

**“Today he cures; tomorrow he kills”: Domingos Álvares, African Healing,
and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World**

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Between 1730 and 1750, Domingos Álvares traveled the Atlantic world like few Africans of his time—from war-torn Dahomey, to the slave societies of Brazil, to the rural hamlets of Portugal. Using Domingos’ biography as a prism through which to analyze broader patterns of forced migration and diaspora, I highlight the complex social and political ambiguity that defined the history of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. As a powerful healer and vodun priest, Domingos Álvares cured hundreds of people across the Atlantic, yet these cures were rarely a simple matter of remedying illness and disease. By examining the transfer and transformation of particular forms of Gbe healing across the Atlantic world, I will show how ideas were never static, but, rather, always in dialogue with the new. The power of healers like Domingos lies in their ability to point out the tensions, conflicts, and hypocrisies of ruptures, like illegitimate warfare and plundering in Dahomey or enslavement and forced exile in Brazil. These ruptures were the bricks and mortar of history, the catalysts for change that linked thousands of years of transformation in Africa, in some cases extending into the diaspora. Thus, public healing actually became a crucial tool for rendering “modern” intellectual categories, making them more comprehensible, and ultimately more African.ⁱ

In 1727, the Kingdom of Dahomey appeared to be at its apex. By taking control of the port town of Ouidah, Dahomey seemed poised to access the direct spoils of European trade along the coast. Dahomean king, Agaja, boasted an army that was the best-trained, best-equipped military in the region, consisting of 10,000 regular troops, as

well as various apprentices, servants, and hangers-on, but consolidation of the victory at Ouidah would prove much more difficult than Agaja anticipated. The early promise of imperial power and easy wealth was interrupted by years of warfare and disruptions in the interior. The exiled Hueda, who fled to the west during the 1727 invasion, continued to contest Dahomean supremacy at Ouidah. More ominous still was the Kingdom of Òyó, the Yoruba-speaking kingdom to the northeast of Dahomey, whose mounted cavalry struck fear into even the most hardened Dahomean soldiers. Just one year before Dahomey took Ouidah, Òyó invaded Dahomey, killed and enslaved large numbers of soldiers, and burned Abomey to the ground, forcing Agaja to flee to the bush. Agaja attempted to enter into negotiations with Òyó in 1727, but these negotiations failed. Beginning in 1728 and continuing for three years straight, Òyó marched on Dahomey every dry season in an attempt to overthrow Agaja. By 1730, Òyó took the Dahomean capital of Abomey, forcing Agaja to transfer his capital to Allada.

These setbacks were not interpreted as mere happenstance. Indeed, political challenges intertwined with spiritual challenges. Temporal failures were understood to be directly related to the failures of the gods. In response to the abrupt shift in political fortunes, Agaja instituted a policy of appropriating the deities of conquered peoples, importing their shrines and priests to Abomey, where they were integrated into the official royal pantheon.ⁱⁱ One of the prime motivations behind this shift in policy was the immediate political threat presented by vodun priests and their devotees. The healing skills of the priests attracted people from across the region, especially those who were forcibly exiled by warfare, in some cases permanently alienated from their natal homelands. As priests attracted more and more devotees, they increasingly threatened

the political legitimacy of the monarchy at Abomey. Agaja hoped that the policy of assimilation would insure the loyalty of the priests and their growing congregations, but he already feared potential rivals were plotting to overthrow him. In 1732, English trader William Snelgrave observed that Agaja had “grown exceedingly cruel towards his People, being always suspicious, that Plots and Conspiracies are carrying on against him.”ⁱⁱⁱ Particularly suspect in these plots were the priests and devotees of Sakpata, the vodun of the earth.

Sakpata is a generic term for a larger group of deities associated with the land; however, by the eighteenth century it was understood primarily to be the vodun of smallpox. By the early eighteenth century, the disease had devastating impacts on Dahomey. Snelgrave noted that Agaja himself was “pitted with the Small Pox.”^{iv} Outbreaks of smallpox were noted in thirteen different years between 1708 and 1734. During these epidemics, nearly half of the population could become infected, resulting in population declines that approached ten percent a year.^v Compounding the losses from disease, periodic famines killed “many thousands” in the region.^{vi} Agaja possessed one of the most feared armies in the world, but he was powerless against the forces of the earth vodun, which could give or take life at its own caprice.

The only people capable of intervening under such dire circumstances were the Sakpata priests. Individuals afflicted with smallpox went to the priests in search of ways to placate the angry god. The priests prescribed offerings to the vodun, medicines for the sick, and so on. When people died from the disease, the priests were the only ones to handle the bodies, and they were responsible for arranging proper ritual burials. For those who escaped ghastly death from the pox, the priests prepared festivals of ritual

thanks at which the survivors swore their devotion to the vodun. As congregations swelled, Sakpata priests gained tremendous political power. New adherents included not only commoners, but also local chiefs and elders, whose affiliation with Sakpata undoubtedly shaped their political outlooks.^{vii} Logic demanded that Agaja's reign of terror could not be disentangled from the simultaneous terrors wrought by smallpox, famine, and dislocation. Disease, hunger, and exile were mere symptoms of a much broader calamity. One way of appeasing the vodun was for people to join forces in opposition to the Dahomean army. Balance could be restored to the land by defeating the imperial usurpers and restoring rightful chiefs to their kingdoms. In this way, Sakpata represented a potential cure, not only to immediate maladies like smallpox, but also to larger ones like the imperial ambitions of Dahomey.

