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## Swimming, Surfing and Underwater Diving in Early Modern Atlantic Africa and the African Diaspora<sup>1</sup>

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Long before the Portuguese ventured down the West African coast, many Africans had become skilled swimmers, divers and surfers. In one of their first recorded encounters, the Portuguese were amazed by the swimming and underwater diving abilities of the Africans. The Portuguese navigator João Gonçalves Zarco noted that his men had considerable difficulty capturing Senegambian canoemen after they leaped into the water to avoid capture, saying “our men had very great toil in the capture of those who were swimming, for they dived like cormorants, so that they could not get hold of them.”<sup>2</sup> Slaves’ expertise in underwater diving, moreover, was one of the first African skills that New World slaveholders exploited, in the process generating considerable profit. At the turn of the seventeenth century Pieter de Marees explained that Venezuelan slaveholders sought Gold Coast Africans to employ as pearl divers, noting:

[t]hey are very fast swimmers and can keep themselves underwater for a long time. They can dive amazingly far, no less deep, and can see underwater. Because they are so good at swimming and diving, they are specially kept for that purpose in many Countries and employed in this capacity where there is a need for them, such as the Island of St. Margaret in the West Indies, where Pearls are found and brought up from the bottom by Divers.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Atlantic Africa refers to the region of coastal, littoral and interior Africa that came to be oriented towards the Atlantic world through political, commercial, military and cultural developments.

<sup>2</sup>Gomes Eannes de Azurara, *The Chronicle of Discovery and Conquest of Guinea* (2 vols., London, 1899), II, 227-228.

<sup>3</sup>Pieter de Marees, *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea (1602)*, trans. Albert Van Dantzig and Adam Jones (Oxford, 1987), 186.

From the Age of Discovery through the nineteenth century, the swimming and underwater diving abilities of people of African descent usually surpassed those of Westerners. Indeed, sources indicate that most whites, including sailors, could not swim. To reduce drowning deaths some philanthropists, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, advocated that sailors and others learn to swim as a means of self-preservation. Theodorus Mason's 1879 pamphlet, *The Preservation of Life at Sea*, stressed that "[t]he great majority of people cannot swim, and strange as it may seem to you, there are many who follow the sea as a profession who cannot swim a stroke." Mason then urged that as part of their instruction all US Naval Academy cadets should be taught to swim.<sup>4</sup>

This essay considers the swimming, surfing and underwater diving skills of Atlantic Africans. First, it compares the swimming abilities and techniques of Africans and Westerners to demonstrate that people of African descent were stronger swimmers than Westerners. Next it considers how Africans incorporated swimming, underwater diving and surfing into their work

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<sup>4</sup>Nicholas Orme, *Early British Swimming, 55 BC-AD 1719: With the First Swimming Treatise in English, 1595* (Exeter, 1983); Richard Mandell, *Sport: A Cultural History* (New York, 1984), 179-180; Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (London, 1789; reprint, New York, 1995), 258, n. 167; J. Frost, *The Art of Swimming: A Series of Practical Instructions on an Original and Progressive Plan. To which is Added, Dr. Franklin's Treatise* (New York, 1818), frontispiece; "Swimming," *Sailor's Magazine*, XI (January 1839), 152; Theodorus Bailey Myers Mason, *The Preservation of Life at Sea: A Paper Read Before the American Geographical Society, February 27th, 1879* (New York, 1879), 2-3; Thomas Tegg, *The Art of Swimming* (London, c. 1805-1824), 5-6; Richard McAllister Smith, *The Confederate First Reader: Containing Selections in Prose and Poetry, as Reading Exercises for the Younger Children in the Schools and Families of the Confederate States* (Richmond, 1864), 20-21; William Percy, *The Compleat Swimmer: Or, The Art of Swimming: Demonstrating the Rules and Practice Thereof, in an Exact, Plain and Easie Method. Necessary to be Known and Practised by All who Studie or Desire Their Own Preservation* (London, 1658), v; Benjamin Franklin, *The Art of Swimming Rendered Easy* (Glasgow, c. 1840), 3-4 and 8-9; Archibald Sinclair and William Henry, *Swimming* (London, 1893), 27 and 186-280; Everard Digby, *A Short Introduction for to Learne to Swimme: Gathered out of Master Digbys Booke of the Art of Swimming and Translated into English for the Better Instruction of Those Who Understand not the Latine Tongue, by Christopher Middleton* (London, 1587; English trans., London, 1595), 3-4; Richard Nelligan, *The Art of Swimming: A Practical, Working Manual. Graphically Illustrated from Original Drawings and Photographs, with a Clear and Concise Description of All Strokes* (Boston, 1906); and Melchisédec Thévenot, *Art de Nager. The Art of Swimming. Illustrated by Proper Figures. With Advice for Bathing. By Monsieur Thevenot. Done out of French. To which is Prefixed a Prefatory Discourse Concerning Artificial Swimming, or Keeping Ones Self above Water by Several Small Portable Engines, in Case of Danger* (London, 1699), i-viii, 1 and 4-5.

and recreational activities. It reviews some of the ways that New World slaveholders exploited bondpeople's African-derived swimming skills in several lucrative capacities. Finally, it considers how people of both European and African descent have racialized swimming.

### Divergent Swimming Styles: The African Freestyle and European Breaststroke

The sport culture historian Richard Mandell contends that during the colonial period most Westerners could not swim, but if "they learned to swim at all it was the dog paddle to save themselves in an emergency."<sup>5</sup> Travel accounts suggest that some whites used variants of the breaststroke, in which both arms are extended forward and pulled back together in a sweeping circular motion, while the legs are thrust out and pulled together in circular frog kicks. Yet the breaststroke is only slightly more advanced than the dogpaddle. In the sixteenth century, European theorists began publishing treatises on swimming. Most advocated versions of the breaststroke, while excluding discussions of the stroke now known as the "freestyle," "Australian crawl" or "crawl."<sup>6</sup> Importantly, swimming theories targeted literate nobility and gentry. Largely evolved as analytical speculation concerned with developing "ideal forms of swimming," these theories were constructed apart from swimmers and thus had little influence on contemporary swimming practices.<sup>7</sup>

Conversely, coastal and interior Atlantic Africans, as well as Native Americans and Asians, used variants of the freestyle, enabling Africans to incorporate swimming into many daily activities.<sup>8</sup> With alternate over-arm

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<sup>5</sup>Mandell, *Sport*, 179-180.

