NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM

Slavery and the natural world

Chapter 4: Everyday life

Context

This material is part of a wider project on slavery and the natural world, carried out at the Natural History Museum, 2006–08. The information is based on documents held in the Museum's libraries, and explores the links between nature (especially the knowledge, and transfer, of plants), people with an interest in natural history (mainly European writers from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries) and the history and legacies of the transatlantic slave trade[1].

More can be found in the original documents, written by natural historians at the time of slavery. Contact the Natural History Museum Library www.nhm.ac.uk/research-curation/library/ +44 (0) 20 7942 5000. The additional references section has other useful sources such as relevant articles, books, journals and websites.

Contents

1 For more background information see Chapter 1: The project.

1. Introduction

Enslavement destroyed normal life for African people. Captured Africans were often separated from their families and mixed with people from other areas who spoke different languages. Enslaved Africans were bought and sold in the same way as other goods. They were treated inhumanely, and were often punished, especially by being whipped. The hardships, including punishments, abuse and harassment, suffered by enslaved people are well documented[2].

In spite of their suffering, African people used natural resources to build a new way of life. They adapted their knowledge to use the new plants and animals they encountered in the Americas. Plants played a very important part in the everyday lives of enslaved people[3]. Although enslavers provided very basic shelter and supplies, enslaved people used natural resources for cooking and to make storage utensils, candles, ropes, lace, clothes and mattresses to improve their lives and their chances of survival.

Retaining aspects of African culture and tradition may also be seen as a powerful form of resistance. Enslaved Africans made drums that were used for music and dancing as well as to communicate the start of revolts. Trading in goods made from natural resources may have allowed some people to save enough money to eventually buy their freedom. Enslaved communities did not have much spare time, but written reports described children playing games[4].

Even in the harshest conditions, there is evidence that suggests some enslaved people took pride in their personal appearance. They made soaps for cleaning clothes as well as their skin; and plants were used to make jewellery and perfumes. African people used palm oil extensively in cooking[5] as well as for personal adornment. Slave traders also used palm oil on the skin of captured Africans to try to increase their value when they were sold.

> 'When they first arrive, they are well rubbed over with Oil, in order to make them look sleek and handsome; and as they can, with a small Comb, curl one another's Hair into inimitable knots, like Roses, &c. it gives a much farther addition to their Beauty; in short, it exceeds the Skill of the best *English* Barber.' (Smith, 1745, p225)

The evidence from European writers found in the Museum's library was mainly concerned with natural history, yet it reveals unique details of the everyday life of enslaved people.

2 See for example the background information on slavery at www.understandingslavery.com and accounts from enslaved people themselves at www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USASplantation.htm.

3 Everyday uses of some plants at the time of the transatlantic slave trade as well as now can be found on the Natural History Museum's Roots and Herbs website: www.nhm.ac.uk/nature–online/life/plants–fungi/roots–herbs/index.jsp.

4 Historian James Walvin argued that enslaved people took pleasure in and used their own time to the full, hence the importance of Saturday night dances, deliberately leaving less energy to work for others (Walvin, 2001, p152).

5 See Chapter 5: Diet and nutrition.

2. Capture, sale and punishment

African people lived normal everyday lives before they were captured and enslaved.

▲ Coronation of an African king, 1725, Labat, 1731 © The Natural History Museum, London

▲ Coromantyn Slave Fort, Ghana, Ogilby, 1670 © The Natural History Museum, London

Slavery separated them from everything that was familiar, including their own families. As chattel slaves[6], Africans were bought and sold, listed along with any other economic goods.

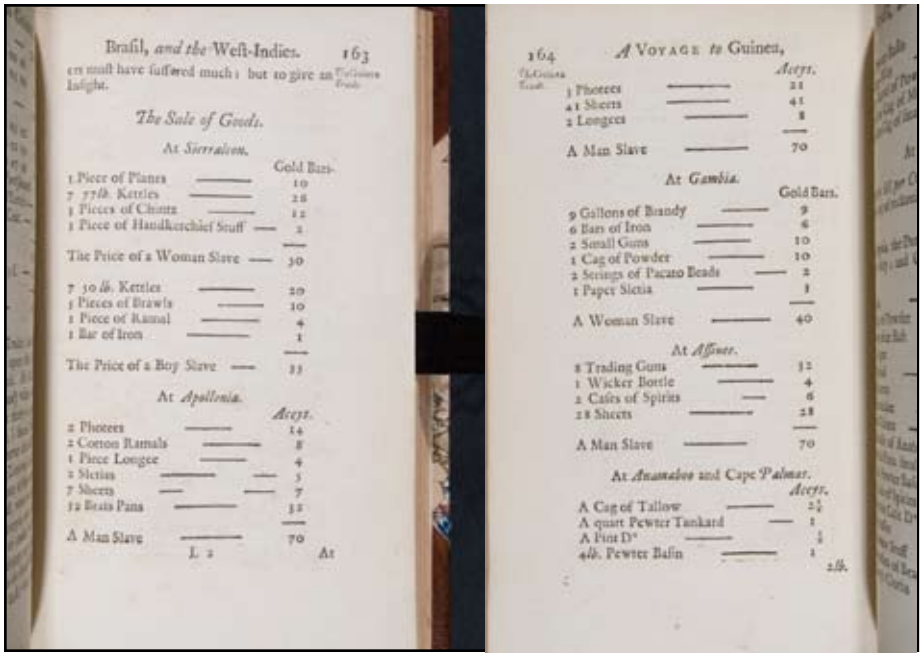
John Atkins, a ship's surgeon, described the treatment of people in west Africa:

