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Comparative Slavery

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### An Analysis of Stanley Elkins and Brazilian Slavery

On January 13, 1845, an ad was released that described the physical attributes of Jose Antonio, a slave who had run away from his plantation. Ads like these were common in this time period, and they were primary sources that reveal several concepts to contemporary scholars. What do slave ads like this one reveal to modern readers, and how do they tie in to arguments made by well-known scholars about slavery? By analyzing this runaway slave ad, I will prove that slaves developed skills during their time in slavery, and refute Stanley Elkins' claims about slavery and what abolition did to Brazil. I will begin by laying out the three main facets Stanley Elkins' argument that revolve around kinship, a lack of skilled slaves, and integration post-abolition. I will then dissect these three facets, and use primary and secondary sources to establish why Elkins' claims are incorrect.

Elkins argued, in a book published in the 1959 about slavery and the impact of abolition, that plantations are close systems that eliminated the ability of personal relationships, or kinship. He continued that because of said closed system, slavery robbed the moral personality of a slave of motivation, skills, pride, self-worth, and the ability to function on their own. He then concluded that because of this lack of personality, slaves were left without coping mechanisms, both social and cultural, to function in a free world, post abolition. Elkins also argued that because of this lack of skills, there was no integration into society, and this environment fostered

racial conflict. These claims were problematic on several levels, and I will analyze each problematic claim in the remainder of this essay. I will then conclude with an analysis of the post-slavery, capitalist society in Brazil, and the ways in which freed slaves were intentionally excluded from this society.

First, Elkins claimed that there was a lack of kinship that is established within the slavery system. This meant that there could be familial ties between any slaves, which is simply false. In Richard Price's *First Time*, he discusses how important familial ties are to the Saramaka marronage community. The first two stories that Price relays about the Heroic Years of the community identifies Lanu, the most important leader, and his younger brother and sister, and how they fought for each other's survival (Price 45-47). The sense of kinship is vital in this instance, and this is displayed by the fact that Price chooses these stories of kinship to be the first to start with, because of their importance to the culture of the Saramakas. There is another story in Prices' book that described Kaála, a runaway slave, killing her husband because he would not turn back to the plantation to rescue her mother, which was another example of the importance of kinship. Along similar lines, slave advertisements often stated the presumed whereabouts of slaves based on where their kin were located. One advertisement in a Brazilian newspaper described a slave in immaculate detail, and finished the advertisement by stating that the slave was thought to be around the plantation of Captain Ferreira, because his brothers are located in that plantation (Conrad 365). All of these examples and more prove that Elkins was incorrect in his assumption that slavery eliminated all familial and kinship ties, because it was clear that slaves remembered their kin and would fight to find them when the time came.

Elkins also claimed that slavery crushed slaves moral personality, and because of this they were not able to develop any skills while in slavery. The advertisement posted about Jose Antonio, the runaway slave, identified that slaves had skills, because it commented on how Antonio was a master blacksmith, and knows how to kill ants and work with copper (Conrad 362). This advertisement was simply one example of a slave learning skills that the master acknowledges. For example, it was clear that slaves developed skills when looking at other slave advertisements of the time, such as one that commented on a slave named Camillo, who was a master carpenter, sailor, and machinery worker (Conrad 365). Slave advertisements were not the only example, however. The Saramaka people who established their own slave society demonstrate the many skills that slaves had to have had in order to survive in the wilderness. They learned how to navigate the wilderness and hunt for their own food (Price 54). The Saramaka people even demonstrate their skills to this day, because being able to recite and remember stories from hundred of years ago shows that moral personalities were never smashed, and their history was so important to them that they passed it down orally, which is a skill in itself. Finally, the story of Juan de Morga, the slave, showed that slaves had well-established skills. De Morga was put through especially harsh treatment, because his owner had a personal vendetta against him. He was in shackles for inhumans amounts of time, and would be put to the hardest of tasks and be flogged without warning (Sweet 170). Through all of this, however, De Morga persisted and continued to try to run away, usually by means of horse (Sweet 174). Riding a horse alone takes skill, and the way that De Morga's personality was not crushed, and how he continuously strived for freedom through resistance, demonstrated that slaves were not always crushed under the terrible institution of slavery.

Finally, Elkins claimed that because of the lack of skills slavery had inundated onto slaves, these slaves were not able to integrate and thus the environment was a breeding ground for racial conflict. This argument was problematic because it rested on false claims, as established in the previous paragraph, because slaves had learned skills through their time in slavery. The argument was also problematic because it blamed slaves for not being able to integrate themselves into society, when the real reason of a lack of integration were structural inequalities that racist lawmakers had put into place, in order to keep freed slaves from integrating successfully. The previously mentioned slave ad about Jose Antonio was released in 1845, a mere five years before the slave trade was abolished. The fact that slave advertisements about runaway slaves had been so prevalent up to the very end of slavery points to the ways in which slaves were rebelling from their confines of slavery up until the moment of abolition. The treatment of slaves was abhorrent, and this mindset did not disappear post-abolition. Take the previously stated example of Juan de Morga, the runaway slave, and his terrible conditions. Or, take the notes of Mary Karasch, who described the treatment of slave women in the capital city of Rio de Janeiro. Karasch described the lack of shoes, and subsequent catching of tetanus, that slaves endured in the city, along with severe malnutrition and lack of clean water (Karasch 84-85).

All of these treatments remained in the minds of lawmakers after abolition, and George Reid Andrews offered a more plausible conclusion as to why *liberatos*, or the freed slave class, had trouble integrating in Brazil post-abolition. Andrews pointed to capitalism as the reason for a lack of integration, his major claim being that, “[s]upply and demand would now replace the violence and coercion of slavery as a means of organizing production” (Andrews 494). Andrews

meant that the system of capitalism and free labor was instrumental in keeping a working class down. In Brazil specifically, *liberatos* tried to take advantage of the new system of capitalism by setting better conditions for themselves in factories, such as no women or children working (Andrews 494). The state then sponsored European immigrants to come in to keep labor prices low, and diminish the efficacy of slaves' demands for better working conditions (Andrews 494). Scientific racism and Social Darwinism were also rampant at these times, confirming that much of Brazil believed that the *liberatos* were innately lazy and shiftless (Andres 495). Newspapers would use these racial divisions to separate the working class from immigrant and *liberatos*, thus effectively diminishing the capability of the working class to unite to go on strikes that would have benefitted them (Andres 498). Andrews concludes that this could easily have been in similar systems all over the world, where racism was prevalent. He states, "the marginalization of black and mulatto workers in São Paulo might easily have led to outcomes like those in the United States and South Africa..." (Andrews 497), thus disproving Elkins' argument about America. All of these state-sanctioned aspects of post-abolition society showed that the state government is the reason which *liberatos* had difficulty integrating into society, instead of blaming the individual as Elkins has done.

To conclude, the claims made by Stanley Elkins, about kinship, a lack of skilled slaves, and integration post-abolition, are all based on false claims. In actuality, slaves had kinship and developed many skills in slavery. George Andrews proved the actual reason that *liberatos* faced difficulty in integration into the post-abolition society of Brazil, which was that the state was sanctioning programs intentionally meant to keep them down. Thus, the entirety of all three aspects of Elkins' argument is false.

## Citations

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