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To Market, To Market:  
Enslaved Women and African Marketing Practices in the Antebellum South

During the colonial era, enslaved Africans and their British captors transformed old-world marketing practices into a system of local commerce that was unique to the American South. Both European and African women were expected to participate in small-scale food trade in order to maintain their households, and the sight of women selling homegrown vegetables, cooked foods, and other perishables throughout the Atlantic World was common. Prior to industrialization, British women were responsible for the buying and selling of the majority of food in the urban and rural areas of England but they rarely engaged in the importing and exporting of sugar, tobacco, or cotton.<sup>1</sup> In large West African cities like Eko, Ouidah, and Kano women also controlled vending in the local markets but unlike England, elite African women also dealt with large-scale trade in commodities like slaves, cloth, and salt.<sup>2</sup> Both 18<sup>th</sup> century African and English women were remarkably similar in their small-scale marketing techniques and many of these customs traveled across the Atlantic Ocean to North America. While plantation owners kept their wives in a type of purdah on southern plantations, certain enslaved women with special skills were allowed to enter urban markets as competent agents for their masters and for themselves. African and African American women utilized their strangely

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<sup>1</sup> E.P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present*, 50 (1971); Alice Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Howe, 1920).

<sup>2</sup> *Women and Class in Africa*, edited by Claire Robertson and Iris Berger, (New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1986); Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *African Women: A Modern History*, translated from French by Beth Gillian Raps (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997); *African Market Women and Economic Power: The Role of Women in African Economic Development*, edited by Bessie House-Midamba and Felix K. Ekechi, (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1995); Ester Boserup, *Women's Role in Economic Development*, (London: George Allen and Unwin LTD, 1970).

privileged positions to reinforce the informal economy and to create a version of southern commerce that reflected African customs.

Southern slave owners often utilized the gendered nature of food distribution to generate extra money by granting bondwomen permission to sell surplus vegetables from their home plantations to the closest towns and cities. The task system in the Carolina low country encouraged enslaved laborers to grow corn, yams, and gourds in addition to keeping hogs, chickens, and cows. Certain plantation owners allowed their enslaved workers to travel up to 20 miles on Sundays, an accustomed free day, to sell surplus produce in urban marketplaces.<sup>3</sup> In order to control the influx of enslaved women into the southern metropolis, City Governments like those of Charleston and Savannah sanctioned a Huckster or Fruiter slave badge which was specifically designed for enslaved female sellers who, along with their masters' products, sold cakes, nuts, their own produce, handmade baskets, and even earthenwares.<sup>4</sup> With this physical device, bonded women were able to conduct business without the presence of their owners. Through the use of the Huckster or Fruitier slave badge, women helped establish a type of informal economy that thrived in Charleston's bustling marketplace. Since the establishment of the first official market in 1739, African and African-American women controlled many aspects of Charleston's local vending, which slowly developed into conventional buying and selling rights that became increasingly unenforceable by the municipality.<sup>5</sup>

Southern cities had a difficult time trying to maintain economic control over local

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Morgan, "Work and Culture: The Task System and the World of Lowcountry Blacks, 1700 to 1880," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (1982): 565; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 1-7, 535-540; Douglas R. Egerton, "Markets Without a Market Revolution: Southern Planters and Capitalism," *Journal of the Early Republic* 24 (2004): 212.

<sup>4</sup> *South Carolina Gazette*, May 17, 1773; David J. McCord and Thomas Cooper, eds. *The Statues at Large of South Carolina, Vol. 7* (Columbia, SC: A.S. Johnson, 1840).

<sup>5</sup> Philip Morgan, "The Development of Slave Culture in Eighteenth Century Plantation America" (Ph.D. diss., University College, London, 1977), 136-139.

markets because of their heavy reliance on slave labor as a means of producing and distributing goods. Paternal slaveholders expected their bondspeople to treat them as fatherly lords, but economic rules of supply and demand did not bow to archaic views of pre-industrial deferential relationships. One Charleston resident noted that “I have known those black women to be so insolent as even to wrest things out of the hands of white people, pretending they had been bought before, for their masters or mistresses, yet expose *the same* for sale again within an hour after, for their own benefit.”<sup>6</sup> Wealthy Charlestonians soon abandoned going to the market altogether to avoid dealing with an enslaved woman as an equal during a financial transaction and preferred to send their own enslaved people to do their shopping for them.<sup>7</sup> “The Laws of Market” were color blind, so “property and price” rather than “deference and duty” determined the relationships that existed in the marketplace.<sup>8</sup> This laissez-fair environment allowed enslaved women to implement West African trading techniques that eventually dominated southern markets.