'I have observed how our Trading is managed for Slaves, when obliged to be carried on aboard the Ship. Where there are Factories, (Gambia, Sierraleon, the Gold Coast, Whydah, Calabar, Cabenda, and Angola,) we are more at large; they are sold in open Market on shore, and examined by us in like manner, as our Brother Trade do Beasts in Smithfield; the Countenance, and Stature, a good Set of Teeth, Pliancy in their Limbs and Joints, and being free of Venereal Taint, are the things inspected, and governs our choice in buying... the Women retain a Modesty, for tho' stripped of that poor Clout [arse-clout; apron] which covers their Privities (as I know the Whydahs generally do) they will keep squatted all day long on board, to hide them.' (Atkins, 1737, p179–80)

Enslaved Africans were sold again on arrival in the Americas, and again at any time if it suited their enslavers.

'The Negroes who constitute the last class of the inhabitants of this country, are, for the most part, the property of the Whites; and bought and sold like every other commodity in the country, being always reckoned a part of their estates either real or personal...' (Browne, 1756, p25)

'A Boy or Girl about sixteen years old, may be worth Twenty Pounds Sterling, a Woman Twenty-seven, and a Man Thirty.' (Smith, 1745, p225)



Brasil, *and the* West-Indies. 163

The Sale of Goods.

At Sierraleon.

	Gold Bars.
1 Piece of Planes	10
7 7½*lb.* Kettles	28
3 Pieces of Chints	12
1 Piece of Handkerchief Stuff	2
The Price of a Woman Slave	30
7 30*lb.* Kettles	20
3 Pieces of Brawls	10
1 Piece of Rannal	4
1 Bar of Iron	1
The Price of a Boy Slave	35

At Apollonia.

	Accys.
2 Photees	14
2 Cotton Rannals	8
1 Piece Longee	4
2 Sletias	3
7 Sheets	7
32 Beads Pans	32
A Man Slave	70

L 2 At

164 A Voyage to Guinea,

	Accys.
3 Photees	21
41 Sheets	41
2 Longees	8
A Man Slave	70

At Gambia.

	Gold Bars.
9 Gallons of Brandy	9
6 Bars of Iron	6
2 Small Guns	10
1 Cag of Powder	10
2 Strings of Pacano Beads	2
1 Paper Sletia	1
A Woman Slave	40

At Assiney.

8 Trading Guns	32
1 Wicker Bottle	4
2 Cases of Spirits	6
28 Sheets	28
A Man Slave	70

At Anamaboe and Cape Palmas.

	Accys.
A Cag of Tallow	2½
A quart Pewter Tankard	1
A Pint D°	½
4*lb.* Pewter Basin	1

2*lb.*

▲ Purchase price for Women, Boys and Men, Atkins, 1737
© The Natural History Museum, London

6 'Chattel' derives from the word for cattle, and refers to enslaved people as possessions (movable property).

Many enslavers treated enslaved Africans extremely badly[7]. Physical hardships of work and punishment were added to the psychological trauma of slavery. Whipping was routinely used as a form of control and punishment, as described by the doctor and natural historian Hans Sloane[8]:

> 'For Negligence, they are usually whipt by the Overseers with Lance-wood switches, till they be bloody, and several of the Switches broken, being first tied up by their Hands in the Mill-Houses. Beating with *Manati* Straps is thought too cruel, and therefore prohibited by the Customs of the Country. The Cicatrices are visible on their Skins for ever after; and a Slave, the more he have of those, is the less valu'd. After they are whip'd till they are Raw, some put on their Skins Pepper and Salt to make them smart; at other times their Masters will drop melted Wax on their Skins, and use several very exquisite Torments. These Punishments are sometimes merited by the Blacks, who are a very perverse Generation of People, and though they appear harsh, yet are scarce equal to some of their Crimes, and inferior to what Punishments other *European Nations* inflict on their Slaves in the *East-Indies*, as may be seen by Moquet, and other Travellers.' (Sloane, vol 1, 1707, plvii)

Although Hans Sloane wrote that *Manati* straps were banned in Jamaica, whips made from cattle or manatee (sea cow) hide were commonly used across the Caribbean:

> '... they [bull and cow hides] are often cut up into large thongs, which they twist in the form of whips, and sell in the public markets. These are the principal instruments of correction used among the negroes, and the ensigns of their overseers'. (Browne, 1756, p489)

> 'The Manatea is about eleven or twelve Foot long, and in girt half as much... the true Skin an Inch thick, used by the *West-Indians* in thongs for punishing their Slaves...' (Atkins, 1737, p42–3)

White lancewood (*Xylopia glabra*) was also used as a whip:

> 'From the flexibility of its smaller branches, they are often used, as birch is in England, for the punishment of delinquents.' (Lunan, vol 2, 1814, p438)

7 See also Chapter 6: Resistance.

8 Punishments were also very severe in Europe at the time, see for example, www.oldbaileyonline.org/history/crime/punishment.html. Slavers in the Caribbean and Americas created their own regulations and punishments.

