Entangled Roots. Heritage and identity in the African 'mesa-diasporas': community case studies for the 2020s

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Abstract

The archaeology and heritage of the African Atlantic diaspora is a topic that has been extensively covered in academic literature. The experience of enslaved and freed Africans in the Americas (primarily) has been well studied through examination of plantation villages, urban settings, burial sites and freed communities. It is a mistake though to see this framework as an overarching and monolithic 'meta-diaspora', for within this process of forced and violent migration a more nuanced picture emerges of many hidden heritages, movement and re-movement of diasporic communities in the late colonial and post-colonial period. We argue that the hidden heritages of these 'mesa- (meaning inside) diasporas' demands attention. Drawing upon primary, diasporic-focused community heritage work conducted individually by the two authors, this chapter considers two distinctive case studies: the intra-American context (the Garifuna 'Black Carib' communities of St Vincent, Belize and New York) and returned African communities in West Africa (the Krio in Sierra Leone). These two case studies have much to offer in terms of thinking through the survival and remaking of African diasporic identities and emphasising the role of heritage-focused community tourism in the post-Covid world of the 2020s.

Introduction

In 1997 one of the present authors (NF) visited Shashemene, a small township 250 kilometres south of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. In 1948, the then Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie granted about 500 acres of land to the Ethiopian World Federation, a group that had been founded with the explicit aim of encouraging African Americans to settle in Ethiopia (Macleod 2014 for an overview). This was a recent iteration of a wider current of 19th-century 'Ethiopianist' thinking which saw Ethiopia as the embodiment of the promised land for displaced African Christians (Duncan 2015), a theme later taken up by Marcus Garvey's Back to Africa Movement (Lewis 2011). Among the earliest settlers at Shashemene were a number of Jamaican Rastafarians, who conceived of Ethiopia as their idealised Zion, and Haile Selassie as their deity (Bonacci 2011; Minda 2004). Only about 200 Jamaican families remain now, but colourful murals referencing the Lion of Judah motif, similar to those found on Rastafarian houses in Trenchtown

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(Kingston, Jamaica), still adorned the walls of the compound, and the pungent smell of cannabis (*ganja*, the Rastafarian holy herb) hung in the air. These Jamaican Rastafarians believed they had 'come home' when history tells us their ancestors came from West Africa, not the highlands of the Horn of Africa. Their Africa is as much a state of mind as a physical place.

This brief vignette introduces the overarching issue that we tackle in this contribution, namely that the African diaspora is still an ongoing process of physical movement, as well as an ongoing process of renegotiating concepts of identity, place and memory. The African Diaspora [1] is arguably one of the most significant legacies of the European global colonial entanglement. Over a roughly 350-year period, beginning with Spanish colonial expansion through the Caribbean in the later sixteenth/early seventeenth century and ending as late as the mid-nineteenth century, enslaved peoples were violently removed from their West African homelands to work the sugar, cotton and tobacco plantations in the insular Caribbean, Southern United States of America and Brazil (Falola 2013; Gomez 2019; Lovejoy and Trotman 2003 *inter alia*). To give an idea of scale, current estimates place the number of enslaved Africans forcibly transported to the Americas as high as c.12.8 million, and they were drawn from a wide area of the western and west-central African seaboard (see Eltis 2001 for a statistical analysis). Today the largest descendant African-American populations are found in Brazil (54.5 million), the USA (46.3 million) and the insular- and pan-Caribbean regions (Haiti contains the largest Afro-Caribbean population with 8.9 million people followed by Jamaica with 2.5 million; Yelvington 2005).

The experience of exile and identity making within the context of this larger 'meta' diasporic context has been extensively explored in recent years by post-colonial African diaspora writers from a range of backgrounds, drawing from a range of experiences. In a British context, the pioneering cultural studies work of Stewart Hall gave voice, for the first time, to a distinct and dynamic British Caribbean diasporic culture (Hall 1990). Building upon Hall's work, and taking a much wider Atlantic perspective, British cultural theorist Paul Gilroy's writings emphasise the fluidity and dynamism of the African diasporic identity, moving at once across the African, European and American dimensions with the Atlantic as a nexus of movement (Gilroy 1993). Writing within the Francophone Antillean tradition, Martinique-born writer Édouard Glissant captured the cultural 'mixed' or 'creole' experience of being a French-African-Caribbean, critiquing the earlier *Négritude* literary movement which sought to tie African-diasporic identities more closely to becoming and being French (Glissant 1990). American academic Saidiya Hartman's works, especially her 2007 book *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, examine the violent legacy of the experience of enslaved African Americans and the painful experience of engaging with the sites of memory of slavery in modern Ghana (Hartman 2007). Archaeological and heritage-focused research within the context of the African-American diaspora has diversified beyond the site of the plantation (for overviews see Franklin and McKee 2004; Ogundiran and Falola eds. 2007), to consider concepts as diverse as gender relations (Franklin 2001) academic power relations (Battle-Baptiste 2017), resistance (Agorsah 1994), the legacy of African botanical knowledge (Carney and Rosomoff 2009) maritime/nautical cultural expressions (Harris 2014) and religious identities (Ogundiran and Saunders 2014) among others.