Like both their enslaved and free West African counterparts, bondwomen in South Carolina created economic relationships between groups of people on multiple plantations and became an integral link for supplying fresh food to urban areas. Borrowing from West African traditions, female vendors would meet these suppliers along specific routes and purchase surplus goods. Bondwomen used this strategy to control the rates of particular items, like corn or yams, and influenced their prices. In 1772, a concerned citizen wrote to the South Carolina Gazette describing this practice, noting that “I have seen the country negroes take great pains, after having been first spoke to by those women to *reserve* whatever they chose to sell to them only,

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<sup>6</sup> *South Carolina Gazette*, September 24, 1772.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Olwell, *Masters, Slaves and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Low Country, 1740-1790* (Cornell University Press, 1998), 166-178.

<sup>8</sup> Olwell, *Masters, Slaves and Subjects*, 178-181.

either by keeping the particular article in their canows, or by sending them away and pretending they were not for sale.”<sup>9</sup> Market women were so adept at these transactions that when items could were sold to them, the citizen found that “the wenches so briskly hustle them about from one to another that in two minutes they could no longer be traced.”<sup>10</sup> Trade networks allowed bonded laborers and market women to profit without having to include the dominant class in any monetary transactions. Through these processes, they organized a distinctive informal economy that intertwined African and European cultures.

Local statutes and the Charleston grand jury pronouncements constantly referred to the control African and African American women had over commerce, and the frequency of these laws indicate this perceived problem was not easily solved by punishment or fear. The 1840 *Statutes at Large for South Carolina* specifically stated that “no slave or slaves whatsoever, belonging to Charlestown, shall be permitted to buy any thing to sell again; or to sell any thing upon their own account” without a proper ticket or badge.<sup>11</sup> The same law, differently worded, had been passed repeatedly in the Charleston City Ordinances since 1798, which indicates that these laws were consistently ignored by both African and Euro-Americans.<sup>12</sup> Although numerous ordinances attempted to restrict enslaved women’s involvement in the marketplace, officials often failed to enforce these statutes and, to the chagrin of many customers, price gouging became a normal aspect of local food commerce.

Price collusion and long-distance trade networking are practices that originate from the West African traditions of the Yoruba, Fon, as well as the Hausa, and are noticeable in the

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<sup>9</sup> *South Carolina Gazette*, September 24, 1772.

<sup>10</sup> *South Carolina Gazette*, September 24, 1772.

<sup>11</sup> David J. McCord and Thomas Cooper, eds. *The Statues at Large of South Carolina, Vol. 7* (Columbia, SC: A.S. Johnson, 1840), 408.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander Edwards, *Ordinances of the City Council of Charleston* (Charleston, SC: W.P. Young, 1796), 65; The most comprehensive collection of Charleston City Ordinances are located on microfilm at the Charleston Public Library.

southern archival record from the Revolutionary period to the end of the Civil War. The African continent is vast with many ecological zones, and environmental factors have contributed to the differing economic structures of African peoples. Due to the wet and humid climate of the savannah and rainforest areas of southwest and central Africa, the Tsetse fly parasite prohibited the use of draft animals for agricultural pursuits. In the pre-colonial period, farming without large beasts of burden made the production of cash crops impractical and West African farms tended to be smaller and more diverse than the plantations of the colonial New World. Farm laborers in these regions were usually women and while they might not have owned the land, they did control the fruits of their labor.<sup>13</sup> Many women caught in the slave trade did not bring material objects with them across the Atlantic, but the way that they had traditionally established prices, organized their trade routes, and conducted business in the local marketplace survived the Middle Passage.

The port of Ouidah was one of the largest slave trading centers on the West coast of Africa from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>14</sup> Controlled by the inland nation of the Dahomey, the global trade for guns, slaves, silks and spices dominated the Ouidah port.<sup>15</sup> In 1953, Rosemary Arnold investigated the history of the port and the Dahomian officials who conducted trade with Europeans. The connections that she highlights between the location of Ouidah and the political priorities of the Dahomey are interesting, but her most significant contribution to scholarship is her discussion of Zobeme, the Native Market. Arnold emphasized the differences between the port where Europeans purchased slaves and the market areas where the local populations bought

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<sup>13</sup> Boserup, 72-93.

<sup>14</sup> While the Portuguese initially established this port and slave factory around 1580, which they named Sao Joao Baptista de Ajuda, the French occupation of the area in the 1890s and again in the 1960s established this area as "Ouidah." The British refer to the location as "Whydah." The name of the port and area has remained "Ouidah" to the contemporary Benin people; therefore, I will use the common spelling of this location in this essay.