The planter Henry Barham described how additional suffering was inflicted using capsicum peppers:

> 'Some punish their slaves by putting the juice of these peppers into their eyes, which is an unspeakable pain for a little while…' (Barham, 1794, p30–1)

The law gave enslaved Africans no legal rights. The economic value of enslaved workers was always important, and slavers were compensated for the loss of their workers.

> 'I had almost forgot to inform you, That a Negro cannot be Evidence, in any respect, against a White Man: If he strikes a White Man, the Law condemns him to loose the Hand he strikes with; and if he should happen to draw Blood, he must die for it. If a White Man kills a Black one, he is not tried for his Life; however, the Law obliges him to pay Thirty Pounds, *Nevis* Money, to his Master, for the loss of his Slave. You will say, that these Proceedings are very despotick: But if you consider, that we have near ten Blacks to one White Person, you must own them to be absolutely necessary.' (Smith, 1745, p233–4)

The daily routine on plantations was hard, enslaved people worked long hours and their living conditions were poor.

> 'They are rais'd to work so soon as the day is light, or someties [sic] two hours before by the sound of a Conche-Shell, and their Overseers noise, or in better Plantations by a Bell. They are suffered to go to Dinner at Twelve when they bring Wood, &c. one burden lest they should come idle out of the Field home, return to the Field at One and come home at night.' (Sloane, vol 1, 1707, plii)

> '… they live in huts or small thatched cabbins, sustained by crotchets, whose interspaces are laticed, and plaistered or dawbed with clay; these are disposed in the form of villages, in proper places; and generally divided into two rooms, for the greater conveniency of the inhabitants'. (Browne, 1756, p25)

> 'They live in Huts, on the Western Side of our Dwelling-houses, so that every Plantation resembles a small Town; and the reason why they are seated on the Western side, is, because we breath the pure Eastern Air, without being offended with the least nauseous smell: Our Kitchens and Boyling-houses are on the same side, and for the same Reason.' (Smith, 1745, p225–6)

3. Cooking and utensils

Africans were resourceful and used natural materials around them to help them survive. As well as using plants as an essential part of their diet[9], enslaved communities used them for the preparation and cooking of food and to make things to improve their living conditions.

The dried shells of calabash fruits (*Crescentia cujete*) were used as containers for water, cups and cooking pots.

> 'The Calebash-Tree is nigh as large as the Apple-Tree; it supplies the Natives and Negroes with Buckets, Pots, Bottles, Dishes, Plates, and several other Houshold Utensils.' (Quelus, trans. Brookes, 1724, p81)

Hans Sloane and Patrick Browne described many uses for calabashes in Jamaica including as food and medicine[10].

> 'The shell of the fruit makes a light and convenient drinking-cup, and is frequently large enough to hold a gallon, or more, of any fluid... The shell of the fruit is so thin and close, that it serves to boil water, or any other fluid, as well as an earthern pot; and is observed to bear the fire equally, on repeated trials. The thicker parts of it are frequently used for button-moulds, in all the colonies.' (Browne, 1756, p265–6)

▲ Calabash (*Crescentia cujete*), de Tussac, 1801

▲ Calabash (*Crescentia cujete*), Jacquin, 1780

9 See Chapter 5: Diet and nutrition.
10 See www.nhm.ac.uk/nature-online/life/plants-fungi/roots-herbs/index.jsp for more information, and uk.youtube.com/watch?v=-Ui4cFxXbF4&feature=related for a discussion of the many uses of calabashes today.

Gourds (such as the bottle gourd, *Lagenaria siceraria*) and squashes (all from the Cucurbitaceae family[11]) were also used as water containers. Patrick Browne described the use of gourds for holding water, aloes and grain:

> 'This plant is found, either cultivated or wild, in most parts of Jamaica, where the shells of the fruit are generally used for water-cups; and frequently serve for bottles among the negroes and poorer sort of white people, in the country parts of the island... Where aloes is manufactured in any quantity, it is commonly preserved in these shells; but, in Jamaica, they are hitherto used only to hold water and small grain.' (Browne, 1756, p354)

Cork wood (*Annona glabra*[12]) was used to make stoppers for the gourds and calabash containers:

> 'The wood of this tree is so very soft, even after it has dried, that it is frequently used by the country people, instead of corks, to stop up their jugs and calabashes; from when it has now universally obtained the name of Cork-wood in Jamaica.' (Browne, 1756, p256)

The fruit of the cork wood tree was edible, and sometimes made into jam, but it was less popular than other fruits such as soursop[13].

4. Other uses of plants

Plants were also used for items such as musical instruments, candles, ropes, lace and mats.