As we note in the Abstract, African meta-diaspora is driven initially by the forced displacement of African enslaved peoples across the Atlantic to the Americas (Akyeampong 2000). There then follows a series of incremental population movements driven by a number of external or internal factors; we term these mesa-diasporas, the word mesa (internal) being the opposite

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conception to meta (outside). Within the United States, for example, the Great Migration is a term used to describe the movement of c. 6 million predominantly African Americans from their traditional homelands in the post-plantation southern states to the industrial cities of the north from c. 1900-1970 (Tolnay 2003). After the Second World War, the arrival of the African-Caribbean 'Windrush' generation changed the face of post-war Britain, and the legacy of this population migration shapes political discourse today, as well as impacting upon British culture in areas as diverse as sport, food and music (Taylor 2020). Both of these (well-known) 're-diasporas' had far-reaching cultural implications and were driven primarily by economic forces. But there are other less-known African-American diaspora population movements, some of which we will consider here, and each has left a significant legacy in terms of thinking about shared conceptions of archaeology, heritage and identity. Before we introduce these case studies, we propose to deal with some of the key questions our work has sought to tackle.

In the first case, the title of the paper acknowledges the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic which started in 2020, hence our time frame. In addition, during this period the Black Lives Matter movement moved to the front of public consciousness in the USA and in Europe, and the legacy of the African diaspora came into sharp focus alongside wider academic debates around de-colonisation. The battle lines of the culture wars are still drawn, so we regard the 2020s as being a significant time period in relation to our work. This research work is tied in with aspects surrounding diaspora, youth and creativity. In particular our shared focus is on using heritage, and heritage tourism more specifically, as a means to empower diasporic communities in developing sustainable local-level economic strategies as part of wider post-pandemic recovery plans. For example, one of the present authors (NF) was asked to lead a discussion with heads of Caribbean tourist organisations during the Summer 2020 lockdown to help frame new tourism strategies that emphasised heritage rather than the stereotypical beach holiday. For many islands though, this heritage represented the legacy of colonisation, so we took a wider perspective. 'Heritage' of course is a term that resists easy categorisation, but many writers have drawn attention to its important social, political, ideological and economic implications (Smith 2006). In our work we draw out three particular aspects of 'heritage': intangible heritage, or cultural expressions that relate to diverse concepts such as dance, food, local knowledge, oral culture etc and which characterise non-western conceptions of heritage (Smith 2015); heritage tourism, a form of tourism where the visitor engages on many levels with the heritage of a place, be it tangible or intangible, cultural or natural (Park 2013); and digital heritage, use of social media, visualisation and other virtual tools to help with accessibility and interpretation of heritage (MacDonald 2006).

In this paper we will consider the comparative issues of heritage and identity among two different African diasporic communities who have moved *within* the Americas or *returned* to Africa. The case studies draw upon the research and consultancy work of the present authors, who both broadly engage with issues surrounding post-colonial diaspora attitudes to heritage, particularly strategies for heritage tourism, digital heritage and entrepreneurship among African diaspora youth (details of our funding and our project design are found in the acknowledgements below). In the first case study we consider the shared experiences of an African-Caribbean group in the Americas. The Garifuna are descended from the comingling of 17th century 'island Carib' Kalinago peoples on the Caribbean island of St Vincent and runaway African enslaved peoples. As 'Black Caribs' they resisted British encroachment on their ancestral lands in the late 18th century, and after their defeat were forcibly removed to Roatan Island in the Honduras from where they have subsequently settled in neighbouring countries, as well as New York (Finneran and Welch 2019; Gonzales 1988). We then switch our focus to Africa, and consider the phenomenon of returned African-Americans, in this case the Krio

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peoples of Sierra Leone, descendants of freed enslaved peoples drawn from a wide range of cultural traditions and who settled there from the late 18th century onwards (Dixon-Fyle and Cole 2006; Cole 2013). In each case we pay particular attention to intangible heritage as a vehicle for diasporic identity and as a means of developing heritage tourism strategies as part of a post-Covid economic strategy, and the role of digital media in community and tourism engagement.