Agaja responded to the challenges of Sakpata in the most practical way he could, given the untenable circumstances. The king might have preferred to eradicate all worship of Sakpata, killing the priests and destroying their shrines. But this would have risked a much broader political uprising among Sakpata devotees. Moreover, Agaja probably genuinely feared the ire of the vodun, which had already demonstrated its ability to punish him on more than one occasion. Still, the temporal challenges of the Sakpata priests were intolerable. The challenge of Sakpata was thoroughgoing—political, social, cultural, and economic. Indeed, for many in the region, Sakpata appeared to be the only true “king of the earth.” As Melville Herskovits has put it, “The King of Dahomey could brook no competitor, not even “the King of the Earth,” and hence the King of the Earth must be banished.”^{viii} Since Agaja could not kill the Sakpata priests, he chose to neutralize them by selling them into the Atlantic slave trade.

By the time of Dahomey's conquest of Ouidah in 1727, a young man who would eventually come to be known as Domingos Álvares was around eighteen years old. Álvares, who grew up in the village of Naogon in Agonli-Cové, would later recall that "his parents are already dead, and they were called in the language of his land, the father Afenage and the mother, Oconon." Each of these names suggests strong linkages to the world of vodun. Domingos' mother's name, "Oconon," means "possessor/mother of the land" in the Fon language.^{ix} Her partnership with Afenage, the "king of the land," reinforces the notion that each was a servant of Sakpata. Taken together, the names of Domingos' parents suggest important roles in the leadership of a Sakpata congregation. Most tellingly, "Afenage" (or its variations) stands at the head of the Sakpata pantheon and is most often represented as a position of leadership in ritual settings. His marriage to "Oconon" reflects the normal pattern of shared male/female leadership in the healing communities of the Gbe-speaking region.^x We might, thus, reasonably assert that Domingos' parents were more than simple devotees of the vodun; they likely were priests (*vodunon*). If so, Domingos stood to inherit his parents' role as a spiritual leader, the position of *vodunon* being tied to lineage.^{xi} The responsibilities of the *vodunon* were considerable. As the "possessor of the vodun," the priest embodied the vodun as the living link to the spirit world. The vodun "chose" the priest (or one of his earlier direct ancestors) by means of supernatural revelations, indicating how and where to establish the original altar to invoke the vodun. The priest passed this knowledge on to devotees, whose worship and offerings propitiated the vodun, but it was always the priest who orchestrated ritual and provided ultimate authority on the esoteric knowledge necessary to satisfy the vodun and bring harmony to the community.

The content of Domingos' spiritual training is mostly unknowable, but the context is not. We can imagine that in early childhood Domingos was able to absorb much of the knowledge that was at the core of his parents' belief system. This was a time of relative peace in Agonli-Cové. Domingos would have been raised around the shrine and among the congregants of Sakpata, with the knowledge that he would one day succeed his father as the congregation's spiritual leader. After 1727, however, sea changes in the social and political terrain radically transformed the role of the priesthood. Refugees, exiles, the starving, and the diseased swelled membership of Sakpata congregations. Political pressures mounted as Agaja began to proscribe the vodun and its adherents. The gravity of these social and political power struggles with Dahomey could not have been lost on Domingos. Since he claimed that his parents were "already dead," we can assume that he witnessed their passing. Their deaths only heightened his awareness of the socio-political tensions, hastening his graduation into the ranks of the priesthood and thrusting him into the role of community leader. Exactly how and when he took the mantle of *vodunon* is unclear. What seems clear is that by the time Òyó and Dahomey began their warfare in 1728, Domingos Álvares was already a powerful spiritual and political leader, one of those Sakpata priests who was a prime target for enslavement by Agaja and the army of Dahomey. When Domingos Álvares was enslaved, sometime around 1730, his healing techniques were already proven in addressing the illegitimacy of one of the most powerful armies in the world. Nothing about his enslavement would have transformed his belief in the power of vodun. Indeed, his enslavement was a direct consequence of that power, an admission on the part of Dahomey that Sakpata priests "knew too much magic." According to oral history, they were sold away because "they made too much trouble."^{xii}