4.1 Music and communication

Calabashes and gourds were also used to make musical instruments such as maracas and drums. Music was an important part of African and enslaved people's culture, and drums were used to retain cultural traditions as well as for pleasure:

> 'The Negroes are much given to Venery, and although hard wrought, will at nights, or on Feast days Dance and Sing; their Songs are all bawdy, and leading that way. They have several sorts of Instruments in imitation of Lures, made of small Gourds fitted with Necks, strung with Horse hairs, or the peeled stalks of climbing plants or Withs.' (Sloane, vol 1, 1707, pxlviii)

Drums were used on board ship to force captured Africans to exercise. However, they were also used for resistance, to communicate between enslaved people and to raise revolts[14]. Drums also played an important part in the ceremonies of African religions (which Europeans considered to be 'superstitions'). Drums were therefore seen as a threat and were banned in some places.

11 The Cucurbitaceae family also includes pumpkins, melons and cucumbers.
12 Cork wood is also called the alligator apple or pond apple tree.
13 See Chapter 5: Diet and nutrition.
14 See also Chapter 6: Resistance.

Hans Sloane wrote in Jamaica that drums were used:

> '... in their Wars at home in Africa, it was thought too much to inciting them to rebellion, and so they were prohibited by the Customs of the Island'. (Sloane, vol 1, 1707, plii)

◀ Replica of an Asante-style drum, collected for Hans Sloane in Virginia, 1730–1745 © The Natural History Museum, London[15]

4.2 Candles

Antidote cocoon (*Fevillea cordifolia*), also called *Nhandiroba* and from the same plant family (*Cucurbitaceae*) as calabashes and gourds, was used by some as a medicine (as a purgative) and an antidote to poisoning[16]. The seeds were also used as a type of candle:

> 'This plant is frequent in the inland parts of Jamaica, and generally found climbing among the tallest trees in the woods. The seeds are very oily, and frequently burnt by the negroes instead of candles: they put them upon skewers, and set fire to the uppermost, from whence they burn gradually to the bottom.' (Browne, 1756, p374)

4.3 Rope and lace-making

The mahoe, or bark-tree (*Hibiscus elatus*), also called the blue mahoe (now the national tree of Jamaica) or Cuban bark tree, grew along many parts of the coast of Jamaica. As Patrick Browne wrote, the bark was used for making ropes:

> 'The bark of the tree is very tough, and not much inferior to either hemp, or flax, on many occasions: it is naturally white, and of a fine, soft, filamentous texture; which must, undoubtedly, render it extremely fit for the paper-mill. The negroes, and country people, make all their ropes of it; which, had they been tarred and well twisted, would probably be no ways inferior to those that are made of the best hemp.' (Browne, 1756, p284)

Mahoe belongs to the mallow family (Malvaceae) – a group of plants that also includes cocoa, cotton, okra and durian.

15 This is a replica of a drum held at the British Museum, see: www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/aoa/a/asante-style_drum.aspx.

16 See also Chapter 6: Resistance, Chapter 8: Medicines and www.kew.org/collections/ecbot/spruce/54601.html. The natural historian James Macfadyen questioned how effective *Fevillea cordifolia* was as an antidote (Macfadyen, vol 2, 1850, p130–1).

▲ Mahoe (*Hibiscus elatus*), Sloane Herbarium, collected 1687–89, ID 396 © The Natural History Museum, London

▲ Lace-bark (*Lagetta lintearia*) Sloane, 1725, Tab 168 © The Natural History Museum, London

▲ Lace-bark (*Lagetta lintearia*) Sloane, 1725, Tab 168 © The Natural History Museum, London

Lace-bark (*Lagetta lintearia*, a scientific name which comes from the indigenous name lagetto), a tree native to Jamaica, was also used for making ropes and whips, as well as special clothing. The inner bark of the tree is made of layers of fibres that look like lace, and Hans Sloane described how it was used for clothing worn when someone had died (as a sign of mourning):

'What is most strange in this Tree is, that the inward Bark is made up of about twelve Coats, Layers, or Tunicles, appearing white and solid... This imitates Linens, Gause, or Lace so much, that in Scarcity it has been made use of in lieu of them for Mourning Linen both for Men and Women, and unless one know them well and look attentively, he will not perceive the Difference.' (Sloane, vol 2, 1725, p22)

Patrick Browne also described how it was used to make clothing among Maroon people who had escaped enslavement:

> 'It is only used for ropes in Jamaica, but would, undoubtedly, make fine paper, had it been properly prepared for that purpose. It has been, upon occasions, made into different forms of apparel, by the wild and runaway negroes.' (Browne, 1756, p371)

4.4 Mats

Enslaved people suffered great hardship and had few things provided by the slave traders and plantation holders. Hans Sloane described how plant material was used to make sleeping more comfortable:

> 'Indians and Negroes lie on the Floors, most generally on Mats made of Bull-rushes, ordinary Rushes, Ribs of Plantain Leaves, or the Spathae, or Vaginae of Cabbage-tree Flowers, with very little or no coverings, and a small Fire near them in their Cottages. Hence they and ordinary white Servants, who lie not in Beds, are not said to go to Bed, but to go and Sleep: and this Phrase has generally obtain'd all over the Plantations.' (Sloane, vol 1, 1707, pxxxi)

Patrick Browne described the use of the Jamaica cabbage tree (*Andira inermis*) for cladding houses and feeding animals, as well as for mats for sleeping[17]:

> 'The outward part of the tree is used for lathing, and boards for out–houses: the seeds serve to feed the wild hogs in the season; and the spathas are frequently made into mats by the negroes.' (Browne, 1756, p343)

He also wrote about the uses of the silk-cotton tree (*Ceiba pentandra*, also known as the kapok tree):

> 'The cotton of this tree makes very good beds, but does not bear the water for the hatters use, nor has it a staple to serve for any other purpose... and the trunks of the full-grown trees serve for *Conoas* [canoes], or long-boats.' (Browne, 1756, p277)

17 Browne also described plantain leaves being used for mats, and stuffing mattresses (Browne, 1756, p363).

5. Markets

Enslaved people developed their own markets, usually on Sundays, when they had some free time. In these markets they sold foods from their provision grounds[18], tobacco and rum as well as utensils, musical instruments and clothes they made. For some people this trading of goods and skills meant that they could eventually buy their freedom.

William Smith described the markets on Nevis in 1720:

> 'At Charles Town, our Metropolis, we hold a Market every Sunday Morning, which begins at Sun-rising, and ends about nine o'clock, whither the Negroes bring Fowls, Indian Corn, Yams, Garden-stuff of all sorts, &c.' (Smith, 1745, p231–2)

Markets took place across the Caribbean islands. Patrick Browne wrote:

> '... on Sunday they provide provisions for the ensuing week, and send some to market, to supply themselves with a little salt beef, pork or fish, and a little rum, which are the greatest dainties they can come at, unless a cat, a rat, or dog fall in their way. It is true, many of them raise a few poultry, and other stock; but these they generally sell to enable them to purchase some decent as well as necessary cloaths for their wives and themselves'. (Browne, 1756, p25)

Morass weed (*Ceratophyllum demersum*) was used to keep fish cool to carry to market:

> 'This plant is very common in all the brackish waters in Jamaica; and generally used to cover whatever fish or water–plants they carry a long way to market; for it retains a deal of moisture, which keeps them fresh and cool for a considerable time. It may be also used, with great success, to cover the tender seeds of the Cacao, for a few days after they are planted.' (Browne, 1756, p345–6)

18 See also Chapter 5: Diet and nutrition.

6. Seeds

Although enslaved people had very little spare time, natural resources were used for pastimes and leisure. Seeds were used in games and as beads for jewellery. In Africa, seeds were used to play counting games, and Patrick Browne described how seeds from the gray nickar plant (*Caesalpinia bonduc*) were used as marbles in Jamaica[19]:

> 'The seeds are of a grey colour, and commonly used instead of marbles by all the boys in our sugar-colonies.' (Browne, 1756, p228)

These nickar nuts were also exported to Europe for buttons.

Enslaved people took pride in their personal appearance and some used plants to make jewellery. Griffith Hughes wrote how popular palm oil nuts (*Elaeis guineensis*) were as necklaces in Barbados:

> 'The Nut, being bored and emptied of its Kernel, is much worn by several Nations of Negroes, by way of Ornament, about their Necks.' (Hughes, 1750, p111)

Job's tears (*Coix lacryma-jobi*) were also used as beads:

> '... and their Seeds, which are inclosed in small Capsulae, are about the Bigness of an English Pea, and of different Colours. These are strung upon Silk, and used instead of Bracelets by some of the poorer Sort, and especially by the Negroes'. (Hughes, 1750, p253)

▲ Job's tears (*Coix lacryma–jobi*), Clifford Herbarium ID 437 © The Natural History Museum, London

Patrick Browne described kernels of the mackaw palm (*Acrocomia aculeata*) used as beads, in Jamaica:

> '... and the seeds, which are of a black colour, about the size of walnuts, and bear a fine polish, are frequently made into beads by the negroes'. (Browne, 1756, p343)

The trunk of the mackaw palm can also be 'milked' to make a fermented drink called coyol wine[20].

19 Nicker nut seeds were also used to play mancala-type board games (also called oware) that were popular particularly in west Africa. The nuts also get hot when rubbed and were used in a 'burning bean' chasing game.

20 The mackaw palm was also known as grugru palm, macaúba palm, coyol palm and macaw tree. As well as containing alcohol, coyol wine supposedly causes additional drunkenness by enzymes reacting with sunlight.

7. Beauty

Enslaved people used different plant extracts for washing clothes and themselves, and as perfumes and salves on their skin.