Yearning for Yurumein: [2] the Garifuna and the Afro-Caribbean-American diasporic nexus

Historically the Caribbean region has seen extensive diasporic movements. Pre-contact migration histories are being slowly worked out through reference to linguistics, genetics and archaeological material (Keegan and Hofman 2017; Martinez-Cruzado 2013). From the early 17th century indentured white servants arrived in the Caribbean alongside Africans and their legacy has left an impact on islands such as Barbados where their communities still live (Reilly 2019). Occasionally the false memory of a European, particularly Irish, 'slave' diaspora surfaces, promoted by certain media elements as a reaction to the Black Lives Matter movement (see Hogan, McAtackney and Reilly 2016 for a corrective to this mythos). Within the colonial Caribbean there were many other non-African diasporas (Brown 2004): eastern and southern Asian indentured workers arrived in the mid-19th century (England 2008; Hardwick 2014; Mohammed 2009), as did Portuguese merchants (Collins-Gonsalves 2020) and Greek sponge divers (Andreas 1996). Afro-Caribbean economic migrants are found settling in Panama after their work on the Canal was finished (Newton 1984) and there is also an African-Caribbean diasporic community in Brazil too (Johnson 2002). The onward migration of the descendants of these diverse Caribbean peoples to other parts of the Anglophone world after the Second World Ward has further shaped our post-colonial world and reminds us in the UK that the Windrush generation was not solely Afro-Caribbean, but also Indo-Caribbean and Chinese-Caribbean too (Kaladeen and Dabydeen 2021; Premdas 2002: 58).

It is the cultural and social memory of Africa though that overshadows Caribbean cultural history over the last 300 years. Without wishing to engage too heavily in theoretical issues around 'creolisation' or 'African cultural survivals' (see Finneran 2013, notes 22-23), it is important to recognise that *broadly* African cultural traits survive especially in Caribbean religious (Murrell 2010; Nanton 2016, 98-99; Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 2011), culinary (Bower 2008; Higman 2008) domestic spatial (Armstrong and Fleischman 2003) and ceramic (Hauser and De Corse 2003) cultural expressions. Sometimes these links are very vivid. The work of Angus Martin, Joseph Opala and Cynthia Schmidt (2016) on the Grenadine island of Carriacou has focused on the survival of the Temne, people who arrived from what would become Sierra Leone over 250 years ago. The Temne have maintained a distinctive identity in a small island setting, so much so that they have developed strong and enduring links with contemporary Temne of Sierra Leone, celebrating connectivity through shared cultural gatherings of food, music and drumming. The Carriacou Temne were brought to the island to work on the estate of John Mill, owner of both the Grand Bay estate and the slave entrepot of Bunce Island in Sierra Leone, a mesa- diaspora which owed its origins to the personal circumstances of a wealthy English plantation owner whose holdings straddled the Atlantic. On their visit in 2022, some form of exorcism of the shared ancestral spirits was achieved by the Temne at the site of Grand Bay through the use of rum and water libations and the power of a communal cleansing African ritual (Martin 2022).

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The Garifuna ('Black Carib') peoples are the focus of this case study. They originated in the south-eastern Caribbean island of St Vincent and perceive their ethnogenesis as being the result of intermarriage between indigenous island Kalinago peoples (the term Carib has been inaccurately used in the past here; see Allaire 2013) and runway or shipwrecked African enslaved people from neighbouring islands. The southern Windward islands were recognised by both the French and British as being territories reserved for the Kalinago, and in any case were only marginally settled by the French (Finneran and Welch 2019; Taylor 2012). This state of affairs changed in the late eighteenth century, and these islands became the focus of European rivalry. St Vincent changed hands many times between the British and French, and ultimately in 1796, the Garifuna/'Black Carib' people, who had allied themselves with the French in the struggle against the British were overcome and their chief, Joseph Chattoyer, was killed. Some four thousand Garifuna were exiled on the uninhabited Grenadine island of Balliceaux for six months from October 1796-March 1797 prior to being transported to Roatan island in Honduras; during those six months it is estimated that some 2000 men women and children died there. It is not stretching the emotional boundaries of this place of exile to suggest it was in fact a formative colonial concentration camp (Finneran and Welch 2020).