<sup>6</sup>Digby, *Short Introduction*; Percey, *Compleat Swimmer*; Thévenot, *Art de Nager*; Tegg, *Art of Swimming*; Frost, *Art of Swimming*; Orme, *Early British Swimming*; "Swimming," 152; Mandell, *Sport*, 112-113 and 179-180; Sinclair and Henry, *Swimming*; and Nelligan, *Art of Swimming*, frontispiece and 12-14.

<sup>7</sup>Orme, *Early British Swimming*; and Mandell, *Sport*, 112-113.

<sup>8</sup>For Native Americans and Asians as strong swimmers and their use of the freestyle, see Mandell, *Sport*, 180; Thévenot, *Art de Nager*, vii-viii; Nelligan, *Swimming*, 27; Sinclair and Henry, *Swimming*, 97-105; William Strachey, *The Historie of Travell into Virginia Britannia* (London, 1612; reprint, London, 1953), 66; Clements Markham (ed.), *The Hawkins' Voyages During the Reigns of Henry VIII, Queen Elizabeth, and James I* (1847; New York, 1970), 157-158 and 314; George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians: Written During Eight Years' Travel (1832-1839) amongst the Wildest Tribes of Indian in North America* (2 vols., 1844; reprint, New York, 1973), I, 96-97; Pierre Antoine Tabeau, *Tabeau's Narrative of Loisel's Expedition to the Upper Missouri*, ed. Annie Heloise Abel (Norman, OK, 1939), 74; John Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior of*

strokes combined with fast scissor-kicks, the freestyle is the strongest and swiftest swimming style. Travellers mentioned that considerable numbers of Africans swam, that they were better swimmers than most Europeans and that Westerners tended to use the breaststroke while Africans preferred the freestyle. Significantly, several observers referred to the breaststroke as the “ordinary” method of swimming, indicating that whites tended to use the breaststroke.<sup>9</sup>

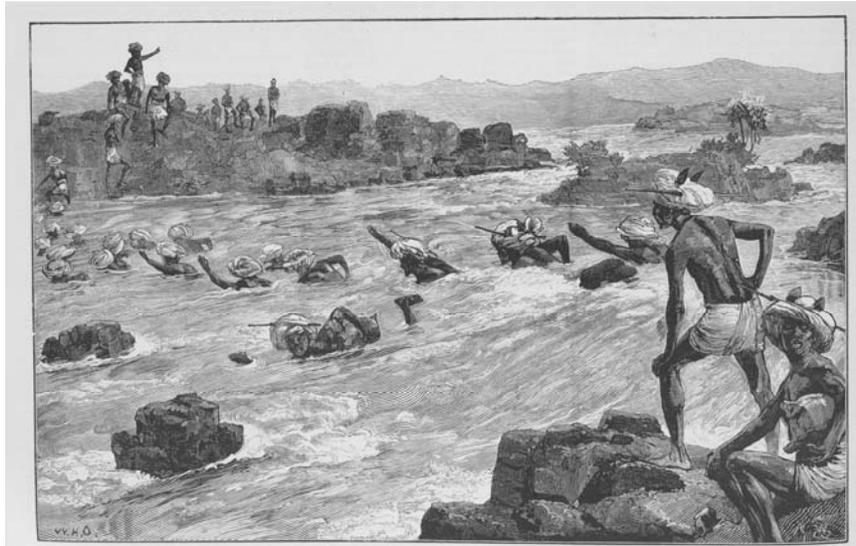
While most travellers to West Africa mentioned that Africans were sound swimmers, several also noted that they were better than Europeans and described their use of the freestyle (see figure 1). In 1455, the Venetian merchant adventurer, Alvise de Cadamosto, wrote that Africans living along the Senegal River “are the most expert swimmers in the world.” In the late sixteenth century, after Flemish adventurer Pieter de Marees commented on Gold Coast Africans’ freestyle technique, he wrote “they can swim very fast, generally easily outdoing people of our nation in swimming and diving.” In 1606, Pieter van den Broecke noted that many of the Africans at Gorée Island, Senegal, were “extraordinarily strong swimmers.” Comparing the freestyle used by the residents of Elmina (Gold Coast) and the breaststroke employed by Europeans, Jean Barbot asserted that “the Blacks of Mina out-do all others at the coast in dexterity of swimming, throwing one [arm] after another forward, as if they were paddling, and not extending their arms equally, and striking with them both together, as Europeans do.” Similarly, Asante men and women at Lake Bosomtwe, about a hundred miles inland, used the freestyle. According to Robert Rattray, Asante “men are very fine swimmers and some show mag-

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*America* (Liverpool, 1817; reprint, Lincoln, NB, 1966), 160-161; George Frederick Kunz and Charles Hugh Stevenson, *The Book of the Pearl: Its History, Art, Science and Industry* (New York, 1908; reprint, New York, 2001); Charles Warren Stoddard, *Cruising the South Seas: Stories by Charles Warren Stoddard* (London, 1904; reprint, San Francisco, 1987), 93-95 and 117-118; Hiram Bingham, *A Residence of Twenty-one Years in the Sandwich Islands* (Hartford, 1847), 382-383; Walter Colton, *Deck and Port: Or Incidents of a Cruise in the United States Frigate Congress to California. With Sketches of Rio Janeiro, Valparaiso, Lima, Honolulu, and San Francisco* (New York, 1850) 352-353; Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (1872; reprint, New York, 1962); and Ben R. Finney and James D. Houston, *Surfing: A History of the Ancient Hawaiian Sport* (Rohnert Park, CA, 1996).

<sup>9</sup>For the “ordinary” method of swimming, see Franklin, *Art of Swimming Rendered Easy*, 15; Richard Ligon, *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes* (London, 1673; reprint, Portland, OR, 1998), 53; P.E.H. Hair, et al. (eds.), *Barbot on Guinea: The Writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa, 1678-1712* (2 vols., London, 1992), II, 545, n. 50; R.S. Rattray, *Ashanti* (Oxford, 1923), 63; and Catlin, *Letters and Notes*, I, 97.

nificent muscular development. They swim either the ordinary breast stroke [like Europeans] or a double overarm with a scissor-like kick of the legs.”<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 1:** *Dongola Men Swimming across the Cataract*

*Note:* This image shows some of the approximately 1500 *Dongola* employed by the British during the 1884 Nile Expedition swimming across rapids. Note the use of the freestyle.

*Source:* *Illustrated London News*, 4 October 1884. Courtesy of the Huntington Library, San Marino, CA, and used by permission.