7.1 Cleansers

The seeds of the soap tree (*Sapindus saponaria*[21]) were used as soap for washing clothes, as Patrick Browne described:

> 'The seed-vessels of this plant are very detersive and acrid; they lather free in water, and are frequently used instead of soap; for a few of them will cleanse more linnen than sixty times the weight of that composition; but they are rather too sharp, and observed to corrode or burn the linen in time; and the water, in which the tops and leaves have been steeped or boiled, are [sic] observed to have the same quality in some degree.' (Browne, 1756, p206–7)

Soap tree (*Sapindus saponaria*) seeds were also:

> '... frequently made into buttons and beads among the Spaniards'. (Browne, 1756, p206–7)

▲ The soap tree (*Sapindus saponaria*), Sloane Herbarium, collected 1687–89, ID 963

▲ Soapwood (with bufflehead duck), Catesby, 1771, Picture Library reference 14798

21 *Sapindus saponaria* was also called soapberry, wingleaf soapberry, western soapberry and Florida soapberry. Soap seeds also have medical properties that are still used today.

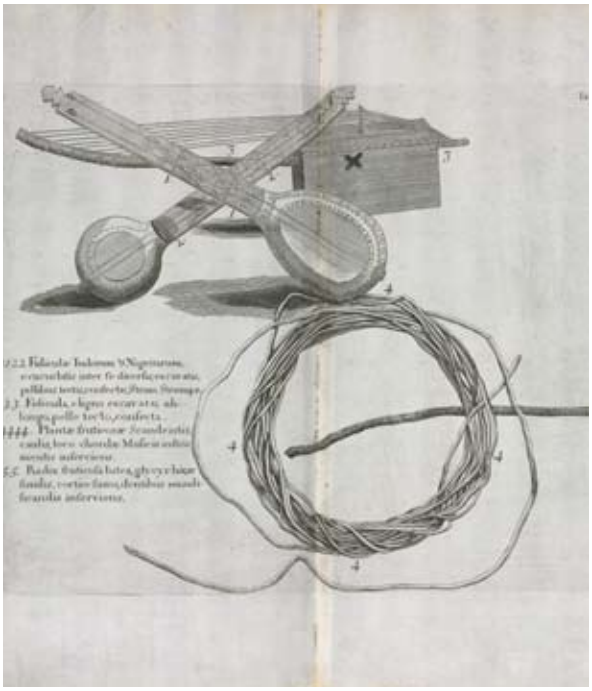
Henry Barham and Hans Sloane wrote about attoo (*Gouania lupuloides*)[22] used as a tooth cleaner and a salve in Jamaica:

> 'The negroes cleanse their teeth with this root; and they also grind it with water like a paste, and plaster their bodies all over with it in most feverish heats, headaches, and cholics...' (Barham, 1794, p9)

> 'This was a Root which was almost as big as ones little Finger... it parted into many Fibers at the Ends like a Brush; these Ends were us'd by the Negroes for cleansing their Teeth.' (Sloane, vol 2, 1725, p185)

Macfadyen (1837, p209) noted that attoo is at least equal, if not superior, to any tooth powder in use in Europe, and Lunan said:

> '... as it really whitens and preserves the teeth better than any tooth powder'. (Lunan, vol 1, 1814 p177)



▲ Attoo (*Gouania lupuloides*) Sloane, 1725, Tab 232 © The Natural History Museum, London

▲ Cashew tree (*Anacardium occidentale*), Catesby, 1771, Picture Library reference 14909 © The Natural History Museum, London

Gouania lupuloides is also still used as an ingredient in some commercial toothpastes and in Jamaican ginger beer.

As well as using soap stick as a teeth whitener, cashew nut oil (*Anacardium occidentale*) was used as a skin whitener.

22 Attoo was also known as soap stick, toothbrush tree, cho-bush, chaw-stick, chew-stick, white root, fit bush, fit weed, xomak, jabancillo and liane-savon.

Patrick Browne and William Smith described its use in similar ways in Nevis in 1720 and in Jamaica in 1750:

> 'The shell of the nut contains a great quantity of caustic oil... with which some of our American beauties skin their faces from time to time. This troublesome operation they undergo with great patience; during which they are obliged to refrain from all manner of company and conversation, and to keep in close confinement: it holds generally for fourteen or fifteen days; and the inflammations raised, during the process, frequently give those ladies reason to repent of this piece of vanity; for it leaves the countenance sometimes more deformed, than any spots or freckles could have made it.' (Browne, 1756, p226–7)

> '... when our West India young Ladies fancy themselves too much tanned with the scorching Rays of the Sun, they gently scrape off the thin outside Skin of the Stone, and then rub their Faces all over with the Stone; their Faces do immediately swell, grow black, and the Skin being thus poisoned, will in five or six days come entirely off the Face in large Fleaks, so that they cannot appear in publick under a full fortnight, by which time their new Skin looks as fair as the Skin of a young Child... now though the thing is actually fact, and frequently enough practiced, I do not call to mind above one Lady who owned that she herself had tried it; she said, that the whole operation was painful, but alas! What will not Pride attempt? As these stones are not very uncommon at London, I wonder that some of our English Ladies who use all other Jezebel-Arts to set off their brown Complexions to the utmost advantage, do not try this Experiment'. (Smith, 1745, p30–1)

The writings imply European women who had caught too much sun used this form of chemical skin peel. It is unclear if women of African descent also used it.