A small number of Garifuna remained on St Vincent, and they are the ancestors of the modern population there (there are c. 4000 people who identify as Garifuna in present day St Vincent; David Williams personal communication to NF March 14 2018, there is no way of accurately assessing numbers through census data). In general terms, the Garifuna are *physically* indistinguishable from other Afro-Vincentians, but identity is a complex thing. One individual interviewed by NF during the course of research in St Vincent in 2019 self-identified as a Kalinago, or an 'island Carib' and not a Garifuna. Kalinago people are to be found in the Windward islands today, but only on the Windward coast of Dominica. Recent work by the present author (NF) and his collaborator Dr Christina Welch has sought to analyse how the Garifuna people on St Vincent express their cultural identities, and set themselves apart from other African-Vincentians. Labels are problematic. A recent state-sponsored project to produce a comprehensive historical account of St Vincent and the Grenadines written by Vincentian historians refers to all the actors in the story as 'Vincentians' (Dr Cleve Scott, pers. comm. 2023; also, Searchlight VC 2019). It seems an elegant solution to the problem of recognising who is 'more African' than whom.

The Garifuna Heritage Foundation is a voluntary community organisation that co-ordinates a yearly conference which draws together foreign and Garifuna diaspora scholars and visitors, and maintains a strong social media presence to engage people across the diaspora. Facebook and Instagram pages are curated on the island and also among diasporic Garifuna communities. Common threads include a focus upon dance, music, language and cuisine, essentially intangible heritage. This is reflected in the author's work at the village of Greiggs, which has focused on plant foods and medicinal plant knowledge as an expression of Garifuna identity (Welch and Finneran 2022). In addition, the inhabitants of the village emphasise drumming, dance, basket making, and attachment to their ancestral landscapes as being important to them and areas of their culture that they feel they could monetarise through local heritage tourism (Finneran and Welch 2019). St Vincent is less reliant upon tourism than the other Windward islands (in 2020, according to pre-Covid statistics it formed 16 percent of the GDP, but this declined by about 80 percent during Covid, a huge economic and social shock; see Scott 2022). Garifuna communities like Greiggs are seeking ways to attract tourists seeking new cultural experiences; exhibitions based around food, art and dance are planned and walking trails, linking together some of the important sacred elements of the local Garifuna landscape are under development.

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The island of Balliceaux presents another aspect to Garifuna identity, and not just for the Vincentian Garifuna. At once it is a tangible place, yet also an intangible concept, a place of memory as the island has become a focus for pilgrimage for Vincentian and diaspora Garifuna (Finneran and Welch 2020). As with the Temne at the site of Grand Bay on Carriacou, the Garifuna see this place as an island of ancestral ghosts. There are therefore huge political issues around the island that transcend the usual discussions of heritage places. Recent rumours of the sale of the island to hotel developers caused immense disquiet in the Garifuna community, and resulted in the involvement of one of the current authors (NF) in helping the community to frame a plan for investigation and management of the island. At the 2018 Garifuna Heritage Foundation Conference in Kingstown, a Garifuna delegation approached the Prime Minister of St Vincent and the Grenadines, Mr Ralph Gonsalves, with a suggestion that the Government put the island for sale with an asking price of upwards of 30 million dollars. Given the size of the annual St Vincent GDP, this was not a realistic option, and Gonsalves, head of the Caricom reparations committee, suggested they approach the British Government for funds by way of compensation for their forced exile and suffering. At the time of writing the island remains in private ownership, but the SVG Government in March 2025 took the decision to acquire the island (precise details of the transaction remain opaque). Permission must be sought to land there, but essentially the current owners respect the spiritual status of the site. It goes without saying that any form of research or development work on the island should only be conducted with the full support of the Garifuna community as a whole, and that from a heritage management perspective it would be entirely appropriate just to leave the island alone.

The Garifuna regard themselves today as strong resistors of European colonialism and champions of indigenous land rights. They are a transnational people, at once African at once indigenous Caribbean in spirit. They have moved beyond the Honduras to Belize and Guatemala where they became known simply as 'Africans'. A vibrant diaspora community exists in the Bronx in New York City, and knitting all these communities together is a shared digital web, promoting music, food and language. There is also an interesting postscript to the Garifuna story which brings their legacy into a British context. British colonial records tell us that in October 1797 some Garifuna, along with a significant number of Afro-Caribbean prisoners who had fought for the French against the British in St Lucia and Grenada were taken as Prisoners of War to Portchester Castle in Hampshire in southern England where it appears they were treated according to their status as Prisoners of War and not as enslaved peoples (Abigail Coppins pers. comm. 2021). A recent exhibition curated by Abigail Coppins of English Heritage drew attention to the lives of these POWs, some of whom were freed and went on to fight for the French in the continental wars of the early nineteenth century, or in some cases returned to the Caribbean. [3] In September 2021 a Garifuna delegation from Honduras and New York visited the castle to undertake ritual drumming and dancing, and to offer libations to the souls of their ancestors who were held there, much in the manner of the Sierra Leonean Tembe at Grand Bay (Figure 1).