When Domingos arrived in Pernambuco in the northeast of Brazil, the ills that plagued him and the larger community of enslaved Africans often derived directly from slavery itself. Just as Agaja's army unleashed associated calamities like famine and disease, so too did the institution of slavery. As a healer, Domingos was bound to address these ills at their roots. On the one hand, Domingos' healing practices served to protect slavery, as he cured all range of maladies in the slave community—from snakebites to stomach illnesses to skin lesions—ensuring that individual slaves would live to work another day. On the other hand, Domingos' personal attacks on the broader institution set him firmly against the interests of slave holders. Domingos vehemently rejected the work of cutting cane, insisting that he should be allowed to cultivate his healing practice. His demands not only implied the freedom to go into the hinterlands to collect medicines (an unacceptable example for other slaves), but also the freedom to build new healing communities, communities that might grow to threaten the patriarchal power of the planter. Just as King Agaja could brook no competitor, neither could the “kings of the cane.” At least one neighboring sugar planter issued a standing order to his overseer: If Domingos appeared on his property, he was to be forcibly removed “because of his fame as a fetisher.” Ultimately, when Domingos' master denied his requests to go into the hinterlands to collect herbs and roots, Domingos “cure” was efficient and deadly. He poisoned his master, his master's family, their slaves, and their cattle. As a reflection of this duality, those in the slave community of Pernambuco said of Domingos, “Today he cures; and tomorrow he kills.”^{xiii}

The attacks on his slave master landed Domingos in jail. Feeling lucky to have survived and fearing further attacks, Domingos' master sold him a thousand miles south to Rio de Janeiro, where he continued his assaults. On the passage to Rio, the ship's captain

accused Domingos of casting a spell that prevented the winds from blowing, thereby impeding the ship's forward progress. When the crew stripped Domingos of his clothing and tied him to the ship's mast in order to punish him, they found in his possession a pouch of empowered substances containing various herbs, roots, and so on. This pouch was removed, its contents emptied and burned. After Domingos was whipped, the winds stirred and the ship sailed to Rio without further incident. When the ship's captain arrived in Rio, he "gave thanks to God" that he was able to sell Domingos.

Domingos' arrival in Rio in 1737 created a buzz in the slave community, and the news of his skills eventually reached slave owners. Leonor de Oliveira Cruz, the wife of a planter, had for many years been suffering from a chronic illness that Portuguese doctors failed to cure. Several days after Domingos' arrival in Rio, a slave traveled to her house to make her a pair of shoes. Recognizing that Cruz was suffering from some ailment, the enslaved cobbler asked if she had heard of "the great curer coming from Pernambuco." Cruz had not heard; however, her house slave, Thereza, knew Domingos from Pernambuco, where they had been friends four or five years earlier. Thereza confirmed that Domingos was a powerful healer and recommended that her master purchase him. On Thereza's advice, Cruz and her husband, Manuel Pereira da Fonseca, brought Domingos into their home, hoping he might heal Cruz's illness. However, when Domingos arrived on their property, he immediately entered into disagreement with his new masters. Just as had occurred in Pernambuco, Fonseca refused to allow Domingos the freedom to go into the woods to collect his medicines, fearing he would run away. Domingos complained to several people that his masters treated him like a common fetisher, and that they should find a person of respect to purchase him so he could engage

freely in his healing practice. Soon, Cruz's health took a turn for the worse. Moreover, her young son began suffering from an unexplainable illness. Fearing that Domingos was trying to kill them, they turned Domingos over to the custody of the governor of Rio, who held Domingos until a new owner could be found.

In early 1738, José Cardoso de Almeida, who described himself simply as a "business man", approached the governor with a request to avail himself of Domingos' services. Among his business interests, Cardoso owned a small farm outside of the city, and some of his slaves suffered from illnesses he hoped Domingos might cure. Cardoso carried Domingos to his farm, where Domingos proceeded to have great success in healing the ailing slaves. Once Domingos completed his work on the farm, Cardoso allowed him to heal freely throughout Rio and its hinterlands. Noting that "in very few days Domingos could bring one dobra (12\$800 mil-réis) in earnings for his master," Cardoso resolved to purchase Domingos from Manuel Pereira da Fonseca. Cardoso paid 150 mil-réis for Domingos, about 25% less than the average price paid for a male slave in Rio in the 1730s.^{xiv} Fonseca believed he was off-loading a dangerous and unproductive slave, who was a threat to public safety. He was relieved to cut his losses. For Cardoso, on the other hand, Domingos represented a tremendous economic opportunity. Even if we assume that Domingos only earned one dobra *per month*, he could pay his value of 150 mil-réis in just under a year. In fact, it seems that Domingos earned far more. As his reputation spread, Cardoso fielded dozens of requests for Domingos' services, some from as far away as fifty kilometers. During this time, one woman claimed Domingos came to her house to cure her, but before he even began, he demanded two dobras. She summarily kicked him out of her house, but the price demanded by Domingos indicates

his rapidly increasing economic power. Unable to meet the demands for Domingos' services, Cardoso eventually set him up in a "public house" in the center of Rio where his clients could come for consultations. During this time, Domingos enjoyed the protection of his master and, apparently, even the governor, who endorsed his sale as a healer in the first place. Cardoso owned Domingos for just over a year before he finally granted him his manumission.

As a freed man, Domingos continued healing, establishing three healing centers that ringed the city, as well as a ritual ground (*terreiro*) on a small property in the southern outskirts of the city at the foot of one of Rio's most important Catholic churches. The ritual ground consisted of a small house and a yard where chickens were raised. There was also a large orange tree, beneath which there was an altar that included many calabashes and in the center, a large earthen vessel of water, fortified with herbs, leaves, and powders, with a knife stabbed into the center of the vessel. His followers, mostly female and mostly from the "Mina" coast, gathered on Saturdays to divine and heal. Among his adherents were a handful of initiates, including ones known as "Captain," "Old Man," and "Long Bearded One."

