and Capuchin missionaries were often manipulated by Kongo rulers who attempted to legitimize their own authority by supporting the religious doctrines of the priests. She is also less sanguine than Thornton concerning the extent of Kongolese literacy. Anne Hilton, *The Kingdom of Kongo* (Oxford, 1985), 78-81, 184-85, and 196-98. Susan Herlin Broadhead expresses grave doubts that late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Kongolese "masses" were instructed in the Christian faith; see her "Beyond Decline: The Kingdom of the Kongo in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, XII, no. 4 (1979), 615-50, esp. 633. See also Wyatt MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa: The BaKongo of Lower Zaire* (Chicago and London, 1986). For an interpretation that argues that Christianity affected a minority of Kongolese and stresses the *situation coloniale*, see Georges Balandier, *Daily Life in the Kingdom of the Kongo from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, trans. by Helen Weaver (London, 1968), 253-56. The difference in emphasis between Thornton and, say, Hilton, is one of degree. See Thornton's comments on the syncretism of Kongolese Christianity in his "The Development of an African Catholic Church in the Kingdom of Kongo, 1491-1750," *Journal of African History*, XXV (1984), 147-67, esp. 148. For an interpretation stressing the difference between Thornton and other specialists, see Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 145-47, 343 n. 27.

<sup>15</sup> Thornton, *Kongolese Saint Anthony*, 27-35 (quotations on pp. 30 and 31). On the cultural subjectivism of definitions of punctuality, see Clifford Geertz, "Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali," in his *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, 1973), 360-411, esp. 391-98; and Douglas Raybeck, "The Coconut-shell Clock: Time and Cultural Identity," *Time and Society*, I (September 1992), 323-40.

gious fraternities among the slaves offered a supportive context for the continuity of African religious elements in recognizable form. In contrast, American Evangelical Protestantism, with its emphasis on biblical preaching, inward conversion, and credible accounts of the signs of grace, was not as conducive to syncretism with African theology and ritual.”<sup>16</sup>

Although Hilton and Thornton differ on the extent to which Kongolese Christianity was syncretic, they agree on the importance of the Virgin Mary to the society’s Catholicism. Beyond the Kongolese’s commitment to Catholicism generally, evidence suggests that the Virgin Mary occupied an important place in their cosmology. One woman had a vision in 1703 in which the Virgin advised her to tell her people to say the Hail Mary three times to avoid Christ’s wrath, and thousands apparently took her counsel. Shortly thereafter another woman, Apollonia Mafuta, had a similar vision from the Virgin, the first of several.<sup>17</sup>

The observations of a Capuchin missionary, Father Jerom Merolla da Sorrento, who visited the Kongo in 1682, also confirm the celebrity of Mary in Kongolese cosmology. Upon his arrival in the region he noticed, for example, a church built by the Portuguese “and dedicated to the Virgin *Mary*, whose Statue [or] *Bassorelievo* [bas-relief], is constantly worship’d every Sunday by a vast number of *Negroes* who flock hither for that purpose.” The priest encouraged the Kongolese veneration of Mary by advising parents to “enjoin their Children to observe particular Devotion, such as to repeat so many times aday the *Rosary* or the *Crown* in honour of the blessed Virgin [and] to fast on Saturdays.” The punctual observance of such affective times—common to both Catholicism and religious times generally—became a characteristic of Kongolese Christianity, for, in addition to the celebration of Saint James’s Day, Sorrento noted that there were “other sorts of Feasts which are wont to be kept by the Blacks, such as upon the Birth-days of their Patrons.”<sup>18</sup>

The advent of the Antonian movement associated with Dona Beatriz

<sup>16</sup> Hilton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, 203 (first quotation), 205 (second quotation); Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 88 (third quotation).

<sup>17</sup> Thornton, *Kongolese Saint Anthony*, 105, 108, and 157. See also Balandier, *Daily Life*, 256–57.

<sup>18</sup> Jerom Merolla da Sorrento, *A Voyage to Congo, and Several other Countries, Chiefly in Southern-Africk*, in Awunsham Churchill and John Churchill, trans. and eds., *A Collection of Voyages and Travels* (4 vols.; London, 1704), I, 673, 690, and 693 (quotations). See also A. J. Gurevich, “Time as a Problem of Cultural History,” in Louis Gardet *et al.*, eds., *Cultures and Time* (Paris, 1976), 229–45; and Geertz, “Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali.”

