



## **Southeastern Regional Seminar in African Studies (SERSAS)**

**Fall Meeting  
27 - 28 October 2000  
University of Tennessee, Knoxville**

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### **West-Central African Nature Spirits in the South Carolina Lowcountry**

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Captives carried from West-Central African ports to the shores of South Carolina arrived in large numbers throughout the duration of the legal and illegal African slave trade, particularly during the years when plantation slavery began to take its familiar form and expand throughout Carolina. These enslaved West-Central Africans played an especially important role in shaping the cultural milieu of the southeastern seaboard. A number of scholars have looked at the influence of West-Central Africans on beliefs and practices in the African-Lowcountry cultural tradition.[1] This paper is part of my contribution to this topic. In particular, I examine the example of nature spirits in South Carolina as reflective of the profound and unique impact that West-Central Africans had on the development of African-Lowcountry culture. I contend that West-Central African nature deities, called *simbi* spirits in Kikongo, served the enslaved people of the early Lowcountry as spiritual benefactors around which captives of diverse African origins and those born in the Lowcountry built their communities.

#### **Simbi Spirits in the South Carolina Lowcountry: Evidence & Questions**

In 1843, a geologist in search of marl deposits in the soil of South Carolina recorded in his journal that enslaved people throughout the Lowcountry that water spirits called "cymbees" inhabited certain springs. This early account and later ones from twentieth-century sources also report that African-descended people in the Lowcountry feared the "cymbees," especially in instances when individuals (usually women) tried to draw water or children endeavored to swim in the springs. Enslaved people described the spirits as vaguely human in form, each possessing unique characteristics, and later informants related various names for the spirits such as The Evil, One-Eye (at Eutaw, Poooshee, and Lang Syne plantations), and The Great Desire of the Unrotting Waters. Indeed, from these accounts "cymbees" appear to fit within the category of malevolent spirits that populated the Lowcountry's forest and swamps and included such specters as Plat-Eyes, "conjur-horses," and spirit bears.[2]

Such an interpretation does not consider additional crucial information, however. The geologist's account in 1843 further relates an incident in which a planter attempted to build a small wall around a spring to make it more accessible. The planter's effort was rebuffed by an elderly enslaved man who argued that the project would anger and drive away the "cymbee." Occasionally springs spontaneously disappeared, which enslaved people interpreted as a sign that the resident spirit had died or had departed because of some human offense, both unfavorable circumstances. Although these water spirits elicited fear, African-descended people desired their presence at these important sites.[3]

These brief accounts of water spirits raise a few questions for students of the African- Atlantic diaspora. Where did the "cymbee" spirits come from? How did they become part of Lowcountry spirit lore? What purpose did they serve, if any, in the worldviews of African- descended people in the Lowcountry?

An interpretation of "cymbees" must begin with an examination of the word's origins. First, "cymbee" is clearly an attempt to represent the pronunciation of the Kikongo word *simbi*. Not only do the words match in sound, they also match in meaning. The nature spirits known as *bisimbi* (plural of *simbi*) among many Kikongo speakers often take the form of water spirits. As such, in both sound and meaning, Lowcountry "cymbee" spirits unmistakably derive from West- Central African understandings of *simbi* spirits. For the sake of orthographic clarity, Lowcountry "cymbee" spirits will be called *simbi* spirits throughout the rest of this paper. The sure etymology of *simbi* also points the way in investigating the significance of these spirits in South Carolina cultural history. Our attention thus turns to the enslaved people who brought West-Central African culture with them to the Lowcountry.

## Simbi Spirits in Africa

Records from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (penned almost exclusively by Catholic missionaries) and twentieth-century explanations (produced by Kikongo-speaking Africans and foreign anthropologists) generally agree in their observations of the beliefs and practices kept by West-Central Africans in regard to nature spirits. [4] Simbi spirits and their analogs in nearby societies occupied especially important stations within West-Central African cultures. Although diverse thoughts about the origins and characteristics of nature spirits existed, the central idea remained that they symbolized the permanence and potency of nature. These spirits, called (in the singular) *simbi*, *nkita*, or *nkisi* among various Kongo-speaking populations and *kilundu* among Kimbundu-speaking people, were seen as principal sources of Other Worldly power. Above all, the living turned to nature spirits for their communal welfare. Nature spirits provided abundant harvests, rewarding hunts, and social health for communities that maintained shrines, upheld ritual observances, and supported the offices of the human representatives of territorial nature spirits (such as Kongo *itomi*, singular *kitomi*). Nature spirits were also the animating forces behind charms employed by groups or individuals for good fortune. West-Central Africans regarded *simbi* spirits as a fundamental source of political authority as well. Local leaders and invested chiefs required the approbation of territorial nature spirits to command the appropriate powers of and respect due their positions.