The Saturday healing sessions usually followed a predictable choreography. Those seeking therapy arrived early in the morning, at which time Domingos passed "black chickens over the heads" of each person to sweep away evil spirits. Then, the assembly was ordered outside to gather around the altar. Domingos threw some leaves and black powders into the vessel of water with the knife stabbed through the center. Then, he ordered the ill to put their fingers into the water. After a short time, the congregation began moving in rhythm around the altar. Eventually, one, or several, of

the initiates were possessed by the deity. For example, during one of the ceremonies around the altar, in the middle of the circle was a black woman “dancing and jumping like she was possessed by the devil.”^{xv} Making his way to the center of the circle, Domingos cast some black powders at the woman he called “Captain,” prompting her to fall to the ground “like a dead person.” Domingos walked up to the prostrate woman, and with a staff in his hand, rapped the ground next to her head. The woman immediately arose, taking on a different persona and speaking in an unintelligible language. Then, Domingos took a calabash and placing his finger over the mouth of the vessel, he clapped the bottom with his other hand and also hit it against his thigh. Removing his finger from the hole, a cloud of “smoke” emerged. Domingos commanded the woman to inhale the smoke. He also wafted some toward her ear and her head, which “provoked and infuriated her further.” Domingos placed his finger on the back of her head and began asking the Captain questions “to learn what made the others ill.” The Captain proffered her divinations, answering that some had feitiços; others “suffered from this or that illness;” and so on. Domingos responded to the Captain’s divinations by choosing the appropriate herbal remedy for each of his patients. He then ordered another of his disciples, a man named Barbaças (long bearded one), to administer the medicines.

As his following grew, Domingos gained the unwanted attention of the Catholic Church hierarchy. Catholic priests raided his healing center in the western part of the city and pursued him for months, until 1742, when the Portuguese Inquisition finally arrested him and sent him to Lisbon for trial. Just as with Agaja and the sugar planters, the Inquisition’s charge that Domingos had a “pact with the devil” was a threat to yet another “king” and his followers—God and the Catholic faithful. Domingos’ arrest by the

Portuguese Inquisition exposed deep contradictions in assumptions about the definitions of slavery and freedom. As the slave of Jose Cardoso, protected by the patronage of no less a figure than the governor of Rio de Janeiro, Domingos was free to heal as he pleased. However, as soon as he gained his legal manumission—his “freedom”—he became subject to arrest by the Inquisition. In essence, he was freer as a slave than he was as a freedman. Domingos underscored this reality when, on arrival in Lisbon, he consistently claimed that he was still the slave of Jose Cardoso. He also lamented the loss of a wife and young daughter forever left behind in Rio.

Domingos endured jail, multiple interrogations, torture, and eventual banishment to the Portuguese Algarve. However, his verbal sparring with the Inquisitor Manuel Varejão e Tavora reveals a keen understanding of Catholic doctrine and highlights Domingos’ own skills as a debater and philosopher. Essentially, Varejão demanded a simple confession that Domingos had formed a “pact with the devil.” Faced with detailed descriptions of his ritual practices, Domingos stood fast to his story: All of his cures were natural; he possessed no hidden virtues; and he never parted from the Catholic Church. Domingos clearly understood that Varejão wanted to elicit from him a particular type of confession. After nine long weeks and four different appearances before the inquisitor, a stubborn Domingos still would not break under Varejão’s questioning. He denied invoking spirits for divinatory purposes; he denied predicting past and future events; and he denied using ritual prayers or words in his healing. In short, he avoided any suggestion that he channeled the powers of ancestors or voduns. Domingos was acutely aware that the Catholic hierarchy reduced these powers to the workings of the Devil. Sadly, he may have been a victim of his own intellectual and cultural acumen. Had

Domingos made a full confession of his transgressions, admitting that his healing powers emanated from the Devil, he might have saved himself from the torture that was to follow.

Yet it is precisely Domingos' intractability that should give us pause, lest we conclude that he was a mere "victim" of a cruel and overzealous Inquisition. Domingos would not subject his faith to facile Christian reductions. Nor would he reveal his faith's secrets. Instead, he used his skills to draw the hidden truths out of his inquisitorial adversary, just as he had done numerous times for his clients. Varejão's insistence that Domingos' ritual practices were the work of the Devil was an admission of his belief in Domingos' extraordinary powers. This belief in the power of African malevolence was a refraction of Portuguese assumptions about the redemptive power of God through colonialism and slavery. Africans like Domingos could be rescued from the Devil's clutches only through the intervention of the Catholic Church. When Domingos argued away the presence of the Devil in his cures, he exposed the hypocrisies of the divide between Portuguese "good" and African "evil." Indeed, with the Devil removed from the equation, Varejão faced the heretical prospect of a much more universalist spectrum of therapeutic possibilities. That the powers of African healers might be on the same moral and spiritual plane as those of God and the Catholic Church was simply unimaginable to him. Domingos may have won the larger philosophical argument, but in Varejão's eyes, he was an inveterate liar. Behind the mask of superior logic, the Devil surely resided. Refusing to cede to Satan's trickery, Varejão accused Domingos of criminal libel and once again ordered him to return to his cell. Days later the inquisitor subjected Domingos to torture on the rack, crushing his joints and bones until he cried for mercy.