Kimpa Vita (ca. 1684–1706) in 1704 had the effect of relegating Mary to the status of a secondary saint. Sufficiently confident in her knowledge of Catholic doctrine, this young Kongolese woman set about critiquing colonial Portuguese rule. She reconfigured basic Catholic tenets by offering theological arguments based on those beliefs that used the religion of her oppressors to lead a movement dedicated to restoring the Kingdom of Kongo. But even Dona Beatriz, who championed the supremacy of Saint Anthony, included the Virgin in her sermons against the established Catholic Church. In her desire to purify what she perceived as venal and racially biased Catholicism, Dona Beatriz argued for the existence of black saints; she also maintained, according to Thornton, that “Jesus and Mary were actually Kongolese” and that “Mary’s mother was a slave of the Marquis Nzimba Mpangi when Mary gave Jesus birth.” She went further, not only changing the words of the catechismal prayers but, most importantly, altering the Ave Maria and the Salve Regina, prayers addressed to the Virgin Mary. The revised prayer is worth quoting, for it is suggestive of the revolutionary and emancipatory power the Kongolese attached to Mary:

*Salve* [Save] the Queen, mother of mercy, sweetness of life, our hope. *Deus* [God] save you; we cry out for you, we the exiled children of Eve; we sigh for you, kneeling and weeping in this valley of tears. Therefore, you, our advocate, cast your merciful eyes on us and after that exile show us Jesus, the fruit of your womb; Ehe, you the merciful, Ehe benevolent one! E sweet one! the perpetual Virgin Mary. Pray for us, *Santa* [Holy] Mother of Nzambi a Mpungu, so that we may be worthy of the promises of Christ.<sup>19</sup>

As Thornton explains, the final portion of the new prayer, while “reasserting the concept of advocacy of the Virgin,” also “takes the virtues of Mary from the Salve Regina and substitutes Saint Anthony.” The reasoning for this substitution need not concern us. Suffice it to note that, although Dona Beatriz’s reformulation of the prayer placed Anthony above Mary, the Virgin still remained a powerful and protecting figure in Kongolese theology. With Dona Beatriz’s burning at the stake in 1706, the Antonian movement lost momentum, and Kongolese veneration for the Virgin Mary—already very high anyway—only increased.<sup>20</sup>

The Virgin Mary, then, occupied a central role in Kongolese theology. Her statue was as commonplace as her picture. Mary’s semblance

<sup>19</sup> Thornton, *Kongolese Saint Anthony*, chap. 5 (quotations on 113–14, 115). Thornton’s translation of this prayer was made directly from the Kikongo version into English; see *ibid.*, 115 n. 4.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 117 (quotation), 118, 159–60, 184, and 187. See also Hilton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, 92–93.

was believed to have come from the sky and to carry the “protective functions of an *nkisi*—fetish—of the *nkadi mpemba* and sky spirit type.” People from surrounding districts visited churches that housed statues of the Virgin, especially during times of calamity. Even Anne Hilton, who stresses the highly syncretic nature of Kongolese Catholicism, sees Mary as particularly important to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Kongolese Christianity: The Mwissikongo (the Kongolese elite), she writes, may well have “regarded the Virgin Mary as Christ’s female co-chief.”<sup>21</sup>