<sup>15</sup> The Dahomey Kingdom was established by a group of ethnic Fon around 1600. They conquered much of Yorubaland and sold many Yoruba to European slave traders in order to maintain control of the land.

their provisions. For Arnold, the “trading operation is an affair of state administered from the palace, and conducted by the dignitaries of the land under terms of treaty”; therefore, an examination of the local market would provide further information about the lives of those Africans unconnected to the slave trade. While Arnold’s questions focused on the economic contributions that the markets provided for the port, her description of how African women controlled commerce in a market area distinct from the port area that traded human cargo reveal similarities to female hucksters who traded in the local food markets of the United States South.

There were three markets in Ouidah with the majority of exchange occurring in Zobeme. As the largest of the three markets, it was a 14 acre lot in the southwest section of the city with cross streets in a grid pattern.<sup>16</sup> Arnold used traveler accounts to describe scenes in which masses “of people, especially women, meet to buy and sell.”<sup>17</sup> Zobeme women in mud huts would vend both raw or cooked provisions, like eggs, fish, shrimp, baked ground nuts, yams and multiple types of meat.<sup>18</sup> These sights were similar to those described by travelers in the American South, with one Charleston observer “counting in the market and different corners of this town, sixty-four Negro wenches selling cakes, nuts, and so forth”.<sup>19</sup> Like their American counterparts, African women were responsible for their household’s consumption, and this gendered position dictated their roles in the marketplace.

Similarly, Yoruba women have had a long and successful history of market participation. Nigerian scholar Toyin Falola has pointed to connections between trade and power in Yoruban society that influenced female social relationships and wealth in his article “Gender, Business, and Space Control: Yoruba Market Women and Power.” The different types of trade Yoruba

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<sup>16</sup> Rosemary Arnold, “Separation of Trade and Market: Great Market of Whydah” in *Trade & Market in the Early Empires*, eds. Karl Polanyi, Conarad M. Arensberg, and Harry Pearson (Henry Regnery Company, 1957), 177.

<sup>17</sup> Arnold, “Great Market,” 178.

<sup>18</sup> Arnold “Great Market,” 178.

<sup>19</sup> *South Carolina and American Gazette*, February 19, 1778.

women participated in depended on their marital status. Women who were elderly or newly married usually traded items like cooked foods, cosmetics, and tobacco from their homes, whereas women who were established in their marriages were expected to participate in the local marketing of cloth, foodstuffs, handmade items, and other sundry articles. The wives of high status men took part in the more profitable regional and long-distance trading activities.<sup>20</sup> The relationships that all of these women developed between their distributors and customers were predicated on specialized knowledge of price setting, product regulation, and networking.

In a shift from the purely economic aspects of trade to a more cultural interpretation, Falola explored the religious characteristics of female trading in Yoruba society. He argued that no matter how wealthy market women could get, they would never be able to achieve the status of *Oba* (King) or *Balogun* (War Commander).<sup>21</sup> However, the spiritual balance of power that defined Yoruba culture gave these women authority in other areas. The marketplace was viewed as part of “the religious environment that is integrated into the religious pantheon” which allowed women control over market rituals.<sup>22</sup> Almost all Yoruba women participated in some sort of trade from the pre-colonial through the colonial periods and the gatherings at the local marketplaces allowed women to control how the market functioned economically, but also socially.<sup>23</sup> Through this type of “space control,” the patriarchal structures of a male dominated society allowed women to maintain the spiritual and economic relevance of the marketplace.<sup>24</sup> By doing so, women configured this space in ways that benefited them. The significance of

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<sup>20</sup> Toyin Falola, “Gender, Business, and Space Control: Yoruba Market Women and Power” in *African Women and Economic Power*, 27.

<sup>21</sup> Falola, 23.

<sup>22</sup> Falola, 24.

<sup>23</sup> The African colonial period (c. 1890- c. 1975) started when European countries began invading the interior regions after vaccinations for malaria and other tropical diseases were developed in the 1890s, making it easier for troops to move through areas that had previously been inaccessible. Europeans carved up the African continent and ruled their colonies until Africans declared independence, starting with Libya freeing itself from Italy in 1951.

<sup>24</sup> Falola, 26.

Yoruba religion in relation to female marketing could help explain why certain African and African American women felt so comfortable disregarding the ordinances and laws of Southern states in order to manipulate the physical and social atmosphere of local marketplaces.