Throughout the Atlantic world, maritime disasters both punctuated and juxtaposed the swimming prowess of people of African descent and the inabilities of those of European ancestry. When a boat sank, those of African descent typically were able to save themselves. Accounts indicate that one of two things usually happened to the whites aboard a stricken boat – either people of African descent saved them or they drowned. The American naval offi-

<sup>10</sup>G.R. Crone (ed.), *The Voyages of Cadamosto and Other Documents on Western Africa in the Second Half of the Fifteenth Century* (London, 1937), 34; de Marees, *Description and Historical Account*, 26, 32 and esp. 186-187; Pieter Van den Broecke, *Pieter Van den Broecke's Journal of Voyages to Cape Verde, Guinea and Angola, 1605-1612*, trans. J.D. La Fleur (Amsterdam, 1634; London, 2000), 37; Hair, et al. (eds.), *Barbot on Guinea*, II, 532; and Rattray, *Ashanti*, 63.

cer Horatio Bridge provides examples of both. On 11 December 1843 Bridge noted that marines debarking in Liberia upset the dugout canoes in which they travelled. “[U]nable to swim, [one] was upheld by a Krooman.” Later, on 15 October 1844, Bridge explained that five whites and five Kru were aboard a boat that “capsized and sunk. The five Kroomen saved themselves, by swimming, until picked up by a canoe; the five whites were lost.”<sup>11</sup> Significantly, I have found no account in which a white person swam to save the life of a drowning African.

Recognizing the superior capabilities of many people of African descent, some whites advocated their use as lifeguards. In 1804, while Dr. George Pinckard was in Barbados, he wrote that slaves’ swimming expertise “renders the negroes peculiarly useful in moments of distress, such as in cases of accident at sea or in the harbour.” When high surf inhibited the embarkation of several hundred slaves to an awaiting slaver, French slave smuggler Theophilus Conneau employed African lifeguards to ensure the safe passage of his manacled human property. Conneau recorded that “a lot of youths were appointed to swim off whenever a canoe should capsize... Negro after Negro was rescued by the swimming party.”<sup>12</sup>

There is no evidence that Westerners ever officially employed early modern people of African descent as their lifeguards, but they provided this service *de facto*. In his poem (c. 1568) of shipwreck and disaster on the Gold Coast, Robert Baker related how Africans saved him and eight shipmates when their longboat overset some distance from shore, saying that “[o]ur men rowing in a maine/the billow went so hie [high]/That straight a wave overwhelms us/and there in the sea we lie./The NEGROS by and by,/came swimming to save/And brought us all to land quickly/ not one durst play the knave.” Simi-

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<sup>11</sup>Horatio Bridge, *Journal of an African Cruiser: Comprising Sketches of the Canaries, the Cape Verdes, Liberia, Madeira, Sierra Leone, and Other Places of Interest on the West Coast of Africa* (New York, 1853), 76-77; 174; Robin Law (ed.), *The English in West Africa, 1681-1683: The Local Correspondence of the Royal African Company of England, 1681-1699* (3 vols., Oxford, 1997), I, 97, Hair, *et al.* (eds.), *Barbot on Guinea*, II, 531, James Holman, *Travels in Madeira, Sierra Leone, Teneriffe, St. Jago, Cape Coast, Fernando Po, Princes Island, etc.* (London, 1840), 231-232; and Peter C.W. Gutkind, “Trade and Labor in Early Precolonial African History: The Canoemen of Southern Ghana,” in Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch and Paul Lovejoy (eds.), *The Workers of the African Trade* (Beverly Hills, CA, 1985), 32.

<sup>12</sup>George Pinckard, *Notes on the West Indies; Written during the Expedition under the Command of the Late General Sir Ralph Abercromby: Including Observations on the Island of Barbadoes, and the Settlements Captured by the British Troops, Upon the Coast of Guiana* (3 vols., London, 1806), II, 149 and 321; and Theophilus Conneau, *A Slaver’s Log Book, or 20 Years Residence in Africa* (1853; reprint, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1976), 85 and 256.

larly, a dugout canoe landing Paul Erdmann Isert at Williams Fort at Ouidah (Benin) gave him “the unpleasant experience of being submerged with the canoe. I was tossed around in the breakers until a Black came swimming from the shore, pulled me onto his back, and thus drew me ashore.”<sup>13</sup>

Canoemen’s strong swimming abilities and Westerners relative inability forced many whites to respect canoemen in ways that cut across widely accepted views concerning race. Prudent Europeans realized that their lives could be dependent on canoemen’s swimming abilities, and even if they were in Africa to purchase slaves it was unwise to express racist sentiments towards canoemen or otherwise to insult them. Whether intentionally or accidentally, canoes manned by the best watermen could be overset in the surf, and offended canoemen could swim away from, rather than towards, a drowning European. In 1693, the English slave ship captain Thomas Phillips advised Europeans to treat canoemen with respect, saying that:

we venture drowning every time we go ashore and come off again, the canoos frequently over-setting, but the canoo-men are such excellent divers and swimmers, that they preserve the lives of those they have any kindness for, but such as they have any displeasure to they will let shift for themselves, therefore ’tis very prudent for all commanders to be kind and obliging to them, their lives lying in their hands, which they can make them lose at pleasure, and impute all to accident, and they could not help it; and there are no amends to be had.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Robert Baker, *The Travails in Guinea of an Unknown Tudor Poet in Verse* (1568; reprint, Liverpool, 1999), 42; Paul Erdmann Isert, *Letters on West Africa and the Slave Trade: Paul Erdmann Isert’s Journey to Guinea and the Caribbean Islands in Columbia, 1788*, ed. and trans. by Selena Axelrod Winsnes (Oxford, 1992), 89; and J.P.L. Durand, *A Voyage to Senegal; or Historical, Philosophical, and Political Memoirs, Relative to the Discoveries, Establishments, and Commerce of Europeans in the Atlantic Ocean, from Cape Blanco to the River of Sierra Leone. To which is added an Account of a Journey fro Isle St. Louis to Galam* (London, 1806), 110-111. A billow usually refers to an open-ocean swell rather than one that breaks near shore. David Wright and David Zoby, *Fire on the Beach: Recovering the Lost Story of Richard Etheridge and the Pea Island Lifesavers* (New York, 2000), document how African-Americans, some of whom were former slaves, were employed as North Carolina lifesavers from the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century.

<sup>14</sup>Thomas Phillips “The Voyage of the Ship *Hannibal* of London, in 1693,” in George F. Dow (ed.), *Slave Ships and Slaving* (Salem, 1927; reprint, New York, 2002), 72; and Hair, *et al.* (eds.), *Barbot on Guinea*, II, 531.