Her centrality to Kongolese spirituality was reflected in Mary’s heightened iconological and theological status. The *mani Kongo*, the spiritual leader of the Mwissikongo and the intermediary between the living and the dead, led Mass on Holy Saturdays, when he displayed the most important of the royal insignia, the drum. “Moreover,” remarks Hilton, “the Madonna was also associated with Saturday, which the Mwissikongo . . . took as the day of prayer and rest devoted especially to the dead.”<sup>22</sup> There were other symbolic resonances associated with Mary. Thornton notes that “white was the color of the dead and of ancestors to the Kongolese,” and the Virgin Mary was, in fact, a Kongolese ancestor, according to Dona Beatriz. But the color white—associated with the Virgin Mary—had further particular provenance in Kongolese history. Dom Afonso’s fifteenth-century victory over the pagan Pango, for example, was, according to Filippo Pigafetta’s 1591 rendition of Duarte Lopez’s account, thanks to the appearance of a woman in white—very likely the Virgin Mary. They “owed their victory to the presence of a lady in white, whose dazzling splendour blinded the enemy.” Memories of the event lingered. “By the eighteenth century,” remarks Thornton, “Kongolese looked back [to] . . . Afonso I as the founder of the faith in Kongo.” Churches in Kongo were accordingly dedicated to the Virgin, and representations of her were apparent throughout the region. In this way, the Virgin Mary seeped into Kongolese historical memory, religious discourse, and spiritual ritual. Plainly, the Virgin Mary had military and religious significance. Her appearance in white had dazzled the non-Christian enemy, and, in this sense, she emerged as savior and holy warrior, protector and advocate.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Hilton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, 207 (first quotation), 92 (second quotation). See also Thornton, *Kongolese Saint Anthony*, 119, 157. On Mary’s image in the Kongo and surrounding regions see Merolla da Sorrento, *Voyage to Congo*, 716.

<sup>22</sup> Hilton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, 96–103 (quotation on p. 102).

<sup>23</sup> Thornton, *Kongolese Saint Anthony*, 160 (first quotation), 114; Margarite Hutchinson,

That some of South Carolina's slaves involved in the rebellion were Catholic is, thanks to Thornton's work, beyond dispute. George Cato also hinted as much when he reconstructed his ancestor Cato's speech before his Stono army: "He say: 'We don't lak slavery. We start to jine de Spanish in Florida. We surrender but we not whipped yet and we 'is not converted'." The admittedly ambiguous phrase "we 'is not converted'" suggests that Stono's slaves saw the retention of their Catholic religion as an important part of their decision to revolt. Since Kongolese catechismal instruction included the memorization of the major Catholic prayers, it is little wonder that even in "far-off America . . . one still met [enslaved] Kongolese saying the prayers they had been taught as children." "The Kongolese brought their language and their culture with them [to South Carolina], but most notably and particularly, their Catholic faith," maintains Thornton. Thus, when the Kongolese began to arrive in South Carolina in large numbers during the 1720s, it is hardly surprising "that they might have chosen to express their consternation at their enslavement in this strange land in religious terms."<sup>24</sup>

Helpful though Thornton's pioneering work is, its heavy emphasis on militarism and on a broadly conceived Kongolese Catholicism blinds us to the specificity of slaves' actions and motivations during Stono. His general points on the manifestations of Kongolese Catholicism and martiality during the rebellion, particularly his emphasis on the rebels' use of drums, identifies some of the broad symbolic features of the insurrection, but his arguments lack precision. Was the behavior of Stono's rebels primarily and singularly militaristic? Is it possible to go beyond the identification of the revolt with

---

trans. and ed., *A Report of the Kingdom of Congo, and of the Surrounding Countries; Drawn out of the Writings and Discourses of the Portuguese, Duarte Lopez, by Filippo Pigafetta, in Rome, 1591* (London, 1881; repr., New York, 1970), 84–85 (second quotation on p. 85); John K. Thornton, "'I Am the Subject of the King of Congo': African Political Ideology and the Haitian Revolution," *Journal of World History*, IV (Fall 1993), 181–214 (third quotation on p. 188).

<sup>24</sup> Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, supplement, ser. I, XI, 100 (first quotation); Thornton, *Kongolese Saint Anthony*, 29 (second quotation), 211 (third and fourth quotations). See also "Extract of a Letter from S. Carolina," 128; Thornton, "'I Am the Subject of the King of Kongo'"; and Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge and London, 1979), esp. 42–43. Missionaries for the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in early eighteenth-century South Carolina also recognized the Catholic tendencies of many slaves. "I have in this parish," wrote Francis Le Jau in 1709–10, "a few negroe slaves who were born and baptized among the Portuguese, but speak very good English. . . . I proposed to them to declare openly their adjuing the errors of the Romish Church without which declaration I could not receive them. . . . I require of them their renouncing of those particular points, the chief of which is praying to the Saints . . ." Not everyone, it seems, heeded Le Jau's injunction. Quoted in Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 111–12.

