From West Africa to Africatown, Alabama

By Sizwe Dumisani

In 1808 the United States banned certain practices of buying and selling human beings: After 1808, it was illegal to transport Africans across the Atlantic Ocean to work as slaves in the United States. It was still perfectly legal however, within the United States, to buy and sell Africans who were already enslaved in the United States; it was also perfectly legal to develop a breeding process on plantations, to increase the supply of Africans and reduce the need to purchase the enslaved. Later, in 1820, transporting Africans across the Atlantic to enslave them in the United States was declared an act of Piracy and punishable by death. In the US, only one person, Nathaniel Gordon, was executed for violating the 1820 piracy act (Diouf 121).

Despite the ban on the Atlantic Slave Trade, and despite the penalty of death for breaking this law, in 1860 an "enterprising" Alabama enslaver named Timothy Meaher bragged that he could "bring a ship full of niggers right into Mobile Bay under the officers' noses" (Diouf 21). Timothy Meaher hired William Foster to build and captain a ship (the Clotilda) that brought over 110 Africans from Ouida port in Dahomey (now Benin) West Africa to Mobile, Alabama. These Clotilda Africans, many of them from what is now the western part of Nigeria, were victims of raids by Dahomey enslavers (Browne 472).

It was not unusual for the Dahomeyan King to "sacrifice [ritually kill] many slaves." (Hurston, Zora Neal *Barracoon* 29). These enslaved Africans, captured by Dahomeyan King Glele's soldiers[1], endured six weeks at sea, across the Atlantic, and four years of enslavement—during the US civil war.

After their 4-year enslavement and having attempted and failed to return to their homeland in West Africa, they resigned themselves to a life in the United States of America with their African

cultures intact. Three years after being liberated from bondage at the end of the US Civil War, the Clotilda Africans approached their former enslaver, the mastermind behind their enslavement, Timothy Meaher. They asked for reparations in the form of land, to build a homestead. Their request was flatly rejected. The Clotilda Africans persevered and collectively sought out land that would be suitable for them, bought the land, chose their own leaders and began the work of preparing the land to build their Africa Town community (Browne 472-473).

Oluale Kossula (Cudjo Lewis), a founder of Africatown
Photo: Public Domain

The residents of Africa Town established churches, schools and some businesses. Eventually, Africa Town included five neighborhoods: Plateau, Magazine, Happy Hills, Kelly Hills and Lewis Quarter. Lewis quarter, in particular, developed over the years and decades to become a "flourishing enclave with a brick mill, a food store, a barber, beauty shops, and a sewing center. The women made quilts, the men fixed trucks, and all grew foodstuff" (Diouf 238).

Compared to other American Black-founded towns, Africa Town (now spelled Africatown) had some unique features: These Africans were intentional about preserving their African culture—their languages (primarily Yoruba), their family living traditions and retaining their African names. They were able to preserve their language and culture since they were only about five years removed from their homeland when freed.

There were ongoing tensions between Africans born in America and Oluale Kossula's people—the Clotilda Africans. Oluale, one of the 110 Africans who endured the six-week journey across the Atlantic, became one of the founders of Africatown.

The Africans of Africatown created their space as an acknowledgement of who they were and deliberately created a space physically, culturally and psychologically separate from White

Americans and native-born Americans of African descent (Diouf 157-158). The Clotilda Africans were a very enterprising people, and proudly strove to be as independent as possible.

Oluale: “De women work too, so dey kin help us. Dey doan work for de white folks. Dey raise de garden and put de basket on de head and go in de Mobile to sell de vegetable. We make de basket and de women sell dem too” (Hurston 68). The Clotilda Africans were also self-determined when it came to the education of their children also.

Oluale: “We Afficky men doan wait lak de other colored people till de white folks gette ready to build us a school house. We build one for ourselves and astee de county to send us de teacher” (Hurston 73).