When Africans were carried throughout the Atlantic world, they and their descendants continued to save the lives of drowning whites. In 1805, the Barbadian slaveholder Robert Haynes sent his three sons to school in Liverpool, along with a slave named Hamlet who “saved the life of my son George” when he fell “overboard whilst landing at Liverpool.” A white clerk “who could only swim a few strokes” slipped off a “ship’s gangway” in Baltimore harbour and was pulled by “far out in the harbour.” Fortunately, his enslaved friend Zamba, who was raised on the “south bank of the river Congo, about two hundred miles from the sea” and had become “quite used to the water in Africa and could swim like a seagull,” dove in and kept him afloat until men in a rowboat could haul him out. Some accounts demonstrate that members of the African diaspora possessed exceptional swimming skills. During a 1792 flood on St. Kitts, a biracial man dramatically saved a white woman from a different sort of marine disaster. “A Mrs. T —, with her house and family, was carried into the sea: she cried out, ‘Lord have Mercy upon me.’ A Mulatto, hearing her cries [swam]...after her, caught her hair and saved her, though she was almost dead.” In another instance, a Brazilian steamer ran aground and began to break apart, but fortunately a black sailor named Simao “swam through the furious breakers” thirteen times to save as many passengers.<sup>15</sup>

Sources indicate that Europeans stopped swimming for a number of reasons. Some scholars of swimming have traced this decline, which began in the Middle Ages when it came to be regarded as a fruitless struggle against nature and changes in warfare favouring heavily armoured knights precipitated a shift in military tactics and, in turn, attitudes about the utility of swimming.<sup>16</sup> Concurrently, many European doctors urged people to avoid swimming because immersion in water purportedly upset the balance of the body’s humours, causing diseases like bubonic plague, cholera and smallpox, which ravaged the continent. Since swimming was generally performed nude, some Catholic Church officials discouraged it for moral reasons.<sup>17</sup> By the fifteenth

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<sup>15</sup>Robert Haynes, *The Barbadian Diary of General Robert Haynes, 1787–1836* (Medstead, Hants., 1934), 26; Zamba, *The Life and Adventures of Zamba, an African Negro King; and His Experience of Slavery in South Carolina* (London, 1847), 1 and 168–170; Henry G. Adams (ed.), *God’s Image in Ebony: Being a Series of Biographical Sketches, Facts, Anecdotes, etc., Demonstrative of the Mental Powers and Intellectual Capacities of the Negro Race* (London, 1854), 159–160; John G. Clinkscales, *On The Old Plantation: Reminiscences of His Childhood* (Spartansburg, SC, 1916; reprint, New York, 1969), 26; and Frederic W.N. Bayley, *Four Year’s Residence in the West Indies, During the Years 1826, 7, 8, and 9* (London, 1833), 486.

<sup>16</sup>Orme, *Early British Swimming*, Mandell, *Sport*, 18, 22–24, 60–62, 112–113 and 179–181; and Sinclair and Henry, *Swimming*, 1–20.

<sup>17</sup>Georges Vigarello, *Concepts of Cleanliness: Changing Attitudes in France since the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1988); Lawrence Wright, *Clean and Decent: The*

century, the freestyle was apparently forgotten; sources indicate that the few Europeans who swam used the breaststroke, which remained the preferred style of swimming into the first decade of the twentieth century.<sup>18</sup>

Sources indicate that most whites remained reluctant to swim, making them less adept than many blacks, Native Americans and Asians.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, after swimming theorist Melchisédec Thévenot explained in his 1696 treatise that “Swimming was in great esteem among the Ancients,” he stated that:

[b]ut to come to our times, it is most certain that the Indians, and the Negroes, excel all others in these Arts of Swimming and Diving. It is to them the Ladies are obliged for their Ornaments of Pearl; they are the Divers who fish for them; they are also very useful for recovering Anchors and Merchandizes that have been cast away.<sup>20</sup>

The breaststroke was the preferred Western style of swimming through the early twentieth century.<sup>21</sup> Westerners were evidently averse to the

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*History of the Bath* (London, 1960); Fikret Yegül, *Baths and Bathing in Classical Antiquity* (New York, 1995); A.S. Turberville, *English Men and Their Manners* (London, 1926), 117-126; David J. Eveleigh, *Bogs, Baths and Basin* (Stroud, 2002); and Françoise de Bonneville, *The Book of the Bath* (New York, 1998).

<sup>18</sup>Mandell, *Sport*, 179-181; Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Plantation Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1972), 307; William Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea, Divided into the Gold, the Slave and the Ivory Coasts* (London, 1705), 283; Percy, *Compleat Swimmer*, 11-12; Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment: Adventures of the First Slave Regiment Mustered into the Service of the United States during the Civil War* (Boston, 1870; reprint, Alexandria, VA, 1982), 156; and John Gabriel Stedman, *Narrative of Five Year's Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam, in Guiana, on the Wild Coast of South America, from the Year 1772 to 1777: Elucidating the History of the Country, and Describing its Productions, viz. Quadrupeds, Birds, Fishes, Reptiles, Trees, Shrubs, Fruits and Roots; with an Account of the Indians of Guiana and Negroes of Guinea* (London, 1796; reprint, London, 1963), 57.

<sup>19</sup>Orme, *Early British Swimming*, 46; Thévenot, *Art de Nager*, viii; Frost, *Art of Swimming*, vi; Nelligan, *Art of Swimming*, 27; Strachey, *Historie*, 66; Markham (ed.), *Hawkins' Voyages*, 157-158; Tabeau, *Narrative*, 74; and Bradbury, *Travels*, 160-161.

<sup>20</sup>Thévenot, *Art de Nager*, vii-viii.

<sup>21</sup>Kevin Dawson, “Enslaved Swimmers and Divers in the Atlantic World,” *Journal of American History*, XCII, No. 4 (2006), 1334; Sinclair and Henry, *Swim-*

freestyle because it naturally generated considerably more splashing than the breaststroke, and according to theorists and pragmatists like Benjamin Franklin and Theodorus Mason, swimming “should be smooth and gentle.” Since splashing was deemed unsophisticated, the freestyle was largely regarded as unrefined when compared to the sedate and harmonious breaststroke. Thus, even though the breaststroke is one of the most rudimentary strokes, Westerners ironically regarded it as the most refined and graceful.<sup>22</sup> George Catlin’s observation of Native Americans’ use of the freestyle reveals that although whites recognized that it was stronger than the breaststroke, they regarded it as uncivilized. “By this bold and powerful mode of swimming, which may want in the grace many would wish to see,” penned Catlin, “I am quite sure, from the experience I have had, that much of the fatigue and strain [the breaststroke placed] upon the breast and spine are avoided, and that a man will preserve his strength and his breath much longer in the [freestyle’s] alternate rolling motion, than he can in the usual mode of swimming, in the polished world.”<sup>23</sup>

One striking difference between African and Western swimming practices was that many African women swam, while Western women generally did not.<sup>24</sup> This is probably because most people swam nude, and Western standards of modesty did not tolerate the public disrobing of white women.<sup>25</sup> Many African women, however, were not so constrained. Because Africans felt less shame than Westerners about publicly revealing their bodies and since the African climate was hot and humid, many African women did not completely clothe their bodies. They often disrobed when swimming in the presence of

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*ming*, 88-98; Nelligan, *Art of Swimming*, 26-29; Finney and Houston, *Surfing*, 81 and 86; and Joseph Brennan, *Duke Kahanamoku: The Life Story of Hawai'i's Duke Kahanamoku* (Honolulu, 1994).