Kongolese Catholicism generally by identifying specific Catholic traits apparent in the timing and features of the revolt? Moreover, in his zeal to establish the authenticity of the insurgents' Kongolese Christianity, Thornton sometimes slights the extent to which their Catholicism was necessarily altered in the New World. By focusing on their specific veneration of Mary, we can add detail to Thornton's notion of Kongolese Catholicism, thereby helping to better explain the actual timing and iconological landscape of the Stono rebellion.

To take timing first: Most accounts place the beginning of the rebellion in the early hours of Sunday, September 9. In his recent examination of slavery in colonial South Carolina, Robert Olwell sensibly dates the preparations for the revolt—and, hence, its beginnings proper—as Saturday, September 8. He notes the publication of an advertisement in the South Carolina *Gazette* on that Saturday and remarks that “on the very night that this advertisement appeared, a group of slaves were secretly gathering on the banks of the Stono.”<sup>25</sup> Although the Stono rebellion broke out on Sunday, September 9, it was preceded by contemplation, planning, and preparatory gathering late on Saturday, September 8. The date is significant since, as previously noted, Saturdays in the Kongo were dedicated to Mary, and the *mani Kongo* led Mass using the royal insignia, the drum. Hilton notes that “the Madonna was also associated with Saturdays . . . the day of prayer and rest,” and possibly also, in the context of enslavement, prayer and preparation. More importantly still, that specific Saturday, September 8, 1739, was the day of Nativity of the Virgin Mary, as even contemporary Protestant almanacs noted.<sup>26</sup> Given that, as Jerom Merolla da Sorrento remarked in 1682, the Kongolese usually feasted on certain days of observance “such as upon the Birth-days of their Patrons,” it is possible that, of the weekends when South Carolina's Catholic slaves could have revolted, they chose the weekend of September 8–9

<sup>25</sup> Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects*, 51–52.

<sup>26</sup> Hilton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, 102. The Virgin's nativity was a date recorded even in Protestant calendars of eighteenth-century North America. See *Job Shepherd, Poor Job, 1752: An Almanack for the Year of Our Lord 1752*, in the Jacob Cushing Diaries, 1749–1809, Peter Force Collection, ser. 8D, microfilm, reel 36, p. 30 (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.), which lists the “Nativity of Virgin Mary” as a significant date. Of course, it was celebrated on September 8 ordinarily, although in 1752 it was observed on September 19 for that year only. The nativity was recorded in later almanacs too. See the entry for September 8 (“Nat. B.V. Mary”) in *Palladium of Knowledge: or, the Carolina and Georgia Almanac for the Year of Our Lord, 1798, and 11-23 of American Independence* (Charleston, 1798), n.p. On the celebration in 1565 in Spanish Florida, see R. K. Sewall, *Sketches of St. Augustine* (New York, 1848; repr., Gainesville, Fla., 1976), 18. For remarks on the importance of the feast of Mary's nativity to the Catholic faith historically, see Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York, 1976), 66–67, 106.

because it coincided with the nativity of an important, protecting, and empowering Kongolese religious icon.<sup>27</sup> Since no direct evidence exists to show that the Kongolese celebrated Mary's nativity specifically, the interpretation advanced here remains conjectural, although no more than that offered by Thornton concerning the martial symbols used in the rebellion. On the other hand, it seems likely that such a calendar-conscious Catholic people were quite aware of the auspicious date on which they revolted.<sup>28</sup>

If Stono's slaves did rebel with Mary in mind, a case needs to be made that they not only had the wherewithal and opportunity to ascertain the date, but also that they infused the revolt itself with Marian memories and images. Regarding the former, it is probable that the rebellion's slave leader(s) was aware of the date in the English colony. Most sources agree on the literacy of the rebellion's leader—whatever his name. George Cato recalled that "Cato was taught how to read and write by his rich master." Indeed, "long befo' dis uprisin', de Cato slave wrote passes for slaves and do all he can to send them to freedom." Other sources and virtually all historians agree on the literacy of the leader(s); Wood, for example, argues that slaves revolted on the heels of the publication of the Security Act in mid-August 1739—a consciousness of which implies the literacy of at least some of them. Stono's rebels were, therefore, probably capable of ascertaining the date, presumably from snatched glances at newspapers.<sup>29</sup>

Of the images and icons recruited by Stono's rebels, nineteenth-century accounts of the eighteenth-century incident are suggestive. One new piece of evidence offers important clues—a rather romantic, but surprisingly accurate, literary account of the rebellion published in the antislavery newspaper *Liberty Bell* in 1847. Although the names of the various participants seem invented (in place of Jemey or Cato is "Arnold"), and the geography of Stono a little muddled, essential details can be corroborated. The account notes, for example, that Arnold was literate. The description of the unfolding of the revolt also rings

<sup>27</sup> Merolla da Sorrento, *Voyage to Congo*, 693.