In June 1744 Domingos marched in the Lisbon Auto da Fe where he heard a public reading of his banishment sentence to the tiny town of Castro Marim, agreeing to abide by all of the penalties applied to him. Located at the Spanish-Portuguese border near the Mediterranean Sea, Castro Marim had long been a destination for Portugal's criminal exiles. Nevertheless, Domingos claimed that people there "abhorred" him and that he couldn't find any way to make a living. Thus, he broke the terms of his banning order and fled Castro Marim. As he walked across the Portuguese Algarve Domingos tried to weave threads of social connection that might once again allow him to form a healing community. However, unlike in Rio, he could find no community that shared his worldview or history. Domingos sold sardines; he worked in a hostel; and he divined the location of buried treasures supposedly protected by half-Moorish, half-serpent creatures. According to local legend, these treasures had been buried as North Africans fled the Iberian peninsula hundreds of years earlier. That Domingos glammed onto this local knowledge and utilized it to his benefit is just one more indication of his remarkable flexibility.

In addition to these endeavors, Domingos continued to heal. On one occasion, he cured a woman named Domingas de Andrade, who was suffering from paralysis below her waist. Even after Andrade regained the use of her legs, her husband refused to pay Domingos the amount he thought he deserved. Then, one day Andrade stepped outside her front door and immediately flew into a terrified frenzy. According to witnesses, she ran about, "disturbed and acting like she was crazy." The cause of her hysterics? A bundle of objects left on her front doorstep, consisting of "a doll with 39 pins; human hair, some blonde, and others black; dog hair; snake skins; sulfur; chicken feathers;

pieces of glass; half a bottle with two packets of pepper and corn kernels...some bones...and grave dirt.” Andrade immediately set out to find Domingos, who told her that the things at her door were “fetishes for her, for all the people in her house, and for the cattle and farm.” In response, Andrade and her husband denounced Domingos before the Inquisition, setting Domingos into almost perpetual motion, as the Portuguese Inquisition pursued him across the country.

In July 1747, as he passed through the town of Silves, secular authorities apprehended Domingos. Though the exact circumstances of his arrest are not spelled out in the record, his initial detention may have been for something as simple as vagrancy. He would have been a truly odd spectacle in the rural areas of the Algarve—a tattered, hungry African man, embellished with bolsas, beads, and veronicas, carrying a cane tube full of medicines and a sack with various other healing implements. Among the strange objects found in the bag was a “small rock” taken from the head of a jack fish (*xaréu*). Domingos later confessed that he threw this rock into herbal baths as part of the treatment for kidney stones, another cure he learned in Brazil.^{xvi} Whatever the precise circumstances of his arrest, the Holy Office in Évora had been pursuing Domingos for almost two years and was closely monitoring news of his whereabouts. On July 15, the Évora tribunal issued an order requesting that Domingos be turned over to their jurisdiction. They also ordered that he be confined in the Inquisitorial jails in that city.^{xvii} Less than a month later, Domingos arrived in Évora, where he once again faced a judicial inquiry before the Portuguese Holy Office.^{xviii}

By the time of his arrest, Domingos had been in the Algarve for nearly three years. During that time, he traveled hundreds of miles on foot, moving frequently from

place to place, trying to eke out a living wherever he could. Domingos' position in Portuguese society scarcely resembled the elevated status he enjoyed in his homeland, or even in Brazil. In those places, his skills were widely acknowledged as crucial to the maintenance of community well-being. Ties of reciprocity between Domingos, the local community, and the world of the spirits were recognized and respected. In this way, Domingos became an integral force in the creation and continued vitality of social networks that defined "individuals" by their temporal and spiritual relationships.

Despite his best efforts to serve new communities and forge new social networks in Portugal, nothing could transform his singular status as an exile, outcast, and social pariah. Everywhere he went, people recognized him as a colonial convict. Some people "abhorred" him, while others selfishly sought to capitalize on his alleged powers. As a result, Domingos constantly re-made himself in order to curry favor and adhere to Portuguese expectations. He was variously a "healer," a "virtuoso," and a "fetisher." In one town, he cured illnesses with herbal baths, Catholic prayers, and the sign of the cross. In the next, he peered inside the earth, spoke to enchanted Moors, and discovered incredible riches. He conspicuously wore holy objects; yet he also carried a sack full of *feitiços* (fetishes). Most of his clientele knew he was from the Mina coast and had spent time in Brazil, yet he allegedly told some people that he was from Angola.^{xix} Whatever the social context, Domingos seemed to have an appropriate answer.