<sup>22</sup>Frost, *Art of Swimming*, 9; Orme, *Early British Swimming*, 164; Franklin, *Art of Swimming Rendered Easy*, 14; Digby, *Short Introduction*; Mason, *Preservation of Life at Sea*; and Nelligan, *Art of Swimming*, 12-17.

<sup>23</sup>Catlin, *North American Indians*, I, 97.

<sup>24</sup>De Marees, *Description and Historical Account*, 186; and Rattray, *Ashanti*, 63.

<sup>25</sup>Hair, *et al.* (eds.), *Barbot on Guinea*, II, 501, n. 16; Ligon, *True and Exact History*, 53; John Lawson, *A New Voyage to Carolina* (London, 1709; reprint, Chapel Hill, NC, 1967), 158; Octavia V. Rogers, *Albert, The House of Bondage, or, Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves, Original and Life Like, As They Appeared in Their Old Plantation and City Slave Life; Together with Pen-Pictures of the Peculiar Institution, with Sights and Insights into Their New Relations as Freedmen, Freemen, and Citizens* (New York, 1890), 24; Higginson, *Army Life*, 157, 161 and 165; Belle Kearney, *A Slaveholder's Daughter* (New York, 1900), 37-38; and Stedman, *Narrative*, 7 and 57.

men without shaming themselves.<sup>26</sup> After describing males' swimming proficiencies, de Marees noted that "many of the women here can swim very well too." Robert Rattray wrote that Asante women were "as expert as the men, and this I quite believe, as I used to see whole family parties alternately wading and swimming along the lake shore instead of following the road running between the villages."<sup>27</sup>

### Swimming in Atlantic Africa

Sources indicate that after early modern Africans learned to swim at a relatively young age, they incorporated this skill into numerous activities. While there is no evidence to indicate at what age interior peoples learned to swim, travellers reported that many coastal Africans did so as toddlers, either right after learning to walk between the ages of ten to fourteen months or after they were weaned at approximately two to three years of age. "Once the children begin to walk by themselves, they soon go to the water in order to learn how to swim and to walk in the water," wrote Pieter de Marees. William Bosman commented that "the Mother gives the Infant suck for two or three Years; [when] ever...they [are] able to go...to the Sea-side to learn to swim."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>De Marees, *Description and Historical Account*, 187; Hair, *et al.* (eds.), *Barbot on Guinea*, II, 501, n. 16; Ligon, *True and Exact History*, 53; A.C. de C.M. Saunders, *A Social History of Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal, 1441-1555* (Cambridge, 1982), 39-40; and David Northrup, *Africa's Discovery of Europe, 1450-1850* (Oxford, 2002), 14.

<sup>27</sup>De Marees, *Description and Historical Account*, 186-187; Hair, *et al.* (eds.), *Barbot on Guinea*, II, 501, n. 16, 532 and 639-640; Rattray, *Ashanti*, 63; Hugh Crow, *Memoirs of the Late Captain Hugh Crow, of Liverpool; Comprising a Narrative of his Life, Together with Descriptive Sketches of the Western Coast of Africa; Particularly of Bonny; The Manners and Customs of the Inhabitants, the Productions of the Soil, and the Trade of the Country. To which are Added, Anecdotes and Observations, Illustrative of the Negro Character. Compiled Chiefly from His Own Manuscripts; with Authentic Additions from Recent Voyages and Approved Authors* (London, 1830; reprint, London, 1970), 44; and John Adams, *Remarks on the Country Extending from Cape Palmas to the River Congo, Including Observations on the Manners and Customs of the Inhabitants. With an Appendix Containing an Account of the European Trade with the West Coast of Africa* (London, 1823; reprint, London, 1966), 138-139.

<sup>28</sup>For swimming, see de Marees, *Description and Historical Account*, 26; Hair, *et al.* (eds.), *Barbot on Guinea*, II, 501, n. 16, 532 and 640; Adam Jones (ed.), *German Sources for West African History, 1599-1669* (Weisbaden, 1983), 103; Bosman, *New and Accurate Description*, 121-122; and William Smith, *A New Voyage to Guinea: Describing the Customs, Manners, Soil, Climate, Habits, Buildings, Education, Manual Arts, Agriculture, Trade, Employment, Languages, Ranks of Distinction, Habitations, Diversions, Marriages, and Whatever else is Memorable among the In-*

After parents taught them the fundamentals of swimming, children improved their skills by playing in the water and observing the techniques of stronger swimmers. While at Elmina, Jean Barbot saw “several hundred...boys and girls sporting together before the beach, and in many places among the rolling and breaking waves, learning to swim.” He then contended that Africans’ strong swimming abilities “proceed from their being brought up, both men and women from their infancy, to swim like fishes; and that, with the constant exercise renders them so dexterous.”<sup>29</sup>

### Work-Related Swimming and Underwater Diving

Many coastal, littoral and interior Africans incorporated swimming into daily work activities. Many canoemen and fishermen swam on a daily basis. As canoes were launched from the beach, watermen often swam alongside to help keep their bows pointed towards oncoming waves to prevent them from tipping. When canoes overturned in the surf, canoemen swam to save their lives and, as Jean Barbot reported, “being excellent swimmers and divers recover[ed] goods from the upset canoes.”<sup>30</sup>

When European ships sank in African waters, African salvage divers recovered sunken goods. Scholars considering the commercial relationship between Africans and Europeans have generally agreed that up to about 1700 Africans largely controlled and dictated the terms of commerce while, as Robin Blackburn explains, “Europeans did enjoy an effective monopoly of sea transport.” Yet as John Thornton notes, “if the powerful of Europe controlled the commerce of the sea, in Africa they were unable to dominate either the

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*habitants. Likewise an Account of their Animals, Minerals, &c. with a Great Variety of Entertaining Incidents, Worthy of Observation, that Happen'd During the Author's Travels in that Large Country* (London, 1744; reprint, London, 1967), 210. For nursing practices, see Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental, and African Slave Trades* (Cambridge, 1990), 55; Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619-1877* (New York, 1993), 44; Richard Steckel, “Women, Work, and Health Under Plantation Slavery in the United States,” in David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hines (eds.), *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington, IN, 1996), 57; Barbara Bush, “Hard Labor: Women, Childbirth, and Resistance in British Caribbean Slave Societies,” in *ibid.*, 202-203; de Marees, *Description and Historical Account*, 26; and Hair, *et al.* (eds.), *Barbot on Guinea*, II, 501, 532 and 640.