<sup>28</sup> Haitians, notes Leslie G. Desmangles, also observe Marian dates, although some are apparently unsure why. She describes a "symbiosis by identity," a process whereby "Elizi, the beautiful water goddess of love in Vodou, whose originals exist . . . in the African goddess of the same name in Whydah in Dahomey . . . becomes the Virgin Mary" and concludes that, "although Vodouisants do not know the actual significance of Assumption Day (except that it is dedicated to Mary), Vodou ceremonies are held in Elizi's honor on that day." Leslie G. Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti* (Chapel Hill and London, 1992), 10 (first and second quotations), 144 (third quotation).

<sup>29</sup> Rawick, *American Slave*, supplement, ser. I, XI, 98–99 (first quotation), 100 (second quotation); Thornton, "African Dimensions," 1106–8; Wood, *Black Majority*, 313–14.

true, although the numbers of “four or five hundred strong” are certainly exaggerated: “The day approached. It arrived. It was a Sunday . . . Arnold repaired early to the slave-quarter and harangued the slaves upon a case of surpassing cruelty they had witnessed the night before. A tumult of excitement was gathered around him. The alarm spread.” From the plantation, they headed “towards Stono, a small settlement about five miles off, where there was a warehouse full of arms and ammunition.” As Wood put it, “the group proceeded to Stono Bridge and broke into Hutchenson’s store, where small arms and powder were on sale.” At the store, continues the 1847 account, the rebels armed themselves with guns, clubs, and axes. Revealingly, “a quantity of white cloth furnished them with banners. Drums and fifes were also in the warehouse . . . . So they took up their march towards Jacksonburgh, with drums beating and banners flying, in some show of military order.” The account then details correctly the slaves’ encounter with Lieutenant-Governor Bull, the ensuing fight, and the quelling of the insurrection. The source seems reliable not least because it echoes some key details offered in other descriptions of the revolt.<sup>30</sup>

Although historians have focused on the iconography of the revolt by identifying the rebels’ masculinity and their militaristic use of flags, dances, and drums, no one has considered the rebels’ use of drums and white cloth in the context of their close identification with Mary and her central place in Kongolese Catholicism.<sup>31</sup> The cloth and its color, however, require attention. Thornton, who ignores the banner’s color, unnecessarily dismisses Wood’s suggestion that it may have had religious significance. Thornton argues that the banner was really a flag and typical of Kongolese military practice.<sup>32</sup> Recall, though, that the

<sup>30</sup> Edmund Quincy, “Mount Verney: Or, an Incident of Insurrection,” [Boston] *Liberty Bell* (1847; repr. in *American Periodical Series*, II, reel 491), 165–228, 193–95 (on Arnold’s literacy), 216 (first quotation), 211 (second quotation), 215 (third quotation), 216–17 (fifth quotation), and, on the encounter with Bull, 219; Wood, *Black Majority*, 315 (fourth quotation). See also Walter Edgar, *South Carolina: A History* (Columbia, S.C., 1998), 74–78; and Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves*, 17.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Thornton, “African Dimensions.” On masculinity see Edward A. Pearson, “‘A Countryside Full of Flames’: A Reconsideration of the Stono Rebellion and Slave Rebelliousness in the Early Eighteenth-Century South Carolina Lowcountry,” *Slavery and Abolition*, XVII (August 1996), 22–50.