Figure 1**.** Garifuna delegation at Portchester Castle, Hampshire, September 2021, affirming a new Garifuna place of memory within the wider Atlantic network and exorcising ancestral ghosts (Niall Finneran).

Another controversial English site of Afro-Caribbean memory relates to the journey of these African-Caribbean soldiers to Portchester Castle. Raparee Cove is a small beach located just

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east of Ilfracombe in north Devon.[4] For many years local tradition held that the ship that was wrecked here in October 1796, HMS London, was a slave ship heading for Bristol with its cargo of Afro-Caribbean enslaved people. Local historian Pat Barrow has alluded to the finds over the years of manacles and human remains around the Cove (Barrow 1998, 39-57; 61). In fact, the London was a Prisoner of War ship, part of a convoy conveying French prisoners, including a number of Afro-Caribbeans, from St Lucia (and possibly Garifuna) to Bristol. These were not enslaved people. Results of an archaeological excavation here in 1997 by a team from the University of Bristol remain unpublished (Flatman and Blue 1999), and in episode 6 of the 2020 Canadian-British TV programme *Enslaved*, underwater archaeologists failed to locate (unsurprisingly) any wreckage of the ship. Much controversy surrounds the identity of human remains recovered during these excavations (Bousquet 2020), and they have become the focus of a repatriation issue. A memorial plaque to the shipwreck was sponsored by the St Lucian High Commission in London (Figure 2), marking the spot as an important transatlantic site of social memory. The St Lucian Government certainly view the African-Caribbean shipwreck victims as freedom fighters, and they were certainly not (as the TV programme incorrectly stated) enslaved people. The Garifuna mesa-diaspora reflects the legacy of British colonial policy in the late eighteenth century, and embraces places as diverse as Balliceaux, Roatan, the Bronx and a small cove in what would become a North Devon Victorian seaside resort: here Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic consciousness has been given a concrete sense of place.

Figure 2**.** Commemorative plaque, Raparee Cove, Ilfracombe, Devon. The identification of another African diaspora place of memory near a quintessential English seaside resort. (Niall Finneran).

'If yu nor noe usai yu dae go, noe usai you comot'.[5] The Afro-American-West African Nexus: heritage identity and being Krio in Sierra Leone

The search for roots is a constant in African diaspora cultural history, and as we have noted this search is endless, as is the process of diaspora. In this segment we turn our attention to West Africa and the Krio of Sierra Leone, looking at the work being undertaken by one of the present authors (JS) on community heritage and tourism there. West Africa was the main source of enslaved peoples in the New World. The Atlantic African meta-diaspora was fed by peoples from the Senegambia region, the Asante of the 'Gold Coast' and further eastwards the Fon, Yoruba and Igbo, and from further south, the Bakongo people. We have noted the concept of Ethiopianism and the idea of a return to Africa in post-Emancipation contexts taking on a spiritual rather than economic emphasis. For freed enslaved peoples of the USA and of the British Empire, Liberia and Sierra Leone respectively became effectively state-sponsored footholds for returning African Caribbeans and Americans. In Liberia a number of small-scale north American communities were established by former enslaved Africans which reflected their areas of origin (for example New Georgia, Kentucky in Africa, Mississippi in Africa, Republic of Maryland) and these were subsumed into the new state during the mid-19th century. In addition there was a sizeable African-Barbadian community, which dates back to the nineteenth century, and this has recently been the subject of a ground-breaking community archaeological and heritage study which has emphasised local capacity building in archaeological and heritage studies and the facilitation of visits of Liberian-Barbadians back to Barbados, as well as the excavation of pioneer houses (Reilly, Banton, Stevens and Gijanto 2019).