<sup>29</sup>Hair, *et al.* (eds.), *Barbot on Guinea*, II, 532.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, II, 497, n. 3, 501, 510, n. 20, 529-532, 544, n. 45, 545, n. 46, 545, n. 550, 573, n. 8, and 640; de Marees, *Description and Historical Account*, 26, 32 and 186-187; Jones (ed.), *German Sources*, 12, 103, 109 and 219; and Crow, *Memoirs*, 34 and 39-40.

coast or coastal navigation.<sup>31</sup> Sources indicate that many African rulers forcefully demonstrated their control over coastal waters when Western ships ran aground or sank by claiming ownership of distressed ships, their cargo and their crew. French officials in Senegal complained that “[t]he right of pillage rests on no other foundation than the claims of the Negroes, who have always maintained, that every vessel belonged to the sovereign of the country on the coast of which it might be wrecked.”<sup>32</sup> Governors stationed on the African coast unsuccessfully tried to persuade coastal rulers to sign treaties abandoning this practice. Instead, survivors were ransomed, and canoemen, fishermen or anyone with access to a boat plundered grounded ships and were likely required to give local oligarchs a percentage of the goods they salvaged. When ships sank or broke apart in coastal waters, salvage divers were deployed. Unfortunately, there are no known accounts of these underwater salvage operations. Such tasks, however, surely required some divers to descend to considerable depths and enter ships’ broken hulls.<sup>33</sup> We can conjecture from accounts of salvage operations elsewhere in the Atlantic world that they probably held rock weights that enabled them to descend quickly without expending valuable oxygen. Salvage divers likely carried small baskets attached by ropes to canoes

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<sup>31</sup>Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492-1800* (London, 1997), 82; and John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800* (Cambridge, 1992; 2nd ed., Cambridge, 1998), 7-8, 21, 36 and esp. 42.

<sup>32</sup>Frederick Shobel (ed.), *The World in Miniature; Africa, Containing a Description of the Manners and Customs, with Some Historical Particulars of the Moors of the Zahara, and the Negro Nations Between the Rivers Senegal and Gambia* (4 vols., London, 1821), III, 27-30.

<sup>33</sup>Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 1545-1800* (Oxford, 1970), 87; Thomas J. Hutchinson, *Ten Years’ Wanderings among the Ethiopians. With Sketches of the Manners and Customs of the Civilized and Uncivilized Tribes, from Senegal to Gaboon* (London, 1861; reprint, London, 1967), 97-206; René Caillié, *Travels Through Central Africa to Timbuctoo; and Across the Great Desert, to Morocco; Performed in the Years 1824-1828* (2 vols., London, 1830; reprint, London, 1992), II, 31 and 35-36; J.A. Skertchly, *Dahomey As It Is: Being a Narrative of Eight Months’ Residence in that Country* (London, 1874; reprint, Whitefish, MT, 2004), 41; André Álvares de Almada, *Brief Treatise on the Rivers of Guinea. Being an English Translation of a Variorum Text of Tratado breve dos Rios de Guiné*, trans. and ed. by P.E.H. Hair and Jean Boulégue (Liverpool, 1984), sect. I, 100; Manuel Álvares, *Ethiopia Minor and a Geographical Account of the Province of Sierra Leone, c. 1615* (c. 1615; reprint, Liverpool, 1990), chap. 9; Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2005), 55; Isert, *Letters*, 177; John K. Thornton, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa, 1500-1800* (London, 1999), 83; and Baker, *Travails*, 42.

above in which they placed small objects. Ropes were probably attached to larger objects enabling them to be hoisted to the surface.

Sources indicate that Africans incorporated swimming and diving into several other occupations. In 1863, Richard Burton noted that Africans around Carpenter Rock, Sierra Leone, dove for oysters, saying that “[i]t is celebrated for its excellent rock oysters, which are brought up in quantities by divers.”<sup>34</sup> When seas were too high for dugout canoes or European rowboats to launch or land through the surf, intrepid swimmers sometimes carried letters to and from ships anchored up to three miles offshore. While in Senegal, Alvise de Cadamosto detailed the bravery and swimming abilities of one of these letter carriers, exclaiming that “[t]his to me was a marvellous action, and I concluded that these coast negroes are indeed the finest swimmers in the world.”<sup>35</sup>

Divers played a central role in some states’ political and economic development by obtaining different forms of currency and export commodities. Linda Heywood and John Thornton explain that Mbamba province in the Kongo Kingdom was particularly important because it controlled the Kongo’s southern coast, especially the island of Luanda and its surrounding areas, where *nzimbu* (cowrie) shells were harvested for circulation as money. In the late sixteenth century Duarte Lopes observed women diving to harvest these shells, writing that “[t]his island [of Luanda] furnishes the money used by the King of Congo and neighbouring people; for along its shore women dive under water, a depth of two yards and more, and filling their baskets with sand, they sift out certain small shellfish, called Lumanche, and then separate the male from the female, the latter being most prized for its colour and brightness.”<sup>36</sup> Elsewhere, others dove for gold, which was a widely sought after trading commodity. Jean Barbot noted that:

[t]he Kingdom of Sakoo is said to end at this River Mancu, and the Kingdom of Atzyn or Axim or Achem [Gold Coast] is said to begin there. This river is broad and extends far inland into Igwira country. It is full of waterfalls and rocks, which make it unnavigable; it produces much gold, which the

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<sup>34</sup>Richard Burton, *Wanderings in West Africa* (2 vols., London, 1863; reprint, New York, 1991), I, 195.

<sup>35</sup>Crone (ed.), *Voyages*, 37; and Michel Adanson, *A Voyage to Senegal, Isle of Goree, and the River Gambia* (London, 1759), 243-244.