The relationship between ancestors and *simbi* spirits holds additional significance for the present inquiry. Connections made by West-Central Africans of ancestors with nature spirits suggests that territorial deities represented elders of the Other World as they were once ancestors who entered the land of the dead so long ago that they eventually lost ties to specific lineages to become guardians of all in particular areas. The significance of the linking of ancestors and nature spirits extended to the relationship between the living and the land they inhabited. Through the construction of tombs, the proper decoration of graves, and timely offerings to the deceased, living descendents not only retained contact with the dead but also reaffirmed their own ties to the land. Graves provided focal points for the collective energies of descendents, who hoped to receive blessings in return for the attention, and landmarks of identity in that a person's country was where his ancestors were buried. This sentiment is captured in the Kongo proverb that intones, "Where your ancestors do not live, you cannot build your house." [5] Nature spirits served similar functions. Their presence allowed those who lacked ties with named ancestors or who may have come to a region as strangers to still have access to agents of Other Worldly powers and to feel attached to the land where they lived. In this sense, we see *simbi* spirits contributing once again to the well-being of communities.

We should not be misled, however, into thinking that *simbi* spirits, while essentially benevolent, were also gentle, passive entities. To the contrary, their displays of terrifying might comprised a central component of their being. Kavuna Simon, a Kongo man born in the nineteenth century who wrote about Kongo culture in the early-twentieth century, provided a memorable account of this aspect of *simbi* spirits:

Truly they have great power and authority, for their power is revealed by the force they show in the water and in the gullies. They stir up very high winds and unleash tornadoes, so that the bodies of

people are filled with fear and trembling. They break people's courage and render it feeble, weak, limp, petrified, hollow and fevered; they are stunned and grovel in terror. This is how the *bisimbi* show their strength: if they see someone come to draw water from the pool where they reside, they rise to the surface and cover it with foam and turbulence, turning and twisting. So the person drawing the water is scared stiff when she sees how the water boils in the pool. She may tumble into the water because she is dizzy. If she does not cry out so that those who remain in the village hear her, when next they meet her she may be dead.[6]

Violent displays by *simbi* spirits demonstrated their Other Worldly power, just as the ability to spill the blood of wild animals showed a hunter's access to the same power or the capacity to spill human blood authenticated a chief's rightful use of it. All people needed intermediaries such as nature spirits, charms, and skilled individuals to ensure survival and prosperity. As such, violent *simbi* displays did not alienate people. Instead, they simply confirmed that nature spirits and the sites associated with them were legitimate channels of Other Worldly power.

From this general description of nature spirits, we see that they were vital components in West-Central African communities of the living, the dead, and other invisible powers. Similar conceptualizations of nature spirits existed in many West African societies as well.[7] We should not be surprised, then, to find that captive Africans carried across the Atlantic brought these ideas with them. Indeed, while specific, named territorial nature spirits were not portable, the conceptions about their existence and their relationships to living people did make crossing.

### **West-Central Africans in the Lowcountry**

A fundamental step in assessing the development of African-Lowcountry culture and making a historical connection between West-Central African and Lowcountry *simbi* spirits includes determining the provenience and numbers of African captives taken to the Lowcountry over time. This entails more than simply computing gross figures for captives taken from various African regions during the entire period of importation. Sensitivity to the temporal dimensions of importation permits a better understanding of the processes of interaction among captives in culturally diverse plantation societies. The remainder of this section connects the key factors of numbers, origins, and chronology and applies them to an interpretation of the cultural milieu of the South Carolina Lowcountry.