7.2 Personal decoration

Griffith Hughes described the use of a sedge (*Cyperus articulatus*)[23] as a perfume in Barbados:

> 'This is of the Rush-kind. Its Root, which hath a very strong Smell, is often steeped in Water, and mingled with the Juice of the Musk-bush. With this the Coramantee Negroes anoint their Skin by way of Perfume, especially when they are to go to their Merry-meetings or public Dances.' (Hughes, 1750, p240)

Enslaved Africans also scarred their skin and braided their hair for personal decoration, as described by Hans Sloane:

> 'There are few Negros on whom one may not see a great many Cicatrices or Scars, the remains of these Scarrifications [sic], for Diseases or Ornaments, on all their Faces and Bodies, and these Scarificationsare common to them in their own Countries, and the Cicatrices thought to add beauty to them. The Negros called Papas[24] have most of these Scarifications. Other Negros take great pleasure in having their woolly curled Hair, cut into Lanes or Walks as the Parterre of a Garden, and this I have seen them do, for want of a better Instrument, with a broken piece of a Glass Bottle.' (Sloane, vol 1, 1707, pliii–liv)

▲ Sedge (*Cyperus articulatus*), Sloane Herbarium, collected 1687–89, ID 617

23 *Cyperus articulatus* was also known as adrue, Guinea rush, piri piri and jointed flat sedge. Modern research shows that the tuber of *Cyperus articulatus* is widely used in traditional medicines in Africa and Latin America. It was used in Jamaica for stomach upsets, vomiting, nausea and diarrhoea. See also Chapter 8: Medicines.

24 The Papas were people from the area of Grand and Little Popo in what is now Togo.

7.3 Palm oil

Palm oil (*Elaeis guineensis)* was an important food, both in Africa and the Caribbean[25]. Palm oil was also used on the skin:

> 'The negroes are fond of this oil, which sometimes makes it an ingredient in their food; but they oftener apply it by way of embrocation, for strains, or to discuss rheumatic aches, for which purpose it is very efficacious.' (Long, quoted in Lunan, vol 2, 1814, p27)

Slave traders rubbed palm oil on the skin of captured Africans to improve their appearance and increase their value when sold[26] as Griffith Hughes described in Barbados[27]:

▲ Newly arrived captives being sent for sale, Stedman, 1806 © The Natural History Museum, London

> 'The Inhabitants of Africa, where Palm Oil-trees abundantly grow... to this Day, they mix Oil with their boiled Rice, and other Victuals; and anoint their Bodies with it, to supple and relax their stiffened Nerves, as well as to prevent a too plentiful Perspiration.This is so universal a Custom, that all the Slaves, brought now from any Part of Africa to this, or any of our neighbouring Islands, are always, before they are brought to Market, anointed all over with Palm Oil, which, for that Purpose, is brought from Guiney: Being thus anointed, their Skins appear sleek and shining.' (Hughes, 1750, p112–3)

Oil from the kernel of the plant was also used as soap (the oil from the fruit is edible).

25 See Chapter 5: Diet and nutrition.

26 The journey across the Atlantic, which lasted for about six weeks, left many enslaved Africans sick and weak. Olaudah Equiano, an enslaved African who became a famous abolitionist and published his autobiography in London in 1789, described the conditions he experienced on board a slaving ship:

'The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died... This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable.' (Equiano, 1789, p58).

27 Similar accounts were written in Nevis by Smith, 1745, p225, and in Jamaica by Barham, 1794, p130.

8. Alternative interpretations

This chapter presents research information and context. The evidence itself can be seen in different ways and raises many questions and some further areas for research. Through the Natural History Museum's slavery and the natural world public programme many alternative interpretations and questions relevant to this chapter have been collected and some of these are summarised below:

- Does the evidence about leisure time and making small luxuries make it more difficult to understand the harshness of enslavement?
- Are there still plants used in similar ways today?

Resilience

The power of survival was clearly expressed by participants in the discussion sessions: '... the main overriding thing for me, was how resourceful people are, even with few things, few possessions, people survive and that is quite an interesting observation even in the most extreme situations'.

One participant, seeing the delicate lace-bark clothing, said that, 'often in painful circumstances you don't see beauty. It is important to show and celebrate creativity and beauty...'. And another added, 'I liked the lace jewellery, showing the creative and artistic side of the slaves'.

Jewellery

The use of jewellery by women, and the sexual exploitation experienced, was discussed in detail.

'We were talking earlier about how plants were used for jewellery and why enslaved Africans wore jewellery on the plantations and we have thought it was to maintain a cultural link with home and just a form of resistance to be beautiful regardless.'

Another participant commented that, '... the women... did not want to beautify themselves because they knew what was in store'.

The idea of memories was important, '... that it was a way of sharing memories and you might wake one morning and your neighbour is not anymore on the plantation so that it was a sort of way that you will be reminded of them'.

'People would wear a certain way of jewellery so you knew which community people came from and you could identify... there was also remembrance jewellery that there was no guarantee for the children. Parents will pin a little something, pin a seed together just in case.'