<sup>36</sup>Linda M. Heywood and John K. Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585-1660* (Cambridge, 2007), 53; and Filippo Pigafetta, *A Report of the Kingdom of Congo and the Surrounding Countries Drawn out of the Writings and Discourses of the Portuguese Duarte Lopes*, trans. and ed. by Margarite Hutchinson (1591; reprint, London, 1981), 18-19.

blacks fish for, diving under the rocks and into the waterfalls.<sup>37</sup>

Entry into the Atlantic trading system enabled some coastal peoples to lucratively employ their underwater diving skills by scraping barnacles, which created drag and slowed progress, from the hulls of encrusted Western ships. After the brig *John H. Jones* delivered ninety-five African-Americans to Monrovia, Liberia, in December 1861, the Kru watermen scoured the ship's hull. Impressed by these divers' lung capacity, Charles Stewart penned: "We also employed [divers] to scrape the barnacles from the bottom of the vessel several times, their power of remaining underwater being truly remarkable."<sup>38</sup>

While most Western travellers did not venture into Africa's interior, upcountry accounts indicate that a significant number of inland peoples could swim. Olaudah Equiano commented that some interior peoples could not swim, but others were relatively adroit. Shortly after being kidnapped into slavery, he saw Africans in what is now Nigeria's interior swimming in a large river. Having never previously seen a large body of water or someone swim, Equiano, who could not swim, was amazed by what he saw, saying that "I was often very much astonished to see some of the women, as well as the men, jump into the water, dive to the bottom, come up again, and swim about."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Hair, *et al.* (eds.), *Barbot on Guinea*, II, 338; Olfert Dapper, *Description de l'Afrique: Contenant les noms, la Situation & les Confins de Toutes ses Parties, leurs Rivieres, Leurs Villes & Leurs Habitations, Leurs Plantes & Leurs Animaux; les Moeurs, les Cōutumes, la Langue, les Richesses, la Religion & le Gouvernement de ses Peuples. Avec des Cartes des États, des Provinces & des Villes, & des Figures en Taille-Douce, qui Representent les Habits & les Principales Ceremonies des Habitans, les Plantes & les Animaux les Moins Connus* (Amsterdam, 1686), 293; and John Ogilby, *Africa: Being an Accurate Description of the Regions of Aegypt, Barbary, Lybia, and Billedulgerid, the Land of Negroes, Guinee, Aethiopia, and the Abyssines, with all the Adjacent Islands, Either in the Mediterranean, Atlantick, Southern, or Oriental Sea, Belonging Thereunto. With the Several Denominations of their Coasts, Harbors, Creeks, Rivers, Lakes, Cities, Towns, Castles, and Villages. Their Customs, Modes, and Manners, Languages, Religions, and Inexhaustible Treasure; with Their Governments and Policy, Variety of Trade and Barter, and also of Their Wonderful Plants, Beasts, Birds, and Serpents. Collected and Translated from Most Authentick Authors, and Augmented with later Observations; Illustrated with notes, and Adorn'd with Peculiar Maps, and Proper Sculptures, by John Ogilby, Esq; Master of His Majesties revels in the Kingdom of Ireland* (London, 1670), 449.

<sup>38</sup>Charles Jones Stewart, "Home at Last!" *A Voyage of Emigration to Liberia, West Africa in 1861-1862* (Cold Spring Harbor, NY, 1977), 12.

<sup>39</sup>Equiano, *Narrative*, esp. 54 and 79; and Rattray, *Ashanti*, 61-65.

Similarly, when Rattray visited Lake Bosumtwi, he noted that the Asante were adept in both the breaststroke and freestyle, which they used to cross the lake and catch fish. Asante living around Lake Bosumtwi relied heavily upon their swimming and diving skills to catch fish because the lake's "anthropomorphic lake god," Twi, had many taboos associated with its use, including other forms of transport. Twi forbade the use of hollowed-out floatation devices, from simple logs to canoes, and permissible watercraft could not be paddled, rowed or poled. In keeping with divine sanctions, the Asante either swam or used paddleboards, called *padua* (or *mpadua* in the plural form) to traverse the lake and catch fish. Fishermen used reeds to construct fish baskets or traps, called *Ntakwa*, "oblong-shaped mat[s] woven of a simple criss-cross pattern" folded in a conical shape. Grasping the wider end of the cone-shaped trap, a "fisherman dives into the water, drags it along the bottom or among a shoal of fish, and keeping water pressure against the pocket-end keeps the fish that enter till he comes to the surface." Larger versions of these cone-shaped fish baskets were made by weaving several of the *Ntakwa* reed mats together to make a large mat called a *Kotokuo Kese*, which were sewn into a cone shape. The *Kotokuo Kese* was then taken by a raft, made by lashing several *mpadua* together, which was propelled by swimmers to a depth that permitted the open end of the net's mouth to lie on the lake's bottom, while the "pocket-end is just on the surface." Five or six fishermen, each on their own *padua*, scared fish into the *Kotokuo Kese* by lining up "about twenty yards from the net and then simultaneously start off at top speed, yelling '*padua! padua!*' and splashing and beating the water." When they reached the mouth of the net, they dove off their paddleboards, swam down, picked up the net's open end and brought it to the surface, trapping the fish.<sup>40</sup>

Mungo Park's account of two journeys deep into Africa's interior from 1795 through 1797 and in 1805 reveals that many inland peoples were strong swimmers. When Park crossed the Senegal River near the town of Kayee on 28 December 1795, a "few boys swam after" his horses, urging them on. On 29 July 1796, after leaving the Bambara capital, Segou, located over five hundred miles inland, Park observed a fisherman dive underwater to collect and set fish traps. The fisherman's lung capacity was so great that he was able to remain submerged "for such a length of time that I thought he had actually drowned himself."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Rattray, *Ashanti*, 61-62 and 63-65.

<sup>41</sup>Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa: Performed under the Direct Patronage of the African Association, in the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797* (London, 1799; reprint, New York, 1971), 71-72 and 210-211; and Park, *Travels of Mungo Park Containing Book One, The First Journey: Travels in the Interior districts of Africa. and Book Two, The Second Journey: The Journal of a Mission to the Interior of Africa in the Year 1805* (London, 1954), 53-54 and 161.

During his second expedition, Park was accompanied by forty-three other Europeans. After crossing the Bafing River in present-day Guinea, about three hundred miles inland, a canoe carrying three soldiers overturned near the opposite bank. “[T]he natives from the shore swam to their assistance, yet J. Cartwright [a soldier] was unfortunately drowned. The natives dived and recovered two muskets, and Cartwright’s body.” Park and the other surviving European party members, however, ultimately died because they could not swim: during a battle on the Niger River against Africans, they drowned after jumping overboard. Only an enslaved canoeman and their interpreter and guide, Amandi Fatouma, lived to carry Park’s journal back to British officials and tell of his demise.<sup>42</sup>

Coastal Africans’ underwater diving abilities served as a spectator sport for visiting Westerners and a source of income for the divers. At many tropical waterside locations throughout the world today, local children impress tourists while earning money by diving for coins that tourists toss into the water from docks or boats. The same was true in early modern Atlantic Africa. William Bosman noted the underwater diving displays of Africans from the Ivory and Grain coasts, writing:

You are probably acquainted with the expert Swimming and Diving of these *Negroes*, which I have several times seen with Surprise. Whenever they were on Board, and I threw a string of Coral, or any thing else into the Sea, one of them would immediately dive after it, and tho’ almost got to the bottom fetch it up again. This they seldom missed of, and were sure of what they brought up as their Reward.

