

The Family Tree Is Not Cut: Marriage Among Slaves in Eighteenth Century Puerto Rico

A people without the knowledge
of their past history, origin and
culture is like a tree without
roots.

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The frequency and nature of slave marriages in Puerto Rico has long been a subject of controversy. Scholars including Luis Díaz Soler (1953:174) affirm that marriages were not only common but, more importantly, that owners, along with religious and civil authorities, encouraged marriage and family life among slaves throughout the colonial period. This served as a means of increasing the number of enslaved laborers on the island without having to rely on the introduction of African slaves. Using nineteenth-century census records and other archival sources', James L. Dietz (1986:39), Pedro San Miguel (1988:86), and James Wessman (1980:288) have refuted notions that civil and religious authorities alike sought to promote slave marriages. These same scholars have also cast doubt on the actual number of formal unions that occurred. Since then, the assumption has been that marriage among slaves in this Caribbean island was not common and that slaves were unable to establish links of association or ties of kinship within the structure of the dominant society or outside of it. Unlike other areas of Latin America, many documents in Puerto Rico relating to the first centuries of Spanish colonization have disappeared (Silvestrini and de Castro Arroyo 1981:157), making it difficult to assess these dimensions of slave life.¹ Because of the scarcity of primary sources from the colonial period, slaves have often been perceived as a people without a reconstructable past.

Utilization of a methodology known as family reconstitution supplies the key to filling

this gap in our understanding of colonial Puerto Rico. Family reconstitution, which is mostly based on parish registers, consists of two stages (Knodel 1988:3). The first involves linking together births (baptisms), marriages, and deaths (burials) to form family groups consisting of a married couple and their children. The second stage entails computing measures of demographic behavior, such as birth and death rates. However, the family reconstitution I have used is limited to the first stage and is not the classic form developed by Louis Henry, et al.² I utilize parish baptismal, marriage, and death registers surviving from the agriculturally and geographically diverse island communities of Arecibo (1708-1757), Caguas (1731-1804), Coamo (1755-1800), and Yauco (1751-1790) to reconstruct the vital statistics of individual slaves, their families, and their owners over several generations. In order to follow slaves, their families, and their owners who may have moved to communities adjacent to ones selected for this study, whenever possible I consulted surviving parish registers from bordering communities.³ I was able to document 237 marriages in which one or both spouses is a slave. With this information, I will study the frequency of slave marriage in the eighteenth-century communities to see whether it was higher than in the nineteenth-century communities examined by Wessman and San Miguel, or by Dietz. The data set that I compiled also enabled me to ascertain whom, at what age, and at what times of year slaves most frequently married. These data enable me to demonstrate that marriage among slaves was not uncommon and that they had a family history much like the rest of society.

This article is divided into several parts. My strategy is to provide first a historical framework for understanding economic conditions that shaped the island slavery, then to examine slavery within the context of the work regimens and material conditions of life associated with Puerto Rico's eighteenth-century agricultural economy. I continue with a brief overview of the religious context and social implications of marriage among slaves. Then, I will

look at the examples of Pedro and Francisca and Lázaro and Agustina--two slave couples married in the southern coastal community of Coamo on December 29, 1793--in order to provide greater insight into spousal selection patterns as well as the impact of the liturgical and the agricultural calendars upon the seasonality of slave marriage.⁴ Finally, I will explore the ways in which slaves pursued marital strategies, allowing them to manipulate material conditions of life within the constraints of slavery. As we shall see, many slaves in Puerto Rico during the eighteenth century not only asserted their humanity by marrying but also created viable patterns of family life that we can reconstruct.

The Agricultural Economy in Puerto Rico, 1508-1800

The institution of slavery in the Caribbean was shaped by unique cultural and economic forces. Some Spanish colonies including Puerto Rico experienced an initial cycle of sugar and slavery that began in the 1540s. The Spanish Crown encouraged the rise of sugar cultivation through grants and loans, and the production of this commodity was initially quite lucrative. However, sugar production in Puerto Rico declined following an attack on San Juan and its brief occupation by an English fleet under the command of the experienced seaman George Clifford, third Earl of Cumberland, in the summer of 1598, in which all the ginger, hides, and sugar in the city and the surrounding countryside were seized as booty. Cumberland made off with 2,000 slaves and 200,000 pounds of sugar. Puerto Rico's agricultural economy never recovered. The Spanish Crown in the year 1600 ordered that monies be distributed among the island's sugar mill owners and that 200 African slaves be introduced into the island as compensation for losses sustained (Moscoso 1999:75). However, these concessions were not immediately implemented.

This, along with restrictive trade policies associated with mercantilism, such as those requiring all Spanish colonies to trade exclusively with Seville using Spanish ships and merchants, limited opportunities for legal trade and spelled disaster for the island's sugar industry.

Spanish mercantilist policies fostered an increase in smuggling by British, Dutch, and French traders and, even more harmful for Spanish trade, in piracy. This occurred precisely when production of sugar began in the non-Hispanic Caribbean during the 1630s and 1640s. The focus of Puerto Rico's agricultural economy was gradually transformed from one based on the produce of sugar plantations to one based on cattle ranching and production of foodstuffs. For nearly a century beginning around 1675, these pursuits combined with the export of hides, dye and hardwoods, along with the cultivation of tobacco and cotton to become the island's principal economic activities (Moscoso 1999:98-100).

If we look at the geography of the Caribbean economy from 1675 to 1765, two distinct zones emerge. The first consists of the plantation zones or sugar islands of the non-Hispanic Caribbean; the second comprises the provider colonies of the Spanish Caribbean including Puerto Rico. The latter supplied draft animals and foodstuffs for slaves needed to support sugar production elsewhere as described by Picó (1986:94), González Vales (1990:120), and Giusti Cordero (1993:6 and 22). With few legal outlets for their goods, planters and ranchers throughout the island were increasingly drawn into the complex web of intra-Caribbean contraband trade. In effect, there were two Puerto Rican economies: legal and illegal. Legal trade with Spain or Spanish colonies was practically non-existent, a fact that has led some scholars such as López Cantos (1975:93 and 127) and more recently Padilla (1985:108) to conclude that the island's economic development reached its nadir at this time. Notwithstanding, an illegal trade thrived. Livestock, dyewoods and timber, and foodstuffs were exchanged with

adjacent islands in the non-Hispanic Caribbean for clothing, iron tools, and slaves.