Between 1803 and 1808, South Carolina and Georgia imported over 40,000 Africans from the Bight of Biafra, many of whom were war captives of the “jihad” occurring in Hausaland.<sup>25</sup> In 1804, Shehu Usman dan Fodio initiated the Sokoto “jihad” against the Hausa in what is now northern Nigeria.<sup>26</sup> He waged war, in part, to reduce peasant Hausa women’s unlimited freedom in local markets, which contradicted his interpretation of a female’s public place under shari’a law.<sup>27</sup> Unlike some of their more urban Fulani neighbors, Hausa women had bought, sold, and controlled agricultural surpluses from the rural areas to the city markets for generations. The Sokoto Caliphate attempted to push non-elite Hausa out of the markets, and women who did not abide by the new laws were most likely sold to slave traders. Once in the United States, these newly enslaved women would have recognized their mistresses as living in a type of purdah on the southern plantation, similar to the elite women in Hausaland who might have been their suppliers, customers, or patrons. While the environment would have been new, the social relationships that existed between females of different status in a slave society would have been familiar.

Like southern planters, the Hausa kept enslaved people to work as domestics and farm laborers. There were strong paternalistic ties that bound the dominant group to their chattel, and in both societies, enslaved women were permitted to participate in small-scale economic

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<sup>25</sup> G. Ugo Nwokeji, “African Conceptions of Gender and the Slave Traffic,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 58, Issue 1, 2001): 47-68; David Eltis, “The Volume and Structure of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Reassessment,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 58, Issue I, 2001: 17-46.

<sup>26</sup> Robert O. Collins, *Problems in African History* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968).

<sup>27</sup> Beverly B. Mack and Jean Boyd, *One Woman’s Jihad: Nana Asma’u, Scholar and Scribe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).



activities. Although married Hausa women lived in purdah, they were still able to access the market and sell products through established kinship networks with young girls who had not yet reached puberty, with older women who had gone through menopause, and with their enslaved domestics. Market participation was informed by social class and age in Muslim societies, where certain females were allowed, and even encouraged, to generate their own income. An ethnography given by an old Hausa woman Baba, who lived in the town of Karo, to Mary Smith in 1949 detailed interesting relationships between females and trade in the Hausa regions of Northern Nigeria. Baba remembered that as a young girl, she and her companions would go on “trading expeditions.”<sup>28</sup> They would buy different foods, like calabashes or sweet potatoes, then go home and cook the foods to sell the next day. The girls would spend their profits on the Bori dancers, a spiritual cult, who performed in the market squares. During the early colonial period, cash money was given as a gift, used to buy a gift, or was presented as an appeasement among the Hausa and women fully contributed in creating capital. As exemplified by Baba choosing to spend her coins on Bori dancers, pre-pubescent female market traders in Northern Nigeria could do what they wished with their profits and participated in the market economy independently from men.

Along with attempting to destroy the Bori cult, the ‘jihad’ of dan Fodio shifted Islamic traditions in Housaland to reflect a more secluded role for married women, which by the mid-twentieth century had driven many of them to take part in a secret economy. Like the constant laws and regulations levied against enslaved women’s market participation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century slave society of the American South, the restrictive climate on marketing imposed by the Sokoto Caliphate did not stop females from engaging in commercial activity, but actually allowed them

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<sup>28</sup> Mary F. Smith, *Baba of Karo: A Woman of the Muslim Hausa*, (Yale University Press, 1954), 60.

to create a market atmosphere that was “hidden” from the dominate class.<sup>29</sup> In 1995, Catherine VerEecke confirmed Polly Hill’s analysis from 1969 that a large percentage of Muslim women from Northern Nigeria participated in a “Hidden Trade” that encompassed both petty and large-scale commerce in order for women to make money independently from their husbands.<sup>30</sup> Since most scholars looking into African trade and economics are men, and Islamic laws that publically separate men and women do not allow for female merchants to be interviewed or studied, Muslim women’s involvement in trade have been consistently overlooked by governments, NGOs and other aid societies. Although VerEecke focused on the minority Yolo population, her interpretation of how the ‘second economy’ operates in Northern Nigeria can be used as a type of model for looking at how enslaved women in the South utilized similar strategies when confronted with the strict social and cultural restrictions of southern slavery.

Enslaved African and African American women benefited from the gendered nature of food sales by incorporating a type of “hidden trade” into southern marketplaces to establish networks with other plantations, to collude on prices, and to earn cash for themselves. Enslaved women reshaped African and Islamic commercial culture to control aspects of local food production and distribution in the U.S. South, and hopefully this new narrative will shift American economic history from strictly European origins to include the significant contributions of Africa on our shared past.

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<sup>29</sup> Hill, Polly. "Hidden Trade in Hausaland." *Man* 4, no. 3 (1969): 392-409.

<sup>30</sup> Catherine VerEecke, “Muslim women Traders of Northern Nigeria: Perspectives from the City of Yola” in *African Market Women and Economic Power*, 59.