Teeth cleaning

Participants said that chew-sticks, or sometimes hibiscus plants, were used instead of toothbrushes, even to this day. Chew-stick was said to have antiseptic qualities. It was described as: 'African toothbrush. I have met this. It is very fibrous – I thought maybe it was liquorice when I first saw it.'

People added that attoo is 'chewed and rubbed across the teeth, using the mouth moisture'.

'I tried [attoo] many years ago. My mum still uses it and most of my relatives use it in Nigeria. We don't waste our time with toothpaste. When I tried it, it was slightly sour I think. I just find it quite messy so I don't use it myself.'

Mahogany

Although beds for enslaved people were no more than mats or mattresses at the time of the transatlantic slave trade, many people of African Caribbean descent talked about the use of mahogany to make beds and other furniture in the Caribbean in more recent times:

'In my case my parents have a row of mahogany trees in like fencing and... when my grandmother told me that her mother planted these mahogany trees and when she got married they gave her two or so to make her bed and the poster bed is still in my house and the commode is made of mahogany with the chamber pot still in there. But we had a hurricane about two years ago and when I got home the two oldest trees were thrown down by the hurricane. So the people came and asked me what to do and when they saw it had over 100 rings in one of them and they took them away and paid me for it. They took it to make furniture.'

'My grandfather had a mill in Jamaica and he was also a carpenter and I was told about the four-poster bed but I imagined it was like a four-poster bed over here. But the four-poster bed... made of mahogany was huge. It actually had 4 steps to get on to the bed and it was really... beautiful and you cannot imagine a four poster bed over here to a four poster bed in the Caribbean and my mother when she was bad and my grandmother was going to beat her she would run and hide under the bed. It was big enough to like have a home underneath the bed.'

'As a child I had an uncle who was a cabinet maker, and in the West Indies in the interior, [it was] full of mahogany so you got a permit, you went to the interior, you cut this huge mahogany tree down and my uncle made display cabinets, coffee tables, coffins and dining tables, chairs and everything like that. So I was brought up with mahogany furniture in my house in the West Indies so consequently when I came here and I started visiting museums and seeing the value of these things I started buying them for my home little bit at a time. In the 70s I went to St Lucia to visit my parents and to my horror, they had got rid of all the mahogany furniture because they regarded them as old fashioned and they imported all these American plastic-y things and I could have killed them.'

Uses today

People also talked about some of the everyday items they recognised and use today:

'Apparently the calabash is quite good for absorbing oil so if you are eating your food in the calabash, if you put it in there the calabash absorbs the oil out and you can eat your food pretty much fat free.'

The question was asked, 'Was the palm oil used for deep frying food or for soap?' And, as the research showed, it was used for both.

One participant said: 'I wash my clothes in soap seed. I get a whole box and they last me for months. It is high levels of sulphur. You can see it frothing up in the machine. I have a little ball that aggravates the dirt as well.' Another added, 'I have used soapberry for my washing, at 40 degrees'.

People also asked questions or commented:

- Calabashes have been used for cooking in the Caribbean. They have been put directly on the fire.
- Where did gourds really come from?
- The gourd is called Ugba in Igbo.
- There is a slave song called 'Follow the drinking Gourd'.
- Nickar nut could also be used as counting aids and possibly as weapons.
- Sea beans are also called Jackass and, in Trinidad, Donkeys eyes. They are used in a similar way to nickar nuts in Ghana.
- What are the names of the Nickar nut game?
- Mancala [an African game] is what the game was called in Egypt. It is also called Coro in Uganda; Oware in Ghana; Ayo in Nigeria.
- Oware is played all over west Africa. A wife of an Ashanti king used this game to keep him interested in her, to avoid her being ignored after he got bored with her.
- Ibo of Nigeria played 'OKWE' game, where they didn't always need the board, they draw circles on the table.
- The French used to send their clothing to Haiti to get them washed cleaner there. May have something to do with soap seed?
- Coconut palm has at least 100 uses for food, mats, roofs, bats etc... Lots of original people used a range of plants for cleansing the mouth.
- Very good insights. I would like to learn about the use of new materials for clothing in the enslaved communities.
- Artefacts such as jewellery found in New York Cemetery are now at Howard University.

9. Additional references

There is a full list of references, including all of the research documents, in Chapter 1: The project. These references offer additional reading specifically relating to this chapter.

Information on the everyday uses of some plants can be found on the Natural History Museum's Roots and Herbs website: www.nhm.ac.uk/nature–online/life/plants–fungi/roots–herbs/index.jsp.

Community groups at The Manchester Museum discuss the many uses of calabashes at: uk.youtube.com/watch?v=-Ui4cFxXbF4&feature=related.

Equiano, Olaudah, ***The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African***, 1789, reprinted as ***The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings***, ed Vincent Carretta, Penguin Classics, 2003

Schiebinger, Londa, ***Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic world***, Harvard University Press, 2004

Walvin, James, ***Black Ivory: Slavery in the British Empire***, 2nd edition, Blackwell Publishing, 2001