After 1765, Puerto Rican agriculture entered into a period of rapid expansion. This resulted from the easing of trade restrictions, the liberalization of the slave trade, and the influx of monies earmarked for the construction of military fortifications in San Juan (Bergad 1983:4-12). These factors were instrumental in laying the foundations for the subsequent rise of labor-intensive export agriculture, especially sugar. Up through the dawn of the nineteenth century, Puerto Rico's agricultural economy had required few slaves. Such circumstances relegated sugar planters and slavery to a largely peripheral role in the island's predominantly rural economy. Sugar production came to dominate the agricultural landscape especially during its golden age between 1820 and 1845. Under sugar the institution of slavery on the island was again transformed as the production of this sweet commodity came to (re)occupy a prominent role in the agricultural economy.

Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Puerto Rico

Scholars including Higman (1984:362, 374, and 396) and Bush (1990:37) have demonstrated that slaves' chances of survival were better when and where sugar production was not the principal economic activity. Thus, healthier demographic regimes and more stable family structures than those of the nineteenth century probably prevailed among slave populations in Puerto Rico for nearly a century, beginning around 1675. In these years, the island entered into a period of minimal economic stress providing greater opportunity for slaves to marry and establish family lives of their own. Access to garden plots as well as the right to market any surplus for other goods or specie may have promoted marriage not only among slaves, but also between slaves and free persons. Owners often set aside time and sometimes even designated a specific day for slaves to work on these plots of land (Mintz 1984:204). Where slaves received rations and had access to provision grounds, they usually benefitted from a healthier and more varied diet (Cabanillas de Rodríguez 1973:358; Díaz Soler 1953:161; López Cantos 1985:151). More importantly, slaves were permitted to bequeath freely the right to

continue to cultivate a certain piece of land for as long as the owner permitted that land to be cultivated (Mintz 1984:209). According to Sidney Mintz, “the slave with a better diet, a small source of income, and a feeling of proprietorship in land was less discontented, less likely to run away, and less dangerous as a potential rebel (Ibid:192).” To this, I would also add that slaves were more likely to marry and/or form a family.

During the late-seventeenth and early- to mid-eighteenth century sugar production was largely confined to San Juan, and distinct agricultural regimes evolved on either side of the Cordillera Central bisecting the island. Animal husbandry and cattle ranching were combined with the export of hides in communities such as Arecibo and Caguas to the north of this mountain ridge, and with the export of dye and hardwoods or other cash crops like tobacco or cotton in communities such as Coamo and Yauco to the south. With the information gathered through family reconstitution, I have recreated the contours of adult slave ownership as well as data on the minimum levels of slave importation into these geographically diverse communities. Such variables influenced the likelihood of marriage and family formation among enslaved populations.

But first a few comments on the availability of historical records and demographic data on slavery in Puerto Rico. Such information is limited. Only one manuscript census, a household census conducted for San Juan in the year 1673, survives from the seventeenth century.⁵ No other census was undertaken for San Juan--or for that matter the island until 1765. While this census provides information on the age structure of the island’s free population, it does not for the unfree population. Annual censuses were conducted from the years 1779 through 1802, except for the year 1796. However, these do not list the age structure of the island’s free or unfree population. Notarial records from this period are also quite scarce, as are

wills and other primary sources which would enable us to establish the size and/or distribution of slave populations in island communities at any point between the years 1673 through 1765.

Therefore, it has been difficult for scholars to reconstruct the demography of slaves.

Patterns of slave ownership in areas such as Arecibo, the island leader in animal husbandry, cattle ranching, and the export of hides, differed from those observed in areas such as Coamo, where foodstuffs were grown along with tobacco, cotton, and later coffee and thus, the agricultural economy was more labor-intensive. There were few slaves in areas along the northern coast of the island, including Arecibo and Caguas, because economic pursuits such as animal husbandry, along with the harvest of dye and hardwoods, did not require a large labor force. Furthermore, owners lacked sufficient capital for the purchase of additional enslaved labor. The lives of slaves in these communities were probably less heavily regimented and disciplined than they were in areas along the southern coast of the island, including Coamo and Yauco, where the cultivation of coffee and tobacco was more labor-intensive and the sizes of slave holdings were larger.

The effects of lower labor requirements are clearly discernable in both the smaller slave populations and the smaller size of slave holdings in Arecibo and Caguas. For example, slave holdings in Arecibo during the years 1708 through 1757 were quite small, with an average size of three adult slaves in addition to any children they might have.⁶ Similar slave ownership patterns also prevailed in Caguas; that is, there were many owners with few slaves and, conversely, few owners with many slaves. The slave population in that community during the years 1730 through 1765 was indeed among the island's smallest, with the average size of holdings only two adult slaves and any children they might have. Only a handful of masters in these communities possessed ten or more slaves (Stark 1999:128 and 133).⁷

In contrast, the agricultural regime was more labor intensive in communities to the south of the cordillera central such as Coamo and Yauco due to the additional production of cash crops including tobacco, cotton, and coffee. The distribution of slave ownership in Coamo reflects a slight, albeit important difference in the regional intensity of the island's agricultural regime. For example, the average size of holdings in Coamo during the years 1755 through 1800 was four adult slaves and any children they might have. Coamo also had the greatest number of owners with ten or more slaves.⁸ The concentration of slaves on larger holdings probably indicates greater reliance on the commercial production of cash crops. Throughout the latter half of the eighteenth century, Yauco emerged as one of the island leaders in the cultivation of tobacco and cotton. However, the average size of slave holdings in Yauco during the years 1751 through 1790 averaged only three adult slaves and any children they might have (Stark 1999:139 and 143). The largest slave holdings on the island were located in the sugar-growing area concentrated in San Juan and its surrounding communities. Here, we find a handful of sugar plantations worked by up to 200 slaves (Bergad 1983:5).⁹ While slave ownership throughout the island was common, few owners possessed ten or more slaves.