<sup>32</sup> Thornton, “African Dimensions,” 1111 n. 65; Wood, *Black Majority*, 316 n. 30. Wood relies on the general analysis offered by William C. Suttles Jr., “African Religious Survivals as Factors in American Slave Revolts,” *Journal of Negro History*, LVI (April 1971), 97–104, who does not address the Stono rebellion. More recently, Robert Olwell makes the rather literal connection between a contemporary’s remark that the slaves marched “with Colours displayed” and Olaudah Equiano’s recollection “that when our people march to the field [of battle], a red flag or banner is born before them.” The “Colours” noted by the contemporary probably meant

color white was associated closely with Mary in Kongolese iconography. In fact, it had both spiritual and martial significance: Was not Dom Afonso's fifteenth-century victory over Pango thanks to the appearance "of a lady in white whose dazzling splendour blinded the enemy"? Did not the Kongolese capital have a "Cathedral dedicated to Our *Lady of Victory*" that was "made of Mud, but whitened both within and without"? According to Thornton, "As Christians, Kongolese saw Europeans represented as Jesus, the saints, and the Virgin Mary in religious terms." In Dona Beatriz's visions and dreams, Europeans appeared as white not because of their skin color but because of their supposed affinity with the spiritual world.<sup>33</sup> Jesus, the saints, and Mary, then, were white because of their otherworldliness and, in the context of a rebellion against enslavers who preached an alien religion, the Stono rebels had the wisdom to invoke the whiteness of one of the most powerful of Kongolese saints. By arming themselves with white cloth on the day after the Virgin's nativity, the insurgents invoked broad memories of Mary and specific recollections of Dom Afonso's famous victory over non-Christians. Cato, after all, even after the insurrection, supposedly proclaimed, "we 'is not converted'."<sup>34</sup>

So too with the drums. Drums beaten by the slaves and the dancing that accompanied them have an exclusively martial meaning for Thornton and other historians; they were simply Kongolese military practices of no additional significance.<sup>35</sup> But the royal drum was also associated with Holy Saturdays in the Kongo, the day of the Madonna. More generally, the Kongolese "beat their Drums with open hands" following Mass and catechism. Invoking the Virgin in this way held both religious and military significance to Stono's slaves. The two traditions

---

"Colours" in the military sense—a flag or ensign which is not necessarily colored. Quoted in Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects*, 22 (text and n. 12).

<sup>33</sup> Thornton, *Kongolese Saint Anthony*, 26–27 (quotation on p. 27). On the cathedral see *A Curious and Exact Account of a Voyage to Congo, In the Years 1666, and 1667. By the R.R.F.F. Michael Angelo of Gattina, and Denis de Carli of Piacenza, Capuchins, and Apostolick Missioners into the Said Kingdom of Kongo*, in Churchill and Churchill, trans. and eds., *Collection of Voyages*, I, 621. Michael Gomez agrees with Hilton's argument that the "nkadi mpemba" was a "white-colored realm associated with death and the grave" but elaborates: "Now, the thing about *mpemba* is that it was located beneath the ground, 'on the other side of the water,' where white clay is found (that is, at the bottom of rivers and lakes)." Whiteness, he maintains, was associated with white people (who came from the other side of the water—the Atlantic), the slave trade, and death. They were "all inextricably linked" in Kongolese cosmology. Perhaps, then, the Stono rebels gathered near the Stono River (a body of water) for spiritual as well as logistical reasons. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 146–47.

<sup>34</sup> Rawick, ed., *American Slave*, supplement ser. I, XI, 100 (quotation).

<sup>35</sup> Thornton, "African Dimensions," 1102–3, 1111–12; Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects*, 22–23; Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 455; Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 73–74.

and memories were not mutually exclusive; they were linked inextricably and braided tightly. Furthermore, because Mary and her images were mustered in a context in which enslaved people were striking out for freedom, Mary's significance became political. Indeed, the rebels shouted "Liberty," which, as Thornton shows, was "a word that, to those Kongoleses who still thought in Kikongo as they spoke in English, was *lukangu*, whose root, *kanga*, also meant 'salvation' to a Christian." Stono's rebels summoned Mary temporally and iconologically—the two, in fact, were one and the same—because of her Kongoleses historical significance and her protective and revolutionary power. This was neither the first nor the last time that Mary's iconographic power would be appropriated by the oppressed.<sup>36</sup> Stono's slaves saw, for all the reasons mentioned by Wood, that the general conditions for rebellion were ripe, but their memories of Mary helped shape the features, meaning, and precise timing of the revolt.