The era of importation of Africans to the Lowcountry can be divided into three periods that correspond with significant phases of African-Lowcountry cultural history. The Early Period (c.1710-1744) extended from the beginnings of settlement of the Carolina colony through the establishment of large-scale plantation agriculture. These formative decades witnessed the growth of the enslaved population, which consisted largely of Africans but included an increasingly large Lowcountry-born contingent as well, and the emergence of African-Lowcountry culture. By the end of this period, enslaved people inhabited almost all of the Carolina portion of the Lowcountry. The Lowcountry expanded its territory during the Middle Period (1749-1776) as plantation slavery reached the rivers of the upstart Georgia colony south of the Savannah River. The much heavier importation of Africans during this time contributed not only to the peopling of the Georgia Lowcountry, but also to the continued growth of the Carolina Lowcountry and the recently-settled interior. The Final Period (1783-1808) corresponded with the retooling of plantation slavery following the tribulations and destruction of the War for American Independence, the extension of settlement to the sea islands of South Carolina and Georgia, and the explosive expansion of slavery in the southeastern interior.[8]

The importance of West-Central Africans in the Lowcountry extends far beyond their numbers alone. West-Central Africans, along with smaller groups of captives taken from Senegambia and the Bight of Biafra, built and worked the many rice plantations that set levels of production unsurpassed until the mid-1760s. This means that almost a full generation before the celebrated connection between the Lowcountry and Africa's "Rice Coast" (particularly Sierra Leone) was formed, the foundations for Carolina's pre-eminence in rice cultivation and for African-Lowcountry culture had already been laid in large part through the unparalleled efforts of West-Central Africans. West-Central Africans not only constructed the plantation complex, they also sowed the seeds for the uninterrupted growth of the African-descended population. Following the Stono Rebellion and the outbreak of

King George's War, both in 1739, South Carolina's African trade foundered under the weight of prohibitive duties on importation of enslaved people and decreased trade generally.[11] People from West-Central Africa thus constituted the last large influx of Africans for another decade. This brief respite coincided with the stabilization of self-reproducing communities by the end of the 1740s.[12] Taken together these conditions reveal that West-Central Africans were preeminent among the fathers and mothers of a burgeoning Lowcountry-born society.

### **Simbi Spirits & the Founder Generation**

Although we lack written sources that identify *simbi* spirits in the Lowcountry before the 1840s, I maintain that they became part of the African-Lowcountry culture during the Early Period of importation and settlement. The early plantation center near Charleston experienced its greatest influx of Africans, especially West-Central Africans, during the Early Period. Additionally, all the known and named *simbi* spirits, including the most famous *simbi* at Wadboo, appeared on some of the oldest Lowcountry plantations. This suggests that just as West-Central Africans were particularly important in peopling the early Lowcountry and building the Carolina plantation complex, they were also the principle designers of African-Lowcountry perception of the landscape, especially its sacred dimensions.[13] Of course, captives from other African regions contributed to the development of the African-Lowcountry worldview, but the core structure remained West-Central African. My placement of *simbi* spirits in the early phase also derives from speculation on the meaning of *simbi* spirits in the Lowcountry. Given the historical connection between Lowcountry *simbi* spirits and those in West-Central Africa, as well as the generally similar descriptions from more recent sources, we may imagine that Lowcountry *simbi* spirits functioned similarly to West-Central African *simbi* spirits in that they allowed newcomers to root themselves in a land that lacked adequate ancestral burial grounds, at least in the earliest times. Through the *simbi* spirits and the continuation of West-Central African burial practices, enslaved people in the Lowcountry claimed their place on the landscape and acknowledged the connection between West-Central African ancestors and their children in exile.[14] Additionally, the presence of *simbi* spirits may have offered enslaved people powerful spiritual benefactors within the harsh realm of plantation slavery, as captives may have focused their anxieties over health and fertility on the *simbi* spirits. Sickness during the Middle Passage and several epidemics in the early Lowcountry afflicted many Africans and their descendants. Further, enslaved people relied on the produce of their Sunday gardens and hunting to supplement meager plantation rations. Later generations held many of the same concerns about the maintenance of community and spiritual and material survival. As such, *simbi* spirits remained vital features of the mental and physical landscape into the twentieth century.