Trade in slaves had flourished as long as sugar production remained profitable for planters on the island. Levels of slave traffic to Puerto Rico declined in the early-seventeenth century following the near collapse of sugar production. Portuguese traders were the major providers of African slaves to the Hispanic Caribbean. They trafficked in slaves from the Congo and the Gold Coast. Dutch traders gradually assumed a more active role in the introduction of African slaves to Puerto Rico in the waning years of the seventeenth century (Morales Carrión 1995:66-7) and (Picó 1986:105). Consequently, there was an influx of slaves from the Loango region, located along the southwestern coast of Africa (Alvárez Nazario 1974:71). During the

early years of the eighteenth century when the French controlled the legal slave trade, slaves from Upper Guinea and the Congo river region were introduced to Puerto Rico (Uya 1987:86). After the British assumed control of the legal slave trade in 1713, the majority of slaves brought to Puerto Rico came from the Gold Coast. This trend continued into the mid-eighteenth century.

It is virtually impossible to determine how many slaves were legally or illegally introduced by the British, Dutch, or Portuguese since most records of such transactions have been lost or destroyed (Scarano 1984:128) and (López Cantos 2000:25).¹⁰ Nonetheless, from 1675 to 1765, low levels of legal slave importation probably characterized the structure of slavery. This conclusion is based on the surviving records from the years 1710 through 1714 and 1731 through 1733. A total of 96 slaves (88 adults and 8 boys aged 12 or younger) were legally sold in Puerto Rico between 1710 and 1714 (López Cantos 1994:113-4), while the number of Africans legally introduced to the island between 1731 and 1733 totaled only 115 (López Cantos 1994:37). We can infer that the levels of illegal slave importation during the early years of the eighteenth century were also low. I base this upon the small number of African slaves baptized in island communities selected for this study. Because the baptismal entry in the parish register contained information on the individual's legal status, it provided proof of ownership in the case of slaves. The number of adult slaves baptized during the years covered by this study in Arecibo, Caguas, and Yauco averaged less than one per year, while in Coamo they averaged 2 per year (Stark 1999:113). Prior to the liberalization of the slave trade in the 1760s, which brought about a sizable influx of African slaves to Puerto Rico, many planters and ranchers undoubtedly relied on the contraband trade for increasing the size of their holdings and/or encouraged the growth of the island's enslaved population through natural means by promoting marriage and family life.

The low level of legal and illegal slave importations to Puerto Rico had a lasting impact on the demography of slaves. Since fewer adult African males were purchased from slave traders this helped to lessen their imbalance with women. As the number of women increased, so too did the proportion of children, therefore promoting natural growth. The transition from a predominantly African-born to a predominantly native-born slave population also contributed to evening out the sex ratio among this segment of island society. This transformation of the slave population from African-born to native-born most likely occurred during the late-seventeenth century. The possibility for natural growth continued until the second coming of sugar, which occurred early in the nineteenth century. Moreover, the emergence of a creole majority among slaves facilitated social cohesiveness. Opportunities gradually evolved over the course of the eighteenth century for a more settled family life within a larger, nascent Afro-Puerto Rican community.

Religious Context and Social Implications of Marriage Among Slaves

In areas of the Spanish Caribbean including Puerto Rico where Catholicism was the officially recognized religion, slaves were forcibly baptized into the Church. Thus, it is difficult to gauge how well slaves in Puerto Rico were indoctrinated with the dogma of the Catholic faith and the extent of slaves' subsequent adherence to its tenets. The degree of religious instruction that slaves received, as well as their compliance with religious practices, probably varied from one parish to another and over the course of the eighteenth century. Some priests, such as Juan Apolinario Herrera, who served in the rural parish of Toa Baja along the island's northern coast during the 1750s and 1760s, were particularly attentive to the spiritual needs of their

parishioners.¹¹ In contrast, other clergy, such as José Correa, who served in northwestern coastal community of Añasco from 1754 through 1767 and later in northeastern coastal community of Loíza, were apparently overly preoccupied with their own material well-being and therefore lax in providing the catechism as required following Sunday mass and on holy days of obligation to slaves (Morales Muñoz 1949a:137) and (López Cantos 2000:87).¹² Owners too played a role in how well slaves were inculcated with the beliefs of Catholicism. Often they would make it difficult for their slaves to attend mass and receive religious instruction by forcing them to work on Sundays and other major feast days of the Church (Morales Muñoz 1949b:249-50). The extent of slaves' compliance with Church norms was also contingent on the staffing of diocesan parishes and the level of training among the island's clergy at the time. Thus, the extent of slaves' compliance was sometimes constrained by factors beyond their control.

Slaves' adherence to the customs and practices associated with Catholicism may have been related to the proportion of Africans comprising an area's overall slave population. Newly arrived African slaves probably found it difficult to create a community of their own in which they could openly continue to practice their own forms of religion. In such cases, slaves may have outwardly embraced Christianity as a means of integrating themselves into their new surroundings, while secretly continuing to worship in their own way. The African slaves introduced annually as a part of the trade in human cargo to the island communities selected for this study, often spoke mutually unintelligible languages and were of different ethnic origins. Moreover, the structure of slavery in Puerto Rico during the years 1675 through 1765, characterized as it was by low levels of slave importation and widely dispersed slave holdings, was probably not as conducive to the survival or the transmission of African religious beliefs and practices as it was later in the nineteenth century following the resurgence of sugar as a primary

export crop (López Cantos 2000:75). Of course, some assimilation of African religious beliefs and practices did take place. According to Angel López Cantos (1992:11), however, it was much less common than has previously been assumed.