It is tempting to see these various transformations in the Algarve as ingenious, resistant, even heroic. They were, of course, all of these things, but we must temper the urge to celebrate Domingos' extraordinary adaptability. The image of Domingos as the polymorphous, triumphant trickster belies a starker reality of surviving by one's wits,

constantly fleeing the specters of temporal and social death. Struggling daily against the threats of homelessness, hunger, and physical violence, his alienation from Portuguese social life was profound. The basic narrative of his confession before the Inquisitors in Évora spells out this painful quest for survival. Near Mértola, he healed Maria Mestre with herbal baths, infusions, and balms made from sheep's lard. Though he knew "that her illness was syphilis, in order that she would better reward him, he told her that her pains were feitiços." When she recovered from her illness, she gave him "lots to eat and drink and 1200 réis." In Alcaria, he provided cures "only for some things they gave him to eat, which he requested...for the love of God." In Faro, he "faked" his ability to find buried treasures "because he did not have anything to eat and they could give him something." In Portimão, he unsuccessfully attempted to cure Catharina Varella, but Varella's husband, José Pacheco, still "rewarded him with some money and something to eat."^{xx} Altogether, these explanations suggest that abject poverty and desperate hunger drove Domingos to perform whatever roles were necessary to elicit compensation from his clients, even if this meant forsaking his own vast body of knowledge and beliefs.

Domingos was tried by the Portuguese Inquisition at Évora and found guilty of breaking the terms of his banishment order. He was sentenced to public whipping and a further banishment order, this time to the northeastern town of Bragança. Domingos never made it to Bragança to serve out the terms of his exile, or at least that is the way it appears in the documents. Under normal circumstances, the tribunal at Coimbra would have sent a note to Évora acknowledging that he arrived there safely. Likewise, the Inquisitorial notary at Bragança would have sent a note to the tribunal at Coimbra confirming Domingos' arrival to serve the terms of his exile. No such records exist. Nor

does Domingos' name appear again in the records for any of the Portuguese Inquisition tribunals in the years immediately following his exile order. If, indeed, he remained in Portugal, he ceased his healing practices or concealed them well, neither of which seems likely. Nevertheless, it is possible that the documentary records from Coimbra were simply misplaced and Domingos lived out the rest of his days in Bragança in quiet, solitary misery. Even more improbable, Domingos might have absconded from his penitential obligations, fleeing toward the coast and out into the relative safety of the Atlantic. For those insistent on holding onto the image of a defiant, irascible Domingos, this ending holds great appeal. Unfortunately, history rarely adheres to such uncomplicated romanticism. The likeliest scenario explaining Domingos' fate is far grimmer. At around forty years old, he was no longer a young man. He had suffered more than ten grueling years of slavery and spent more than half of his seven years as a "freed" man in ecclesiastical jails. This accumulation of hardship and physical abuse may have finally taken its toll. Given the apparent absence of any record of Domingos in Portugal after his release from jail in Évora in November 1749, it seems most likely that he perished before arriving in Coimbra, unaccounted for and unrecorded.

In the end, Portuguese institutional power managed to neutralize Domingos and many others like him, but not before these Africans made a profound impact on the intellectual discourse of the Atlantic world. These African intellectuals offered an alternative language of health and healing that simultaneously defied the socioeconomic outcomes of imperialism and sought ingenious translations of them. The ambiguities and apparent contradictions embedded in this discourse were the natural outgrowth of political conflict and compromise that emerged in new communities. By challenging the

mercantilist and expansionist expressions of imperialism, while at the same time weaving itself into the fabric of colonial slave society, this alternative political discourse of health and healing revealed that the "capitalist empire . . . turned out not to be so consistently capitalist after all, bureaucratic rule not so consistently bureaucratic, the making of colonial subjects not so consistent in their ideas of what kind of subject was to be produced."^{xxi} These conclusions are not meant to endorse healing as the most viable solution to the historical problems of capitalism, slavery, and colonialism. Rather, they are meant to show that through the lens of health and healing we can witness the fragmentation of European colonial ideologies, as well as African communal ones. These ideologies were never pristinely European or African so much as they were Atlantic, braided together in ways that made them both mutually distinctive and mutually constitutive of one another.

Where Africans figure in Atlantic world histories, emphasis generally rests on their adoption of European and American legal mechanisms, commercial forms, and revolutionary ideas. To be sure, many Africans applied their creative energies to making these categories their own. Yet such emphases often rest on the a priori assumption that African categories would become folded into Atlantic and American ones rather than constituent of them. Regardless of intent, these approaches reify the idea that Atlantic "modernity" was contingent on a sort of untrammelled civilizing process in which individual rights replaced those of ancestors and kin, capital accumulation replaced reciprocal exchange, states replaced statelessness, monotheism (God) replaced polytheism (ancestors/spirits), biological science replaced herbal remedies, and so on. In fact, as the history of Domingos' healing practices demonstrates, African and European-

American categories of meaning were often part of the same modernizing thread.