Conditions of bondage and the process of their enslavement nevertheless shaped the Stono slaves' Catholicism. For, plainly, although they prepared their revolt on September 8, it was Mary's nativity by the Protestant, Julian calendar—the predominant one in English-speaking South Carolina—not by the Gregorian, Catholic calendar, the use of which the English did not mandate until 1752. In fact, September 8–9, Julian style, was September 19–20, Gregorian style. In a bitter irony, then, Stono's slaves revolted, strictly speaking, on the "wrong" date. This is not surprising. How would they have known that they were revolting eleven days "early"? Perhaps they could have received such specific information from their Spanish informants, but it is quite unlikely that they could have maintained their temporal alignment with the Catholic calendar when the majority of whites around them used the Protestant one. Indeed, highly literate and informed Gregorian-style European travelers to the Julian-calendar American colonies sometimes had trouble remembering new-style dates, even though they had ready access to calendars and almanacs.<sup>37</sup> Probably the rebels had to

<sup>36</sup> Merolla da Sorrento, *Voyage to Congo*, 622 (first quotation); Thornton, *Kongoleses Saint Anthony*, 213 (second quotation). Mary as protector and warrior is a common image, and she can be found "putting in a judicious appearance to hearten her champions" at least since the seventh century; Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 304 (quotation), 305, 308, 313–14. See also Kevin Gosner, *Soldiers of the Virgin: The Moral Economy of a Colonial Maya Rebellion* (Tucson and London, 1992); and Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven and London, 1996). On the prepolitical and political nature of slave resistance generally see Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution*; on the political implications of the Stono rebellion in particular, consult Landers, *Black Society*, 34.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, the travel journal of David Peterson DeVries, who came from Holland

rely on guarded glimpses at newspapers. In effect, then, the revolt is a good illustration of religious syncretism and the disruptive effects of slavery. Stono's rebels kept their liturgical calendar intact mentally, but the realities of slave labor and sometimes deliberate misinformation by slaveholders meant that they unwittingly acted as Afro-Catholics according to a non-Catholic calendar.<sup>38</sup> It hardly matters that the Stono rebels revolted on the "wrong" day. For them it was the "right" date and still held affective importance. Indeed, the insurgents' timing of their revolt illustrates with exquisite precision what some theorists of time have maintained—that time in all its guises is essentially an invented and subjective phenomenon. Calendrical time in this instance was constructed and not reducible to an ostensibly "true" date.<sup>39</sup>

To deny the possibility (or even probability) that the slaves who orchestrated the Stono revolt did so with the date of Mary's nativity in mind means to dismiss the images associated with Mary that the insurgents employed during the rebellion. Non-elite peoples in colonial North America did not lack a sense of time and of temporal rhythms and orders, particularly quite precise ones. Native Americans, for example, sometimes launched highly successful raids on particular dates because they understood the strategic and tactical advantages such dates afforded. During the Pontiac Wars, for example, they attacked Fort Michilimackinac on June 4, 1763 (the king's birthday), "which the Indians knew was a day set apart by the English as one of amusement and celebration," and managed to capture the fort as a result.<sup>40</sup> Calen-

---

accustomed to the new-style calendar, but, following a brief stint in old-style Virginia, became confused as to the actual date. See Mark M. Smith, "Culture, Commerce, and Calendar Reform in Colonial America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., LV (October 1998), 557–84, esp. 576 n. 53.

<sup>38</sup> Leslie Desmangles makes a similar point in her excellent discussion of vodou and Catholicism in Haiti where she notes: "The gods of Africa are related to calendrical events and are identified with natural phenomena . . . . Under the intense missionary activity that accompanied slavery in colonial Haiti, the African priests transported as slaves to Saint-Domingue were torn between two irreconcilable chronological systems—the Christian cycle of holy days, and the recurring cycle of mythical deeds performed *ab origine* in honor of their African deities. . . . This meant that they had to adapt their traditional calendar to the Gregorian calendar . . . . [T]he slaves in Saint-Domingue took the major Catholic feast days to perform their African ceremonies." Because Kongolese slaves were already calendrically Catholicized, they had less adjustment to make. Desmangles, *Faces of the Gods*, 10.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Barbara Adam, *Timewatch: The Social Analysis of Time* (Cambridge, Eng., 1995).