Canonical marriage offered slaves tangible benefits. Laws governing marriage among slaves possibly encouraged formal unions among this segment of the island's population. For example, when two slaves belonging to different owners married, the law stated that the husband's owner was obliged to purchase his slave's wife from the other owner, along with any of her children younger than three (Rípodas Ardanaz 1977:378-82), (Sued Badillo and López Cantos 1986:273), (Rodríguez León 1990:45 and 54). Should the husband's owner fail to purchase the slave's wife, then the wife's owner was obliged to buy the husband. Married slaves could not be separated through sale and neither could they be separated from their minor children. This benefit for slaves was an inconvenience for owners, who were often reluctant to allow slaves the right to formally legitimize their unions through marriage.¹³

The scarcity of primary sources has made it difficult to ascertain the actual number of slave and slave/free marriages occurring throughout the island, prompting a historiographical debate concerning the frequency of slave marriages in Puerto Rico. My findings show that marriages among slaves were common on the island in the years leading up to the nineteenth-century resurgence of the sugar industry. Referring to marriage records consulted for this study, I found a total of 2,712 marriages, including 237 in which one or both spouses were slaves. Assuming that 11 percent of Puerto Rico's population were slaves, as the 1765 census shows, it is striking that nearly 9 percent of all marriages involved at least one slave spouse. Thus, a significant portion of the island's slave population married in the eighteenth century.

Let us examine the formal union of Pedro and Francisca as well as that of Lázaro and

Agustina in order to provide greater insight into whom slaves married, at what ages they did so, and the seasonality of slave marriages by drawing attention to the vital statistics of slaves that can be reconstructed through the linking of data contained in parish registers.

An Example of Two Slave Marriages

On the morning of December 29, 1793, two slave couples were married in the Catholic church of Coamo.¹⁴ The first couple consisted of a thirty-year old groom named Pedro and his thirty-one year old bride named Francisca, both of whom belonged to Juan Pacheco. The second couple consisted of a twenty-six year old groom, named Lázaro who belonged to Andrés de Aponte; his twenty-eight year old bride, named Agustina, belonged to Aponte's wife's second cousin Juan Pacheco.¹⁵ Although marriage among slaves was not uncommon, it was not often that two slave couples in one community were married on the same day.¹⁶ Because the brides were sisters, I suspect that they may have opted (with their owner's approval) to be united in holy matrimony with their spouses in a joint ceremony.

The newlyweds, the slave owners, and their respective spouses were all born in Coamo.¹⁷ Pedro had been baptized on February 13, 1763, at the age of 15 days. He was the second of the two children born to Guillermo and María, a married slave couple belonging to Francisco Pacheco.¹⁸ Francisca had been baptized eleven months earlier on March 23, 1762, at the age of 15 days. She was the second of the four children born to Antonia, an unmarried slave belonging to Juan Pacheco. In contrast, Francisca's sister Agustina had been baptized on September 11, 1765, at the age of 15 days.¹⁹ She was the third of the four children born to Antonia. Lázaro had been baptized fifteen months later on January 6, 1767, at the age of 15 days.²⁰ He was the

second of the eight children born to an unmarried slave named Marcela--who died on March 13, 1808 at the age of 60--belonging to Andrés de Aponte.²¹ There was no record of the spouses' fathers.

This was the first marriage for both brides and grooms. Francisca was childless at the time of her marriage, however, Agustina had previously given birth to two children. Agustina's first child named Ignacia had been baptized on January 25, 1785 at the age of 15 days, and the second child named Buenaventura had been baptized on July 28, 1793 at the age of 15 days, only five months prior to Agustina's marriage. The relatively brief interval between Buenaventura's birth and Agustina's marriage to Lázaro suggests that he was probably the child's father.²² It may be that the child's survival was a factor in Agustina's decision to formalize her union with Lázaro, a hypothesis that I will discuss further in greater detail.

In neither marriage were the bride and groom related and no consanguineal or affinal impediments requiring a dispensation were noted. Unlike Puerto Rico's free population in which marriage among near relations and distant cousins was common, slaves generally avoided marrying their kin, as occurred elsewhere in the Americas (Kulikoff 1986:346-7).²³ Finally, two local citizens, José Berríos and José Ortiz, along with the bride and groom's owners, served as witnesses to the marriages, which were celebrated by José Navarro, the forty-seven year old assistant to the parish priest and a native of San Juan (Zayas León 1997:89).²⁴ Following the marriage ceremony, the slave couples joined hands and pledged their *fidelidad mutua*, or mutual fidelity, as the parish priest pronounced a special nuptial blessing known as the *velación*. The newlyweds then embarked on their new life together and the marriage was duly noted in the parish register.

Spousal Selection Patterns Among Slaves

Whom did slaves marry? Most slaves in the eighteenth-century Puerto Rican communities I examined married other slaves, as was the case of Pedro and Francisca or Lázaro and Agustina. Approximately 60 percent of slave grooms in this study selected slave brides, whereas 80 percent of slave brides chose slave grooms. A slave groom was nearly twice as likely to marry a free bride as a slave bride was to marry a free groom. From the male slave's point of view, marriage with a free woman gave slaves access to the world of peasants by providing a means of social mobility and economic opportunity for the children, who would be free (Metcalf 1992:166-7). Owners probably also looked favorably upon the marriage of slave husbands and free wives for they secured free female (and child) laborers since most of the free persons married to slaves lived with the same master as a servant or retainer and worked for the estate alongside their spouses (Goldschmidt 1986-7:11-2). Such marriages afforded owners with the opportunity to maintain, if not increase, their supply of labor.

A more vexing question involves the motives that would influence a free man to marry a slave woman. The answer can be found in the access to land. By the first decades of that century, a significant number of individuals known as *desacomodados*, or bothersome individuals, lacked access to land and had evolved into a restless people roaming the countryside in search of land on which to squat (Scarano 1989:31) and (Moscoso 1999:126). Land was quite scarce along the island's northern coast, particularly among free persons of mixed race, who comprised 40 percent or more of the island's population.²⁵ Unrest in the fall of 1750 among *desacomodados* in Manatí revealed the socially destabilizing potential of these landless individuals. Colonial authorities in San Juan grew increasingly alarmed at the situation and the

city's cabildo ordered the break up of two *hatos*, or large land holdings dedicated to raising livestock, and their respective *criaderos*, or small land holdings dedicated to animal husbandry, in the highland sectors of Manatí (Gíl-Bermejo García 1970:241). Over 4,800 acres of land were redistributed to 181 *desacomodados* (Moscoso 1999:125).²⁶ Some landowners faced with seasonal labor shortages would allow the landless to live on their holdings in exchange for occasional services. As a result, unions of free men and slave women would be facilitated. It is quite possible that some of the free men who married slave women were squatters whom the slave owner sought to attach to the land out of a desire for secure labor.