### **Lowcountry Simbi Spirits in Theoretical Context**

This interpretation of *simbi* spirits in the Lowcountry continues the line of research that emphasizes the continued relevance and vitality of ancestral cultures to enslaved people, who consciously maintained African traditions in the Americas. But this is not an exercise in "survival studies" or in the basic identification of "Africanisms." [15] Instead, I have endeavored to show how one instance of the extension of African cultures into the Americas fits within the process of community building in American plantation slavery. Given the multi-ethnic composition of Lowcountry plantations (though they were not as diverse as some have argued), we must consider this process as something greater than the simple retention of one African tradition over many others. By looking at the demography of the Atlantic trade in African captives and the chronology of plantation settlement in the Lowcountry, we see the dynamic interplay of space and time in the formation of enslaved communities in early Carolina. By this path we see that West-Central Africans were especially influential in cultural development because they arrived at certain times that corresponded with formative phases in the growth of Lowcountry slavery, not simply because they dominated numerically among imported captives. Africans from other regions likely maintained many of their own beliefs and practices, at least during their lifetimes. But this cultural plurality eventually transformed into a complex African-Lowcountry culture that incorporated various influences into a framework that had been established by West-Central African founders. In this process the fundamentally similar perspectives concerning nature spirits that Africans from many regions brought with them were retained but ultimately expressed in the idioms of West-Central African Kongo culture.

At the same time that this interpretation departs from traditional "Africanisms" scholarship, it also rejects the notion of cultural development that emphasizes almost exclusively the creative impulse of enslaved people in making African-Atlantic cultures. Often labeled the "creolization" model, this position typically dismisses the influence of particular African culture groups in favor of the idea that enslaved people acted as cultural free agents who drew freely and widely from the diverse cultural milieu of the Americas to fashion dynamic, new cultures. African contributions are reduced to generalized influences at best, and examples of specific African continuities are regarded as anomalous or insignificant. This model derives in large part from creolization scholars' lack of detailed knowledge of African cultures and their mistaken assumption that African cultures are fixed traditions inherently resistant to modification and elaboration. While the present inquiry into Lowcountry *simbi* spirits recognizes the imaginative efforts of Africans to understand and adapt to their American circumstances, it does not exclude the fundamental importance of ancestral African culture in shaping the direction of such creative endeavors. In the end, discussion over cultural development in the African-Atlantic diaspora must transcend the familiar tone of continuity versus creativity. I hope that the example of Lowcountry *simbi* spirits will help to highlight the complementary creative and conservative forces at work in cultural development, and continue the trend toward more nuanced treatments of African-Atlantic cultures.[16]

## ENDNOTES

1. Begin with Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 3-97; Robert Farris Thomspon, "Kongo Influences on African-American Artistic Culture," in Joseph E. Holloway, ed., *Africanisms in American Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 148-84; and Margaret Washington Creel, "Gullah Attitudes toward Life and Death," in *ibid.*, 69-97. On the linguistic influence, see Joseph E. Holloway and Vass, *The African Heritage of American English* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).
2. On water spirits, see William M. Mathew, ed., *Agriculture, Geology, and Society in Antebellum South Carolina: The Private Diary of Edmund Ruffin, 1843* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 164-67; F.W. Bradley, "'Knowing Yarbs' Means Ability to Heal with Medicinal Herbs," *Charleston New & Courier*, 19 February 1950; John Bennett papers, 1865-1956, South Carolina Historical Society; and Robert Farris Thompson's essay in Grey Gundaker, ed., *Keep Your Head to the Sky: Interpreting African American Home Ground* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998). On the other spirits, see Writers' Program (S.C.), *South Carolina Folk Tales: Stories of Animals and Supernatural Beings, Compiled by Workers of the Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of South Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1941), 44-51.
3. Mathew, *Agriculture*, 167.
4. For a sampling of West-Central African nature spirits in primary sources, see Andrew Battell, *The Strange Adventures of Andrew Battel of Leigh in Angola and Adjoining Regions*. ed., E.G. Ravenstein (Nendeln, Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprint, 1967), 56-8; Olfert Dapper, *Umständliche und Eigenliche Beschreibung von Afrika* (Amsterdam: Jacob von Meurs, 1670), 534-7; Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi da Montecuccolo, *Descrição histórico doe três reinos Congo Matamba e Angola*, 2 vols., Graziano Maria da Legguzzano, ed. and trans. (Lisbon: Junta de Investigações do Ultramar, 1965), bk. 2, 59-60, 65-7; and Marcellino d'Atri "Giornate apostoliche fatte da me Fra M. d'A ... 1690," in Carlo Toso, ed., *L'Anarchia Congolese nel sec. XVII. La relazione inedita de Marcellino d'Atri* (Genoa, 1984), 483-6, 499. Among the secondary sources, see Anne Hilton, *The Kingdom of Kongo* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), chapter one; John K. Thornton, *The Kongolese Saint Anthony: Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684-1706* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 55-7; Thornton, "Religious and Ceremonial Life in the Kongo and Mbundu Areas, 1500-1700," in Linda Heywood, ed., *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming); Wyatt MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa: The BaKongo of Lower Zaire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 74-81; and MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture: The Conceptual Challenge of the Particular* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