Arguably, discourses of nation-state, capitalism, Christianity, and science eventually won out over others in the broader Atlantic world. But the competition over which discourses would emerge as authoritative was always fiercely contested. Through the Fon-Gbe lens, health and healing amounted to a bundle of powers that Europeans often reduced to "witchcraft." Yet Europeans clearly understood the ways these powers challenged their understandings of religion, science, economy, and politics. As these competing discourses entangled, African ideas became etched into Atlantic ones, informing the development of revolutionary and enlightenment ideas, so often understood to be derived from a uniquely European "intellectual" heritage. Domingos' sustained attempts to eradicate the afflictions caused by empire, slavery, and mercantilism anticipated the "modern" European anticolonial, abolitionist, and socialist movements by decades, if not centuries. Yet his opposition to these Atlantic ills was not driven by modernist "humanitarian" impulses or ideas of individual "liberty." On the contrary, he persistently sought to reconstitute the "self" through the collective power of ancestors and kin. In this way, the artificial boundaries between "imaginary" spiritual power and "real" social power blurred into a political system with divination and healing firmly at its center.

Unfortunately, the condescension of Atlantic history as enlightened, democratic triumphalism often obscures African epistemologies and ways of being, reducing Africans either to "resistant" cultural anachronisms who fought slavery from essentialist, ethnic barricades or to "finished" Americans who miraculously adapted their African pasts to liberal, revolutionary principles. Each of these approaches represents a neat

"modern" morality tale, but neither reflects the chronic vulnerability, serial dislocation, or episodic histories that plagued most Atlantic Africans. To tell these fitful, fragmented stories, one would need to tap into alternate epistemologies of violence, rupture, memory, and the quests for spiritual and communal redemption. These epistemological strands are sewn deeply into the fabric of Atlantic history, yet they remain mostly obscured in the broader tapestry of European and American exceptionalism.

Domingos' ability to collapse time and space into a unity of human and spiritual power defies our understanding of history as chronologically ordered and geographically bound. Yet it was precisely through these epistemologies that he and his followers made sense of Atlantic-world anomie. Whether appealing to Sakpata to deliver his countrymen from the depravities of Agaja or utilizing gbo to address the ills of enslavement, Domingos generated sociopolitical power out of seamless dialogues between the living and the dead, staving off the isolation and loneliness wrought by the forces of the Atlantic world. For Domingos and his devotees, the Atlantic became an integrated memoryscape of voduns, deceased ancestors, and living kin whose power could be called upon to repair the broken shards of diaspora. This collective, regenerative power was their Atlantic history.

Africans experienced vulnerability and chronic dislocation more often than others, but they were never alone in these experiences. The alienating forces of empire also impacted soldiers, planters, merchants, ship captains, governors, and even kings. Thus, Domingos divined news from Spain and Portugal, offered good luck charms for those traveling to university in Coimbra, and remedied unknown illnesses for slave masters. In none of these instances did Domingos' clients share in his communal ethos. On the

contrary, they reduced African understandings of reciprocity to the crass anonymity of monetary transactions, underscoring their allegiance to the empire of capital.

Nevertheless, their use of Domingos' services betrayed uncertainties and fears about the deeply isolating effects of life in the colonies. In this way, Domingos not only served as a savvy, charismatic, and efficacious interpreter of the modernizing Atlantic but also held a critical mirror to it, reminding imperial power brokers that they too shared in the "darkness" of the modern world.

In the end, it was Domingos' extraordinary ability to adapt divination and healing to new circumstances—to translate his knowledge to a world of violent and unrelenting change—that is perhaps his most enduring legacy. Imperial power brokers wanted to dismiss him as a superstitious anachronism, but he consistently proved himself to be a socially relevant, progressive, and thoroughly modern figure. Indeed, some of his ideas seem as pertinent today as they were nearly 300 years ago. In a gesture of "modern" religious tolerance, he embraced the healing power of the Catholic Church. He manipulated the "modern" cash economy, healing for slave masters in order to serve the interests of his spiritual community. Embedded in his healing rituals were "modern" scientific and biomedical practices that proved to be efficacious years before Western medicine discovered them. In his lengthy exchange with Inquisitor Manuel Varejão, he proved himself a virtuoso of "modern" philosophical debate, forcing the Catholic priest to consider a spiritual universalism that included African ancestors and deities. Altogether, Domingos' dazzling skills as a priest, psychologist, physician, philosopher, historian, and sociologist placed him at the very forefront of the incipient modern world. At the same time, as the intellectual catalyst and mediator for a diffuse community of African slaves

and freedpeople, he embodied the stunning and terrifying potential of their spiritual and social unity. Domingos was quite literally power incarnate. That is why he survives in Portuguese archives—as an exemplar of modernity, but also as its fiercest opponent.