Although a majority of slave marriages were between slaves belonging to the same owner, as was the case with Pedro and Francisca, slaves who aspired to marry or establish a family had to overcome demographic obstacles. Nearly one-third of the marriages between slaves in this study paired spouses who, like Lázaro and Agustina, were owned by different masters. For security reasons, owners probably tried to limit the social universe of the slave to the boundaries of the slaveholding unit as occurred in eighteenth-century Bahia, Brazil (Schwartz 1986:383). However, the relatively small size of slave holdings throughout the island meant that slaves who sought to marry would frequently have to look beyond the estate for potential spouses. Slaves likely also avoided marrying first cousins, as occurred in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries in the Chesapeake (Kulikoff 1986:346-7). This would further reduce the number of eligible suitors in a community's marriage pool.

Owners probably encouraged their slaves to select a spouse from a marriage pool restricted to those slaves belonging to other immediate family members and relatives. Such may have been the case when Lázaro and Agustina were married, since their respective owners were second cousins. Another example is the marriage of Sebastián Correa and Felipa Correa on June

12, 1753 in Arecibo.²⁷ Sebastián's owner, the priest Felipe Correa, was the brother of Felipa's owner, José Correa.²⁸ Other evidence confirms that owners encouraged their slaves to select spouses from among slaves of near relations. Of the 40 marriages in this study in which slave spouses belonged to different owners, all but four involved owners with consanguineous ties of varying degree. This information is not contained in the parish marriage register, however, by reconstructing the genealogy of the slave owners I was able to determine the nature of consanguineous ties between owners of slaves who married. Nearly a third of these marriages involved slaves whose owners were linked by ties of the first degree; that is the owners were either siblings, a parent and child, or a parent and son- or daughter-in-law. The marriage of Pablo and Maria on June 14, 1785 in Coamo illustrates this point: Pablo's owner, María de Gracia Santiago, was the mother of María's owner, Francisco de Santiago.²⁹ Whenever a slave selected a spouse from those of the estate or those of other immediate family members and relatives who might be living nearby, the owner avoided the additional expense of purchasing a slave spouse. Ownership did not necessarily have to change and slaves could be allowed to live together.

Of the slave marriages in this study in which the origin of both spouses is known, nearly 70 percent paired slaves who had been born in Puerto Rico. Ethnic preferences among certain African groups in Puerto Rico during the eighteenth century suggest a strong tendency to marry partners from their region of Africa if not from the same ethnic group. The data for the slaves of African origin in this study also shows that they tended to marry other Africans. Because we do not know how many Africans there were among the island's slave populations, their choices may well have been based not on preference but on availability. The predominance of West African slaves, especially from Guinea among the African population probably made it easier for such

slaves to marry a spouse of similar origin. An example of one such couple is Carlos and Catalina, African slaves from Guinea who belonged to Pedro Ximénez, and who married on July 14, 1780 in Caguas (de Castro Sedgwick 1994:12). It should also be noted that males were over-represented in the African slave trade, thus slave brides would have had a greater pool of African men to choose from and were able to do so with greater frequency than slave grooms chose African women

Some slave and slave/free marriages were the culminations of long-term illicit relationships. For example, a total of 37, or 29 percent, of slave brides in the communities selected for this study, were unmarried mothers. Slave brides who had previously given birth on average had two children at the time of their marriage. Moreover, their marriage occurred 33 months, nearly three years, after having given birth. Survival of the infant(s) might have increased the likelihood of marriage between single parents who had formerly lived in stable consensual unions, as was probably the case with Lázaro and Agustina. With their children having survived the perilous first year or two of life, when mortality posed the greatest danger, unmarried mothers in long-term relationships may well have sought to avail themselves of the legal protections by the Church and state afforded to them through marriage. Families could not be separated through sale or bequest, while marriage provided slaves with opportunities to make their situation more tolerable.

Age at which Slaves Married

Since married slave mothers' fertility was higher than unmarried mothers' age at marriage affected the number of children a woman could have throughout her reproductive

period (Rabell 1990:24). For instance, the number of children born to married slave mothers is twice the number of children born to unmarried slave mothers, four compared to two (Stark 1996:407). With a low level of slave importation characterizing the structure of slavery over the course of the eighteenth century, the increase in the island's overall slave population may well have resulted from high levels of marital fertility. Relatively high death rates among both infants and adults during the colonial period suggest that slaves in Puerto Rico likely married at young ages, as did the rest of the island's population, free and unfree, at the time.

Age at first marriage among slave populations was calculated by linking information contained in the baptismal and marriage records of these communities. This does not allow me to determine the age at marriage for slaves of African origin or slaves who were not born in island parishes selected for this study. Nevertheless, the age of one or both spouses was ascertained for a total of 68 marriages in which the bride and/or the groom were slaves. For the most part, male slaves in eighteenth-century Puerto Rico tended to marry at an older age than their female counterparts. The age difference between spouses varied, with the groom typically two to six years older than a bride. Of course, some grooms were considerably older than their bride, as was the case of a slave belonging to the priest Felipe Correa named Joaquín, who was 40 years old when he married Petronila de la Rosa, a slave aged 17 years old, also belonging to Correa, on January 22, 1759 in Arecibo.³⁰ Not all grooms were older than their brides, however, as one bride in Arecibo and six in Coamo were older than their spouses at the time of the marriage. In such cases, the difference in ages between the spouses was less than two years, with one notable exception, a 39 year old bride named Concesa who was 18 years older than 21-year-old Tomás, a slave belonging to the priest Tiburcio González Esmurra, when the two married on August 13, 1801 in Coamo.

Other patterns of behavior among slaves who married in these communities suggest that slaves married and formed families in much the same way as other members of society. This includes a tendency for males to wait until they were at least 20 years old before entering into a formal union. None of the grooms for whom the age at marriage is known in this study are under the age of 20. Moreover, one-third of the grooms were over the age of 30, including one groom who was over the age of 40. One possible reason that male slaves put off marriage is that slaves in Puerto Rico were permitted to market the surplus produce grown in their provision grounds. Thus, males may have purposely delayed marriage until they had acquired a few personal possessions and/or some small animals of their own like a hog or a few chickens. Such a strategy could result in social mobility and economic opportunity for it would provide a male slave the means to marry a free bride.