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The Tabom (known as Agudas in Nigeria, Benin and Togo, and thus representing a series of migrations) are Portuguese-speaking former enslaved people from Brazil who settled initially in the southern coastal regions of Ghana from the mid-nineteenth century. The Tabom refer to themselves as Brazilians, and express their identity through reference to their homeland, placing emphasis upon their cuisine and continued use of the Portuguese language and names. The first Tabom settlers brought over an extensive farming knowledge centred upon cassava cultivation, as well as industrial skills such as building and smithing as well as tailoring (Essien 2016; Schaumloeffel 2009). Today the Brazil House in Jamestown, Accra, located on Brazil Lane (the focus of a number of early Tabom settlements) is preserved as a Tabom heritage site. HACSA, the Heritage and Cultural Society of Africa, is a non-Governmental organisation that promotes knowledge exchange links across the Atlantic through its Sankofa Network, and are especially active in devising accessible educational material as well devising virtual reality tours of Accra's heritage including Tabom sites. In addition, the Ghanaian government supports diasporic cultural homecoming events such as the Detty December Homecoming event, which was part of the 2019 Year of Return initiative devised to promote an awareness of Ghanaian culture through the diaspora, particularly in the USA (Gebauer and Umscheid 2021).

The origins of the Krio of Sierra Leone are, as with the case of Liberia, to be found in the emancipation movements of the late eighteenth century. In 1787, a group of British philanthropists, led by Granville Sharpe (1735-1813), sought ways of mitigating the plight of enslaved peoples in the British Empire (Cole 2013: 25). They proposed a new settlement on the Sierra Leone River in west Africa to receive freed enslaved peoples. Granville believed that it should be established with the consent of the indigenous inhabitants, but this did not happen and the settlement was named Granville Town in honour of its founder (Bangura 2009). The Krio are mainly descended from: 424 original 'Black Poor' transported aboard HMS Nautilus which arrived at the Sierra Leone River in an area known as Romarong from May to September 1787 (many of them of them perished over the next five or so years; Cole 2013: 32). In addition to the 424 Black Poor, 60 white women were also transported to Sierra Leone. The second group of African-Americans to settle in Sierra Leone were mostly British loyalists from the American Revolutionary War who had been resettled in Nova Scotia after the end of hostilities. They were known as the 'Loyalists' or the 'Settlers' and they began to arrive in 1792. A third population increment was the Maroons who had established communities in the mountains of Jamaica and who had long been a thorn in the side of the colonial authorities there (Bangura 2009; Cole 2013, 32). Finally, the fourth and largest of the groups of settlers in Sierra Leone, and the last of the diaspora to arrive, were called the "Recaptives" or "Liberated Africans." They started to arrive from around 1807, and as Cole notes (2013: 32) many had cultural backgrounds from far beyond Sierra Leone, such as Yoruba, Igbo, Popo and Fante.

A significant number of settlers from the four main groups discussed above either spoke fluent English, pidgin or could understand both (Kaba 2022). Therefore, the Sierra Leonian Krio became a Pan-African language, which was understood across West Africa and beyond (Oyètádé and Luke 2008). It is important to note that the word Krio/Creole in Sierra Leone developed two meanings: Krio as a people and Krio as a language. The Krio make up about 2% of Sierra Leone's population. They have their own distinctive identity, in terms of their language and culture, but also in terms of social standing and economic power. Krio people have disproportionately dominated local social, political, cultural and economic networks, having held a privileged position in colonial society. To borrow the famous phrase coined by heritage scholar Laurajane Smith (Smith and Waterton 2012), the Authorised Heritage Discourse of Sierra Leone is very much Krio-centred and arguably overshadows other local cultural expressions. In

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terms of tangible heritage, perhaps the most significant place of memory in Sierra Leone is the former slave trading centre at Bunce Island which enmeshed the region within the wider Atlantic commercial nexus. The site was active from the late seventeenth century through to 1807, and most of the enslaved Africans were shipped to Georgia and South Carolina (DeCorse 2015). As Paul Basu notes however within the wider context of Sierra Leone's heritage policy, protected sites tend on the whole to relate to the British colonial past and do not reflect the wider sweep of Sierra Leone's history (Basu 2008). Heritage policy in Sierra Leone ought to look forward to framing a common destiny rather than dwell of fragmented and contentious pasts (Zetterstrom-Sharp 2015).