There is a strong temptation to reduce Domingos' powers to his remarkable individual skills. To be sure, his story contains elements of an epic, even heroic, history of a “self-made” man. Yet the teleology of the biographical narrative laid out in his Inquisition case, or even in my description in this paper, obscures broader imperatives of communal empowerment that structured Domingos' life. Domingos' individual powers derived from his ability to cultivate a collective historical consciousness through language, proverbs, rumors, and jokes, as well as through divination, healing, initiation rituals, and invocations of ancestors. Such expressions often seem contrived, contradictory, or downright illusory. But the “truths” of Atlantic history cannot be confined to a single genre of linear narrativity. Embedded in the convoluted poetics of spirit possession, magic, rumor, and so on, were “realities” that powerfully explained the modernizing world. These realities were generated from a wider historical consciousness that bound the natural with the supernatural, the living with the dead, the material present with the imagined past. In the Atlantic, violence, alienation, and individuation reinforced the importance of these connections to other worlds and other times, providing dislocated Africans with the discursive tools to resurrect lost family and friends. Domingos Álvares possessed the specialized knowledge to coordinate this regeneration of kin and community, but the actualization of this knowledge depended entirely on others. In this way, his individual story is the product of a collective historical consciousness, reflecting the struggles, aspirations, successes, and failures of voduns, ancestors, family, and friends

across three continents and over many generations. His history ultimately belongs to all of them and to the broader intellectual history of the Atlantic world.

ⁱ This longitudinal approach to African intellectual history owes much to David Schoenbrun, “Conjuring the Modern in Africa: Durability and Rupture in Histories of Public Healing between the Great Lakes and East Africa,” *The American Historical Review*, 111 (2006): 1403-1439, and Neil Kodesh, *Beyond the Royal Gaze: Clanship and Public Healing in Buganda* (Virginia, 2010).

ⁱⁱ On the policy of religious assimilation by Dahomey, see Law, *The Slave Coast*, 332-334.

ⁱⁱⁱ William Snelgrave, *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave Trade* (London, 1734), 154.

^{iv} Snelgrave, 75.

^v Claude Lepine, “As metamorphoses de Sakpata, deus da varíola,” in Carlos Eugênio Marcondes de Moura, ed. *Leopardo dos olhos de fogo—Escritos sobre a religião dos orixás VI* (São Paulo, 1998), 135.

^{vi} On the famine that resulted from Dahomey’s invasion of Whydah, see Snelgrave, 15.

^{vii} On the growth of Sakpata, see Lepine, 135.

^{viii} Melville Herskovits, *Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom* (Evanston, IL, 1967), II:137.

^{ix} In Fon, one often places the letter “O” in front of words beginning with consonants. The word “kó” = earth. And “nõ” = “mother of” or “possessor of.” RPB Seguro, *Dictionnaire Fon-Français*. Cotonou: Procure de l’Archdiocèse, 1963. 2 vols., 2:448, 1:298, 2:408. Also, in a 1934 list of principal deities worshipped in the Agonli-Cové region, a French colonial observer noted that Sakpata was also known as “Docounon.” Covi Mensan, “Le culte des fétiches dans la region de Zagnanado,” *L’Éducation Africaine (Bulletin de l’Enseignement de l’AOF)* 23, no. 85 (1934), 19.

^x Luis Nicolau Parés, *A formação do Candomblé: História e Ritual na Nação Jeje na Bahia* (Campinas, 2006), 135.

^{xi} Herskovits, II:175. Also see the 1797 account of Father Vicente Ferreira Pires, who wrote that the “office of Fetish Parents” passed “from husband to wife, from father to children, in a manner that it always stays in one family.” Pires, *Viagem de África em o Reino de Dahomé (1800)*, ed. Clado Ribeiro de Lessa. São Paulo, 1957), 93.

^{xii} Herskovits, II:63.

^{xiii} The specific quote comes from Tereza Allada; however, the same sentiment was expressed by several others.

^{xiv} Manolo Florentino, Alexandre Vieira Ribeiro, Daniel Domingues da Silva, “Aspectos Comparativos do Tráfico de Africanos para o Brasil (Séculos XVIII e XIX),” *Revista Afro-Ásia* 31 (2004), 83-84.

^{xv} Testimony of Leonor de Oliveira Cruz (1742).

^{xvi} ANTT, Inquisição de Évora, Processos, No. 7759, ff. 272-276, *In Specie* interrogation of Domingos Álvares (10 November 1747). The crucial importance of the jack fish for Brazilian fishermen has spawned a rich set of spiritual and folkloric traditions that can be traced back to enslaved Africans. The celebrations and offerings for the fish tend to revolve around its alimentary importance. The use of the fish’s parts for healing purposes elaborates yet one more reason for its celebration. For a summary of these traditions, see Braga, “Notas Sôbre a Pesca do Xaréu.”

^{xvii} ANTT, Inquisição de Évora, Processos, No. 7759, f. 112, Letter from Luis Antonio Fragoso de Barros to the Doutor Juiz de Fora da Cidade de Sylves (15 July 1747).

^{xviii} ANTT, Inquisição de Évora, Processos, No. 7759, f. 113, Auto de Entrega of Domingos Álvares (9 August 1747).

^{xix} See ANTT, Inquisição de Évora, Processos, No. 7759, ff. 187v-191, Testimony of Catharina Jozepha (15 May 1747). Also see ff. 198v-199, testimony of Constança da Conceição, who reported that “she heard it said that [Domingos] was born in Angola.” (19 May 1747).

^{xx} ANTT, Inquisição de Évora, Processos, No. 7759, ff. 254-258, Confession of Domingos Álvares (11 September 1747).

^{xxi} Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 239-240.