Female slaves, on the other hand, tended to marry at younger ages than males. We see that approximately one-third of the brides in this study are under the age of 20, whereas none of the grooms were. For example, the youngest bride in my sample is a slave belonging to Esteban Colón named Juliana, who was a mere 13 years and 11 months old on March 21, 1779 when she married in Coamo a slave named Pedro belonging to the priest Miguel Rodríguez Feliciano.³¹ Furthermore, only five brides were over the age of 30 at the time of their first marriage; none were over the age of 40. It may have been that masters encouraged females to marry early in order to exploit their reproductive years; and males to marry late, in order to take advantage of their years of youthful energy.

Seasonality of Slave Marriage

Although marriage is the one demographic event most subject to individual human control, factors beyond peoples' control often determined when they married. The observance of religious proscriptions associated with the liturgical calendar affected the timing of marriage (Cressy 1985:4), while labor demands imposed by the agricultural economy influenced the seasonality of marriages, especially those of slaves (Gunn 1990:217). Formal unions were traditionally frowned upon by the church during certain periods of the liturgical year, including the penitential seasons of Lent and Advent.³² According to the diocesan synod of 1645, priests in the diocese of Puerto Rico were prohibited from administering the special nuptial blessing, known as the *velación*, during Lent - which begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Easter Sunday - or Advent - which stretched from the fourth Sunday preceding Christmas until Christmas Eve.³³ Because these seasons were to be marked by abstinence and penance, couples were discouraged from consummating their marriage if they had not performed the *velación* (López de Haro 1986:165), a type of religious oath whereby the future spouses pledged their fidelity to each other as the priest pronounced a special nuptial blessing (Ortiz 1974:87 and Quiñones Cuadrado 1974:14). Additionally, the diocese of Puerto Rico prohibited Sunday marriage and also discouraged the celebration of formal unions on 16 other major feast days, when attendance at mass was required and no work was to be performed. Approximately 130-36 days, or nearly 40 percent of the calendar year, was rendered unsuitable for the celebration of marriage.

Important dates for understanding the agricultural calendar and assessing its impact upon the seasonality of marriage among Puerto Rico's slave population along the southern coast revolve around the planting and harvesting of the principal cash crop, tobacco. Planting of this commodity over the course of the eighteenth century was traditionally begun on August 30—the

feast day of Saint Rose—when the seeds were sown. After 45 days or so the tobacco seedlings were replanted, usually in the month of October (Fernández Méndez 1997:26-7). Yet not all tobacco was planted at once. Thus, replanting was usually staggered over weeks, even months, and often continued through the months of November and December. The growing cycle of tobacco was approximately four months.³⁴ Assuming that the tobacco crop was replanted at the beginning of October, it would have been ready for harvest sometime in February and gathered over the next month or so.

This study of 237 formal unions in which one or both spouses is a slave reveals a considerable diversity in the seasonality of slave marriages. Slave marriages in Arecibo and Caguas were more common during the months of December and January. Work in these predominantly cattle-ranching communities probably came to a halt at this time, except for daily tasks such as feeding and caring for livestock. In areas where tobacco was grown, such as in Coamo and Yauco, slave marriages were more common during the months of April and May. Agricultural activity in these tobacco-producing communities slowed down following the spring harvest of tobacco, allowing slaves who aspired to marriage the opportunity to do so.

The impact of the agricultural calendar on the timing of slave marriage in Coamo and Yauco is most apparent during the period that stretched from October 7 through December 2, when few slaves married. During this ten-week period the tobacco crop was sown. In fact, only two slave marriages took place in Coamo during that period in the years 1778 through 1798. Likewise, there were only three formal unions among Yauco's slave population during this same period in the years 1751 through 1790. Conversely, in Arecibo and Caguas there were fifteen and ten slave marriages respectively during that same ten-week period.

Slaves in eighteenth-century Puerto Rico generally observed proscriptions on Lenten

marriage. For example, during the four-week period from February 25 through March 25, which roughly corresponds to the Lenten season, there were a total of seven slave marriages.

Moreover, three of the seven slave marriages actually occurred in the days immediately preceding Lent. In contrast, it is likely that compliance with the taboo on marriage during Advent varied by region and possibly waned over the course of the eighteenth century. Only in Arecibo do we find a dearth of marriages observed during the two-week period stretching from December 2 through December 16, which fell within the parameters of Advent.

In what ways do the marriages of Pedro and Francisca as well as that of Lázaro and Agustina conform with previously discussed spousal selection patterns? Like most slaves in this study who were married, Pedro and Francisca belonged to the same owner. However, the small size of slave holdings in Coamo and elsewhere throughout the island forced a number of slaves in this community to look beyond the estate on which they lived in order to find a suitable spouse. Such may have been the case with Lázaro since his master, Andrés de Aponte, only owned six or so slaves. Agustina, on the other hand, belonged to one of larger slave holdings in Coamo; her owner, Juan Pacheco, had at least 22 slaves (Stark 1999:139). Most slaves belonging to different owners who married selected a spouse from among those of other family members and near relatives. The formal union of Lázaro and Agustina offers evidence of this trend as their respective owners were second cousins through marriage. Both brides and their respective grooms were born in Coamo, thus their marriages (like many others) paired spouses of a similar origin. Perhaps the newlywed slave couples had known each other since infancy. Families were often separated or broken up through sale if the parents were not married, as was the case with Lázaro and Agustina, when dowries were set up or when it came time for the heirs of an estate to claim their rightful share. In so far as the age at which the couples were married,

26 and 28 years old, and 29 and 30 years old respectively, it was not common for slave brides to be older than the slave groom. However, the two-year or less difference in their ages was typical of those unions in which the bride was older. The fact that Agustina had given birth twice, the second time only five months prior to the date of her marriage, was also not uncommon. As we can see, the marriages of Pedro and Francisca and Lázaro and Agustina were in many ways representative of patterns of behavior observed in other communities selected for this study.