<sup>40</sup> William Warren, "The Capture of Fort Michilimackinac," in Charles Hamilton, ed., *Cry of the Thunderbird: The American Indian's Own Story* (New York, 1950; repr., Norman, Okla., 1972), 135. For some recent thoughts on time, race, and the temporal consciousness of peoples of the African Diaspora see Mark M. Smith, "Questioning Colored Peoples' Time: The Importance of Punctuality for Black Resistance in the American South, 1739 and 1955," unpublished paper presented at a conference entitled "On Time: History, Science, Commemoration," at the

dical consciousness, then, was not the exclusive provenance of the elite. Indeed, if Ira Berlin's recent argument concerning the sophisticated characteristics of Atlantic creole slaves is correct, Stono's leaders epitomized such qualities.<sup>41</sup> Memories of Kongolese history and Catholicism helped Stono's slaves prepare and rebel on days that were both strategically practical as well as spiritually empowering and propitious.

While Wood's reasoning helps explain why Stono rebels revolted on a Sunday, and while Thornton's work adds much needed depth to the episode by iterating the military and Catholic dimensions to the revolt, the evidence presented here clarifies the specific temporal and iconological context and content of that very bloody but spiritually meaningful rebellion. Recent work on the role of Catholicism in shaping the form and timing of slave resistance in Brazil suggests that the Stono rebels were hardly exceptional or incongruous in this regard. As Alida C. Metcalf's compelling analysis of the Santidade de Jaguaripe uprising of the 1580s reveals, Portuguese Catholicism, a highly syncretic slave cosmology, and the appearance of "Saint Mary Our Lady, Mother of God" among the Indians conspired to promote a millenarian rebellion among Brazilian slaves. The rebels' syncretic religion rested on a "reinterpretation of Christianity," and, like the Kongolese, Brazilian slaves were taught "to say Mass in the Morning on saints days" and enjoined "to encourage the establishment of the confraternity of Our Lady of the Rosary." Brazilian slaves also incorporated key elements of Catholicism into their own religious beliefs. "Through Jesuit catechism, Indian and African slaves," maintains Metcalf, "received exposure to the idea of the apocalypse, to the transformative power of redemption." Worsening social and economic conditions, an African millenarian tradition, and the syncretic, revolutionary religious beliefs of the enslaved led to the uprising. Despite the tendency for some earlier scholars to "reject the relevance of the U.S. South to Brazil because the slave religions of the United States came out of a Protestant tradition," and notwithstanding the scholarly emphasis on the revolutionary theology of Afro-Protestantism, the arguments presented here and in Metcalf's work suggest that Afro-Catholicism was an important influence on organized resistance in both regions. Slaves

---

National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside, Liverpool, England, September 16–19, 1999; Walter Johnson, "Possible Pasts: Some Speculations on Time, Temporality, and Atlantic Slavery," *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, XLV, no. 4 (2000), 485–99; and Kevin K. Birth, "Any Time is Trinidad Time": *Social Meanings and Temporal Consciousness* (Gainesville, Fla., 1999).

<sup>41</sup> Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, esp. 73–74.

in Brazil and South Carolina both used a syncretic version of Catholicism—one anchored to varying degrees in the image of the Virgin Mary—to shape the temporal, affective, and iconological contours of their resistance.<sup>42</sup>

The temporal dimensions of both rebellions also help reveal the historical behavior of the ostensibly silent and inarticulate. In the absence of written records detailing the thoughts of the rebels, the timing and shaping of their rebellions must serve as evidence of their motivations, beliefs, and hopes. The rebels' puncturing of historical time through temporally specific and deliberate action is thus, in effect, their articulation, testimony, and voice. Careful attention to the Stono rebels specifically—and other enslaved peoples in the Americas generally—can remind us of the importance that European-African colonial contact and a powerful, residual Afro-Catholicism had in shaping the behavior and beliefs of the enslaved in the New World.

<sup>42</sup> Alida C. Metcalf, "Millenarian Slaves? The Santidade de Jaguaripe and Slave Resistance in the Americas," *American Historical Review*, CIV (December 1999), 1531–59 (quotations, in order, on pp. 1538, 1545, 1547, 1548, 1556, and 1557 n. 127). On Afro-Protestantism and Christianity see John B. Boles, *Black Southerners, 1619–1869* (Lexington, Ky., 1984), 153–68; Boles, ed., *Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord: Race and Religion in the American South, 1740–1870* (Lexington, Ky., 1988); Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*; Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 27–64; and Theophus H. Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York and Oxford, 1994).