One of the present authors (JS) has had a long association with Krio-focused heritage projects dating back to the late 1990's when she was a member of the UK-based Sierra Leone Development Foundation (SLDF) which was co-founded by the current Mayor of Freetown. Currently JS and her collaborator Isatu Smith (founder of West Africa Heritage Consultants and a heritage tourism expert based in Freetown) are working on a heritage tourism initiative in collaboration with Freetown City Council (FCC) and funded by the European Union Diaspora Facility (EUDIF). The project design addresses a number of key issues around heritage tourism, sustainability and capacity building in Sierra Leone, focusing particularly on Krio heritage (EUDIF 2022). From 1991-2001, the country was ravaged by civil war; in 2014-16 there was a severe outbreak of Ebola, followed in 2020 by the Covid Pandemic. These factors naturally had a significant economic impact, and the current project seeks to develop local sustainable tourism strategies focusing on heritage to assist recovery. In particular, the Sierra Leone National Development Plan 2019-2023 seeks to mobilise its significant diasporic community to assist with skills development through knowledge exchange. [6] Specifically the objectives of this project are: to develop a strategic plan and framework to contribute to the rebranding and promotion of the heritage assets in Freetown; to enhance the capabilities and knowledge of heritage tourism staff and tourism management professionals in Freetown; to increase awareness amongst national authorities and local communities in Freetown about the value and potential of heritage tourism and to explore the ability to digitise aspects of the heritage tourism experience. Activities that are being undertaken as part of this initiative are underpinned by primary audience research focusing on stakeholders' responses and reactions to historical heritage sites in Sierra Leone and intangible components of Krio heritage. These conversations will be captured using digital media enabling an immersive and inclusive heritage experience, allowing us to create a collective vision for the future for individuals, community and their descendants. Other initiatives include the development of a series of self-guided walking tours around Freetown and also a Roots festival as part of a diasporic homecoming event.

At the time of writing the initial results of this project are being analysed and await full publication, but on the basis of interviews with members of the Freetown Krio community we can begin to capture some of the key concerns they have about their heritage and how it should be promoted. One key theme we have identified is the acknowledgement of the layered and diverse roots of Krio identity, and this is expressed through intangible heritage in the shape of language, food, language, naming traditions and spirituality too. We have also noted that some Krio have expressed an ambivalent attitude to the sites of colonial heritage, in particular Bunce Island. This structure was rebuilt with the help of Nova Scotians, Krio people worked alongside the colonial authorities and were enmeshed in the story of what was effectively a processing station for enslaved peoples like Elmina Castle in Ghana (unlike the Garifuna, the Krio seem not to define their exile through places of memory, maybe because the circumstances of their

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exile were voluntary rather than forced). Intangible heritage is potentially much more of an easier element of heritage to connect with for younger diaspora groups (as we have noted with the Garifuna). Cuisine, dance and music translate more readily into an accessible digital idiom than colonial buildings which in any case are much more dis-connected from Krio lived experiences, and transgenerational conversations are vital to engage all community members. A desire for better education around Krio identity and heritage is often repeated, and the recognition that this could play an important role in developing local and sustainable tourism strategies is clearly articulated. Engagement of the diaspora is also seen as being vital in this regard, but Sierra Leone lacks the necessary supporting infrastructure for tourism to thrive. However, heritage tourists are more likely to look beyond these shortcomings and embrace the country because of sentiments and a sense of belonging. Any tourism strategy that fails to capitalise on heritage is bound to fail.

Figure 3. Krio women in Freetown in traditional dress. Clothing expresses both individual and group identity and draws upon a range of cultural traditions. Younger Krio are reinterpreting these patterns for display in the 21st century (photograph by Melbourne Garber reproduced with permission).

Conclusion: empowering African mesa-diaspora communities through heritage

During the writing of this paper, we struggled with the terminology. Our initial thinking was around the concept of 're-diaspora', but this implied a fixed and discrete series of movements, as would the concept of 'primary' or 'secondary' diaspora. We thought that a scalar conception would work better, and whilst macro/micro diaspora might have worked, we wished to emphasise more the idea of movement within movement, hence our use of the term meta/mesa. At the start of the paper, we outlined some issues that we wished to address in the context of these historical mesa-diasporas, legacies of the colonial and late colonial European engagement with Africa. As we have noted, in the 2020s we have seen a global pandemic that upended economies and our social lives, and also the emergence of a greater awareness of historic racial injustice that in some areas has not been welcomed. Raising awareness of these interlinked hidden histories is not a process of rewriting history, a common and lazy reactionary cultural trope, but a means of recognising historical wrongs. This is an urgent task for archaeologists, heritage specialists and humanities scholars to deal with in the 2020s, and it is through direct community engagement that we can do this.

There are many ways in which we as Africanist scholars working in the global heritage framework can approach these hidden heritages. We have emphasised here a common thread of a focus on intangible heritage, hidden knowledge, stories, food, dance, language, spirituality and social memory. These cultural elements can feed into localised sustainable heritage tourism plans which can give agency to communities and help them recover from the economic disruption of the Pandemic as well as contributing to a wider raised awareness of social injustice in the light of the Black Lives Matter movement. Digital tools, which are low cost and easily accessible, are a good way to promote this heritage. In a recent study commissioned by the European Union Diaspora Facility, one of the current authors (NF) collaborated in a study looking at diasporic youth entrepreneurs from the Rwandan, Brazilian and Barbadian diaspora communities in Europe. A common thread was the increased use of social media during lockdown to promote heritage tourism (especially in Rwanda and especially focusing on sites of memory relating to the 1994 Genocide) as well as sharing culinary heritage, online dance or Brazilian martial arts classes and language learning, often as subscriber content (Dickinson and Finneran 2022).