Both Pedro and Francisca and Lázaro and Agustina were married five days following the conclusion of Advent. Compliance with taboos on the celebration of formal unions during this penitential season had waned by the late-eighteenth century, thus the liturgical calendar probably did not influence the timing of their marriage. More likely, the timing of these marriages reflects the impact of labor demands associated with the planting and harvesting of tobacco. As mentioned previously, tobacco was replanted in Coamo roughly during the ten-week period from October 7 through December 2, albeit planting sometimes continued past this date. The timing of Pedro and Francisca and Lázaro and Agustina's marriage suggests that their owners grew tobacco and that its planting in the fall of 1793 in Coamo may have continued well into the month of December. The brief respite from the rigors of the agricultural calendar, which also coincided with the slower pace of work at Christmas, offered an opportunity for slaves such as Pedro and Francisca and Lázaro and Agustina to marry.

A New Understanding of Marriage Among Slaves

A unique set of demographic circumstances and economic conditions in Puerto Rico during the eighteenth century fostered the rise of a more fluid society. We see evidence of this in

the frequency and nature of marriage among the island's slave population. Slaves who married, especially those who wed free people of color, contributed to social stability, which characterized relations between the free and unfree segments of the population in the years prior to the resurgence of sugar as a primary export product.

Most slave marriages appear to have been determined by the slaves' own choices; there was probably little direct intervention by masters in the spousal selection process among the island's slave population. This observation is based on the study of eighteenth-century marriage registers in Arecibo, Caguas, Coamo, and Yauco, which reveals that only one instance (the marriages of Pedro and Francisca and Lázaro and Agustina) in which more than one couple belonging to the same master married in the same ceremony or on the same day. If two, three, or more slave couples belonging to the same master had married on the same day and at the same ceremony, this would likely have indicated the master's direct intervention in the selection and/or the timing of formal unions, a practice more characteristic of the nineteenth century, following the rise in sugar production and the concomitant upsurge of slavery.

Through the use of previously overlooked primary sources, including parish baptismal, marriage, and death registers, this study reveals the extent of slaves' efforts to marry and establish families. Despite their absence or omission from the historical record, slaves are not a people without a family history. Slaves do have a reconstructable past--their family tree is not cut.

NOTES

1. The deficiency of primary sources for the study of Puerto Rico's colonial period is the result of various events. "Archives of the jurisdictional office of Puerto Rico at the Audiencia de Santo Domingo were lost, the city of San Juan was burned by the Dutch in 1625, [and] the Archivo Histórico suffered a fire in 1929." (Silvestrini and de Castro Arroyo:157)

2. My use of family reconstitution and genealogy as a tool for social history is based upon the recent work of Fernando Picó.

3. I have reconstituted the oldest marriage and death registers (1750-1784) for La Tuna, known as Isabela, a community located along the island's north coast, and east of Arecibo. Additionally, I have reconstituted the oldest baptismal (1763-1798), marriage (1771-1800), and death (1764-1800) registers for Río Piedras as well as the oldest baptismal and marriage registers (1773-1810) for Santurce. Both of these communities are located in the vicinity of San Juan, and north of Caguas. Furthermore, I have also reconstituted the oldest marriage and death registers for both Juana Díaz (1787-1805) and Cayey (1776-1800), in addition to the oldest death register for Guayama (1746-1781). Once part of Coamo, these communities border Coamo on its eastern and western flanks respectively. Finally, I have reconstituted San Germán's oldest marriage (1759-1774) and death (1762-1774) registers. This community borders Yauco on its western flank. The inclusion of material obtained from surviving parish registers in bordering communities allowed me to create a much more complete and statistically significant data base than is typically possible employing the standard techniques of family reconstitution.

4. Archivo Parroquial San Blas de Coamo (hereafter APSBC), Primer libro de matrimonios: 1778-1798, folios 150-50v.

5. Archivo General de Indias [hereafter AGI], *Santo Domingo 173*, Ramo IV, ff. 838-852v., "Padrón del año 1673 de las personas que hay en la ciudad de San Juan de Puerto Rico." A complete transcription of this census appears in David M. Stark and Teresa de Castro Sedgwick, "Padrón del año 1673 de las personas que hay en la ciudad de San Juan de Puerto Rico: Una transcripción con introducción y notas genealógicas," *Boletín de la Sociedad Puertorriqueña de Genealogía*, IX: 3-4 (octubre 1997): 1-113.

6. Adult slaves, for the purposes of this study, include spouses of an individual in the records, parents, godparents, witnesses, and, of course, baptized adults mentioned in the parish registers.

7. The largest slave holding in Arecibo during the years 1708 through 1757 was that of Antonio de los Reyes Correa and consisted of at least 15 slaves. Correa was arguably northwestern Puerto Rico's most powerful economic and political figure. Not only was he *teniente a guerra*, or all encompassing civil and military leader, of Arecibo from 1700 through 1743, he was also a military hero who in the fall of 1702 was awarded a lifetime pension for his role in spearheading the successful defense of the community against a British attack earlier that same year. The

largest slave holding in Caguas during the years 1730 through 1765 was that of Tomás Díaz, the *teniente a guerra* in that community during the 1750s, and consisted of at least eleven slaves.

8. The largest slave holding in Coamo during the years 1755 through 1800 was that of Antonio Colón de Torres, and his wife Juliana de Aponte, and consisted of at least 37 slaves. The largest slave holding in Yauco during the years 1751 through 1790 was that of Fernando Pacheco, and his wife, María de Quiñones, and consisted of at least 20 slaves. It is worth noting that Antonio Colón de Torres and Fernando Pacheco were the *tenientes de guerra* of Coamo and Yauco respectively, which goes to show how political and economic power were often intertwined.

9. Manuel Díez del Barrio and his son-in-law Valentín Martínez were probably the owners with the largest slave holdings on the island during the late-eighteenth century. Each was reputed to own at least 200 slaves.

10. According to Francisco Scarano, “No official records or estimates of slave imports have ever been found [for the nineteenth century], not even for the period of legal trading before 1820.” (1986:121). Comparable records or estimates do not exist for the eighteenth century.