Anthropologist and author Zora Neal Hurston spent over three months interviewing Oluale Kossula in the late 1920s. Some of Kossula’s recollections appeared to triggered a re-lived trauma of his capture and the slaughter of his fellow villagers, at the hands of King Glele’s soldiers—particularly the women soldiers:

> De got de women soldiers too and dey run wid de big knife and make noise. Dey kektch people and dey saw de neck lak dis wid de knife den dey twist de head so and it come off de neck. Oh Lor’, Lor! I see de people gettee killed so fast! De old ones dey try run ‘way from de house but dey dead by de door, and de women soldiers got dey head. Oh, Lor!...No man kin be so strong lak de woman soldiers from de Dahomey. So dey cut off de head…Oh Lor’, Lor’!...De heads of de men..smell very bad. Oh, Lor’, I wish dey bury dem! I doan lak see my people head in de soldiers’ hands; and de smell make me so sick! De nexty day, dey make camp all day so dat de people kin smoke de heads so dey don’t spoil no mo’. Oh Lor’ Lor’, Lor’! We got to set dere and see de heads of our people smokin’ on de stick… (Hurston 55-56)

"Kossula was no longer on the porch with me. He was squatting about that fire in Dahomey. His face was twitching in abysmal pain. It was a horror mask. He had forgotten that I was there. He was thinking aloud and gazing into the dead faces in the smoke. His agony was so acute that he became inarticulate…" (Hurston 57). Oluale's trauma is evident from his retelling of this raid, massacre and enslavement. Oluale was probably not alone among the Clotilda Africans who witnessed and remembered the nightmare of fellow villagers, friends and possibly relatives being beheaded and their heads carried away like trophies. Maybe this shared trauma—of the village raids, capture, confinement in the barracoons and the six-week voyage across the Atlantic confined in the hull of a slave ship—unified the Clotilda Africans and helped solidify their determination to build a self-reliant community in the foreign land of their enslavers.

Oluale's life was both tragic and productive. Not only was there the collective trauma and tragedy of being attacked and witnessing the murder and decapitation of their fellow villagers, being held in captivity in the barracoons, the tragedy of the transatlantic nightmare and enslavement of the Clotilda Africans in a nation that saw them only as chattel, but Kossula also experienced personal tragedy: Oluale's daughter, Eebewosee, died at 15 years old (Hurston 73). During her funeral, the people sang a song in English, as Kossula did—but Kossula also sang a song from his heart – in his own language, Yoruba (Hurston 73). Nine years later, his son Fisheton was shot to death. Later, his son Adeniah was run over by a train and decapitated; he didn't believe his son was dead until the neighbors delivered his head in a box to Kossula. Still, he would not bring himself to admit that the head in the box and the headless body that lay on his porch was that of his son. Kossula opened the young dead man's shirt and "felt the marks" and knew that his son was dead. Then, his son Polee disappeared, never to be seen again

Oluale and his wife, Abile.
Photo: Public domain

(Hurston 81). Next, his son Ah-no-no-toe got sick and died. Kossula shared poignantly: "I want 'dey comp'ny, but lookey lak day lonesome for one 'nother. So they hurry go sleep together in the graveyard. He die holin' my hand" (Hurston 82). The next to die was Oluale's wife, Abile. Then, his son Yah-jimmy died. Oluale's children and his wife all preceded him in death.

The life of Oluale Kossula and the other Clotilda survivors provides an example of perseverance, self-reliance, determination and perhaps even a collective remediation of the trauma that they experienced together and no doubt continued to live in their personal memories.

Beginning in 1926, Africatown faced environmental pollution from large paper factories. In addition, with Mobile becoming the municipal authority over Africatown came more industrial pollution. This started the decline of Africatown (Howell et al. 44 - 47).

Africatown still exists today. The town has about 800 residents. The residents have established an environmental justice organization, Africatown-CHESS (Clean, Healthy, Educated, Safe, Sustainable) and use the "Africatown Neighborhood Plan" developed in 2016 to ensure that the community is protected from further environmental pollution, and it's also used as a framework for the future development of Africatown (Howell et al. 49). The people of Africatown are very proud of their community and its history. In 1980 the first annual Africatown Folk Festival was held and has been held annually ever since (Diouf 234). In 1997 the Africatown Community Mobilization Project was created with the objective of making Africatown an historic district (Diouf 235). In addition, collaboration with the nation of Benin (formerly Dahomey)—whose king, over a hundred years earlier, enslaved recent ancestors of current Africatown residents—are improving and continuing; Benin government officials and artists often visit Africatown (Diouf 235). In 2004, at Union Baptist Church in Africatown, the director of Benin's Agency for Reconciliation and Development, recognized and apologized, on

behalf of his country, their involvement in the slave trade (Diouf 235). Africatown is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Notes

[1] Diouf, page 31 and Gates 35:57 – 38:15.

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