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In the USA, recent efforts by the Gullah/Geechee African American peoples of the South Carolina sea islands (lowcountry) have highlighted the efficacy of imaginative and energetic local heritage initiatives which emphasise diasporic linkages. Although the Gullah-Geechee are the descendants of enslaved peoples brought in by the British to support the burgeoning rice cultivation plantations of the late 17th-18th century (Cross 2012), many came directly from West Africa (links with Sierra Leone are particularly strong; DeCorse 2015; Hair 1967). There is also a strong link with resettled enslaved Africans from Barbados, and this narrative is being strongly emphasised especially through genealogical research and material culture studies and educational exchanges between Barbados and South Carolina (Rhoda Green pers. comm. 2021; LaRoche 2017; Smith, Loftfield and Paulsson 1995).

In the United Kingdom the study of African diasporic heritage was given impetus with the commemoration in 2006 of the 200th anniversary of the ending of the slave trade. The anthropologist Daniel Miller has signposted the potential for contemporary archaeological/heritage-focused studies of the post WW2 Caribbean diaspora (Miller 2008), and in the light of the recent Windrush scandal, which resulted in the deportation of long-settled African-Caribbeans, such studies have strong social justice implications. In Reading, Berkshire, for example, historically a focus of Barbadian diasporic settlement, Reading Museum has organised youth theatre groups, oral history projects and creative photography classes to capture the lived experience of this mesa-diaspora (Dickinson and Finneran 2022: 40). The strong Barbadian identity here owes its existence to a recruitment drive on the island in the 1950s for employees for the Reading-based Huntley and Palmer biscuit factory; in reality it is rare to be able to fine-grain and situate individual Caribbean island diasporas, as in the 2020s young Afro-Caribbeans in Britain see themselves as Afro-Caribbean rather than Jamaican or Trinidadian. We might also take the mesa-diaspora a stage further and consider returned African-Caribbean communities, for example, following the lead of anthropologist Heather Horst and her study of the domestic spaces and funerary culture of returned British Jamaicans and the often painful process of negotiating identity and re-integration (2004; 2007). Ultimately our focus should be on these often emotional and powerful hidden stories of individual and group heritage and the struggle to articulate and maintain identity 'in exile', something that gets lost in translation of words and in movement across oceans.

"Luagu lidise wéibugu wasandirei lihürü wanügü"
("It is as we proceed on our journey that we feel the weight of our burdens")
Garifuna proverb
BFSAUAlbany 2018.

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Niall Finneran undertook PhD research at the University of Cambridge on the archaeology of Ethiopia. A former British Academy Post-doctoral Research Fellow in the Department of Art and Archaeology at SOAS, he is now professor of historical archaeology and heritage at the University of Winchester and adjunct faculty professor at the University of Notre Dame, London. He undertakes research into Caribbean and African Atlantic historical archaeology, heritage and anthropology and more widely on diaspora heritage.

Joyce Sarpong

Joyce Sarpong's personal background is in West Africa (Ghana) and was selected as an African Diaspora changemaker by Comic Relief and the Royal Society of the Arts (RSA) for her work in the west African diaspora community. This work led to the creation of AfricaOracle, a business consultancy with the mission of amplifying and celebrating the voices of African's diaspora using cutting-edge digital technology. She is currently working on capacity building and community heritage projects in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

Notes

1. This paper makes reference to the historical Diaspora constructed in relation to the process of transatlantic slavery from the 16th-19th centuries primarily within the New World rather than recent emigration out of Africa and within a more globalised perspective; see Okpewho and Nzegwu 2009 for example.

2. The Garifuna name for the island of St Vincent.

3. For further information, see English Heritage, 'Black Prisoners of War at Portchester Castle'. Accessed April 16 2025. https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/portchester-castle/history-and-stories/black-prisoners-at-portchester/

4. HER Monument number 1078671. For details see**:** https://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/Gateway/Results_Single.aspx?uid=1078671&resourceID=19191

5. A very well-known saying in Krio, which means: "If we don't know where we're going, we must know where we're from."

6. See Sierra Leone Immigration Department. "National Migration Policy for Sierra Leone."

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