11. Juan Apolinario Herrera was praised by Bishop Julián de Arraiga in 1760 for the dedication shown to his priestly duties and also for his charitable acts. “*Informes reservado de las cualidades, circunstancias, meritos, servicios y conducta de todos los sujetos [religiosos] que ejercen empleos de todas clases en esta provincia,*” AGI, *Santo Domingo* 2521.

12. José Correa was reprimanded by Bishop Julián de Arraiga in 1760 for participating in the contraband trade and subsequently neglecting his parishioners. *Ibid.*

13. Examples of owners’ resistance elsewhere to slave marriage laws can be found in (Acosta Saignes 1967: 214-18).

14. The original entry in the marriage register reads, “En este Pueblo de Coamo en veinte y nueve dias del mes de Diciembre de mil setecientos noventa y tres años Yo el infra escrito Cura teniente de esta parroquia haviendo hecho las tres moniciones ordinarias en tres dias festivos inter misarum solemnica segun el Sto. Concilio de Trento habiendo expresado su mutuo consentimiento Lazaro Esclavo de Dn. Andres Aponte y Agustina esclava de Dn. Juan Pacheco parroquianos de esta feligresia por palabras de presente que hacen verdadero matrimonio y ante los testigos infra nominados los despose y simul di las bendiciones nupciales haviendolos antes examinado en doctrina cristiana y estando confesados y comulgados dhos. Contrahentes. Fueron tgos. Josef Berrios y Josef Ortiz con otras muchas personas que se hallaron presentes de que doy fe Josef Navarro” (My translation: In this community of Coamo on the 29th day of December of 1793, I the undersigned curate having proclaimed the three ordinary banns on three festival days within solemn Mass according to the Sacred Council of Trent, and having expressed their mutual consent Lázaro, a slave of don Andrés Aponte, and Agustina, a slave of don Juan Pacheco, members of this parish who by the present words make a true marriage and in the presence of the undersigned witnesses joined the couple in marriage and simultaneously performed the nuptial blessings having first examined them in Christian doctrine and after they

had received confession and communion. The witnesses were Josef Berríos and Josef Ortiz, along with many others who were present, of which I give a faithful account (Josef Navarro) APSBC, Primer libro de matrimonios: 1778-1798, folios 150-50v.

15. Age at marriage is not listed in the parish marriage registers, but was calculated by linking baptismal and marital records. Andrés de Aponte's wife was named Juana de Rivera. Her maternal grandmother Eugenia Pacheco and Juan Pacheco's paternal grandmother Gerónima Pacheco de Matos were sisters. Moreover, Eugenia and Gerónima are siblings of Domingo Pacheco de Matos, who oversaw the spirited defense of Guayanilla against a Dutch attack in 1703.

16. This was only the second time in Coamo in the years 1778 through 1798 that two slave couples were married on the same day.

17. Andrés de Aponte was the son of Domingo de Aponte and Constanza de Rivera, while Juan Pacheco was the son of Juan Rodríguez Pacheco and María Berríos Santiago. Juan's wife was named Rosalía Alvarado.

18. Francisco and Juan Pacheco were brothers.

19. APSBC, Primer libro de bautismos: 1701-1773, folio 121.

20. APSBC, Primer libro de bautismos: 1701-1773, folio 139.

21. Marcela died on March 13, 1808 at the age of 60. APSBC, Primer libro de defunciones: 1773-1810, folio 393.

22. This hypothesis is further supported by the fact that Buenaventura's baptismal sponsor was Pedro Pacheco - the child's future uncle who married Agustina's sister Francisca five months later.

23. I observed only one dispensation for consanguinity among slave marriages examined in this study.

24. José Berríos was married to Paula Colón. He was the son of Miguel Berríos and Estebanía de Rivera. José Ortiz (de Peña) never married. He was most likely the son of José Ortiz de Peña and Petrona Figueroa.

25. For example, free persons of color comprised 42 percent of Puerto Rico's total population in 1779, and comprised 44 percent in 1790. AGI Censos de población, *Santo Domingo* 2302 and 2307.

26. Manuel Meléndez, teniente a guerra for Manatí, agreed to the demolition of his hato and criadero named La Potrada in December of 1750 with the stipulation that he and his sister Ana Lorenza Meléndez and their seventeen children be granted twelve *caballerías*, or 200 acre

increments, (2,400 acres) of land. However, Manuel and Ana Lorenza only received a total of six caballerías (1,200 acres) of land. See *Actas del Cabildo de San Juan Bautista de Puerto Rico: 1730-1750*, (San Juan: Municipio de San Juan, 1949), 296-8.

27. Archivo Parroquial San Felipe de Arecibo, (hereafter APSFA), Primer libro de matrimonios: 1708-1760, folio 146.

28. Sebastián was born on an island in the French Caribbean. Felipa was born in Coamo and baptized on May 15, 1712. She was the daughter of Blas and Aldonza, who belonged to Juan Aponte Díaz, a paternal uncle of Felipa's owner's wife (Stark 1992:82).

29. APSBC, Libro primero de matrimonios en Coamo: 1778-1798, folio 52.

30. The reference for Joaquín's baptism is APSFA, Libro primero de bautismos: 1708-1735, no. 466, while the reference for Petronila's baptism is APSFA, Libro segundo de bautismos: 1735-1749, folio 86v. Their marriage can be found in the APSFA, Libro primero de matrimonios: 1708-1760, folio 175.

31. APSBC, Libro primero de matrimonios: 1778-1798, folio 6v. Juliana was baptized on April 2, 1765 in Coamo. APSBC, Libro primero de bautismos: 1701-1773, folio 114v.

32. Cf. Rutman, Wetherell, and Rutman 1980-1: 42. Catholicism was not the only religion to discourage Lenten marriage; the Anglican Church also had a proscription on such marriages.

33. Both Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday are movable feast days. The earliest possible date for Ash Wednesday is February 4, while the latest possible date is March 10. Corresponding dates for Easter vary from March 22 to April 25. In contrast, the penitential season of Advent stretched from the fourth Sunday preceding Christmas--which fell between November 26 and December 2--until Christmas Eve, December 24 (Cressy 1985:1).

34. "Noticias recientes solicitadas y adquiridas sobre los tabacos de la isla de Puerto Rico ... con otras posibilidades que conviene examinar," AGI, *Santo Domingo*, 2305.

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