5. Quoted in Georges Balandier, *Daily Life in the Kingdom of Kongo: Sixteenth to Eighteenth Century*, trans. Helen Weaver (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1968), 253.
  6. Quoted in MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture*, 141.
  7. John Illife, *Africans: The History of a Continent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 85-8; and John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophies*, 2nd ed. (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1990), 50-7, 76-80.
  8. For tables and a fuller treatment of the numbers, see Ras Michael Brown, "'Walk in the Feenda': West-Central Africans and the Forest in the South Carolina-Georgia Lowcountry," in Heywood, *Central Africans*. See also, David Richardson, "The British Slave Trade to Colonial South Carolina," *Slavery and Abolition* 12,3 (December 1991), 125-72; Phyllis Martin, *External Trade of the Loango Coast, 1576-1870: The Effects of Changing Commercial Relations on the Vili Kingdom of Loango* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972); and Joseph C. Miller, "The Numbers, Origins, and Destinations of Slaves in the Eighteenth-Century Angolan Slave Trade," in Joseph E. Inikori and Stanley L. Engerman, eds., *The Atlantic Slave Trade: Effects on the Economies, Societies, and Peoples of Africa, the Americas, and Europe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992).
  9. Quote taken from Frank J. Klingberg, *The Carolina Chronicle of Dr. Francis Le Jau* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956) 69. See also, John K. Thornton, "African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion," *American Historical Review* 96,4 (1991), 1103-1105.
  10. *South Carolina Gazette*, 6 August 1737.
  11. James Glen, "A Description of South Carolina," in Milling, ed., *Colonial South Carolina: Two Contemporary Descriptions* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1951), 45. See also, Richardson, "British Slave Trade," 131; and Stuart O. Stumpf, "Implications of King George's War for the Charleston Mercantile Community," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 77 (1976): 161-188.
  12. Glen, "Description," 45. For analyses of demography of the enslaved population throughout the eighteenth century, see Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 79-95; Peter Wood, "'More Like A Negro Country': Demographic Patterns in Colonial South Carolina, 1700-1749," in Stanley L. Engerman and Eugene D. Genovese, eds., *Race and Slavery in the Western Hemisphere: Quantitative Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); and Menard, "Slave Demography," 291-302.
  13. Brown, "'Walk in the Feenda'".
  14. On burial practices, see Thompson, "Kongo Influences," 167-80; and Jon Michael Vlach, *By the Work of Their Hands: Studies in Afro-American Folklife* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1991), 43-7. Creel ("Gullah Attitudes") provides general observations on West- Central African influences on Lowcountry perceptions of death.
  15. For background on the following comments, see Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston: Beacon, 1992); Mervyn C. Alleyne, "Continuity and Creativity in Afro-American Language and Culture," in Salikoko S. Mufwene, ed., *Africanisms in Afro-American Language Varieties* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 167-181; and Paul E. Lovejoy, "The African Diaspora: Revisionist Interpretations of Ethnicity, Culture and Religion under Slavery," *Studies in the World History of Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation* 2,1 (1997).
  16. For an excellent example of this kind of scholarship, see Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).
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First Online Edition: 24 October 2000  
Last Revised: 24 October 2000