On 14 January 1862, a similarly impressed Charles Stewart described how Kru watermen dove for coins from his ship’s yardarm, saying that “I have often stood on our quarterdeck, which is thirteen feet from the surface, and thrown coppers into the water, having a young man on the yardarm, who when I threw the money would dive from his lofty perch and almost invariably recover it.”<sup>43</sup>

Africans also demonstrated their lung capacity when they pursued sea turtles, whose meat was considered a delicacy, while the shells of many species were carved into women’s combs and cameos. On 15 December 1844, while patrolling the African coast, John Lawrence documented how three Kru sailors dove into the water to catch a large sea turtle, saying that they

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<sup>42</sup>Park, *Travels*, esp. 319-320, 352, 365 and 368-372.

<sup>43</sup>Bosman, *New and Accurate Description*, 491; and Stewart, “*Home at Last!*” 12-13. In the Senegambia, the author saw adolescent boys dive for coins that Western boat passengers threw overboard.

divested themselves of their clothing in a twinkling and were in the Ocean in chase of him; but the Turtle dived when they got within the space of forty of fifty feet. But the chase did not end here, and a submarine pursuit took place which was astonishing as well as amusing to witness; one would hardly suppose that men could acquire such perfection in swimming as they practice.

Unfortunately, Lawrence did not indicate if the turtle was caught.<sup>44</sup>

Swimming was incorporated into some littoral Africans' forms of trial-by-ordeal. After visiting Ouidah in 1698, Bosman wrote that if "any Person is accused of any Crime and denies the Fact" they could clear their name by trying to swim across a river "to which is ascribed the strange Quality of immediately drowning all the Guilty Persons which are thrown into it." Since, according to Bosman, all the Africans in the area were "very expert, I never heard that this River ever yet convicted any Person; for they all come out."<sup>45</sup> Some Ibo communities in present-day Nigeria use a similar method to determine guilt or innocence. Since, however, the rivers that the accused traversed were populated with sharks, culpability was determined by the ability to swim well and to elude these predators.<sup>46</sup>

When misfortune befell a slave ship, the swimming abilities of the coastal, littoral and interior Africans aboard were tested. On 10 September 1830, two British naval vessels, *Black Joke* and *Friar Rosamond*, chased the Spanish brigs *Rapido* and *Regulo* into the Niger Delta's Bonny River. "During the chase, they were seen from our vessels to throw their slaves overboard, by twos, shackled together by their ancles, and left in this manner to sink or swim, as best they could! Men, women, and young children were seen, in great numbers, struggling in the water," Leonard wrote. "Several managed, with difficulty, as may be supposed, to swim on shore."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>C. Herbert Gilliland, *Voyage to a Thousand Cares: Master's Mate Lawrence with the African Squadron, 1844-1846* (Annapolis, 2004), 64.

<sup>45</sup>Bosman, *New and Accurate Description*, 328 and 359; Crow, *Memoirs*, 34-36 and 43-44; and Hair, *et al.* (eds.), *Barbot on Guinea*, II, 640.

<sup>46</sup>Crow, *Memoirs*, 34-36 and 43-44; and Adams, *Remarks*, 138-139. Adams may have drawn from Crow rather than personal observations.

<sup>47</sup>Peter Leonard, *Records of a Voyage to the Western Coast of Africa, in His Majesty's Ship Dryad, and the Service on the at Station for the Suppression of the Slave Trade in the Years 1830, 1831, and 1832* (Edinburgh, 1833; reprint, Neudeln, 1973), 233-235; Daniel Mannix, with Malcolm Cowley, *Black Cargoes: A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (New York, 1962), 210-212; and Richard Drake, *Revelations of a Slave Smugler: Being the Autobiography of Capt. Rich'd Drake, An African Trader*

### **Recreational Surfing and Swimming**

After learning to swim at an early age, many coastal and interior Atlantic African men and women incorporated swimming into their work and recreational activities. Numerous accounts mention Africans swimming as a form of relaxation and recreation and indicate that swimming was incorporated into different forms of competition. Africans' swimming abilities enabled some to invent and develop surfing prior to European contact.

### **Surfing in Atlantic Africa**

In the 1966 surfing documentary "Endless Summer," director and narrator Bruce Brown claimed that surfers Patrick O'Connell and Robert August introduced surfing to Africa after they taught several children to surf to the west of Accra, Ghana. Yet accounts indicate that Africans in Senegal, Côte D' Ivoire, Ghana, Cameroon and possibly West Central Africa had been surfing long before European contact. The swimming abilities of several disparate ethnic groups were so strong that they were able to invent surfing independent of Polynesian influence and probably without influencing each other.

Surfing was invented independently in Polynesia, Peru and parts of Atlantic Africa. Today, people surf while standing, but as the anthropologist Ben Finney explains, in traditional surfing it was possible to surf in a prone, kneeling, sitting or standing position. According to Finney, pre-Columbian fishermen in northern Peru surfed on reed bundles that came to be known as *caballitos*, or little horses. These fishermen propelled their *caballitos* with wooden paddles while in a sitting position. Even in Hawai'i, where surfing and surf culture became most developed, sources indicate that many early modern Hawaiians surfed in sitting, kneeling and prone positions.<sup>48</sup>

Several factors restrict our understanding of African surfing. Unfortunately, only four known accounts were transcribed during the early modern period, while several others were recorded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although there are no known accounts of early modern Africans standing up to surf, accounts clearly indicate that they rode waves for pleasure. The two earliest accounts are terse and rather ambiguous, even for someone with a surfing background. Westerners witnessed African surfing almost two hundred years before becoming aware of Hawaiian surfing in the late eighteenth century, and they did not become fascinated by Hawaiian surf-

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*for Fifty Years—From 1807–1857; During which Period he was Concerned in the Transportation of Half a Million Blacks from African Coasts to America* (New York, 1860; reprint, Northbrook, IL, 1972), 59-62.

<sup>48</sup>Finney and Houston, *Surfing*, 24-25.

ing until the mid-nineteenth century. The uninitiated eye of the first two known European observers led them to dismiss African surfing as a fanciful activity.

The first known account of Atlantic African surfing was written in the 1640s by Michael Hemmersam who, according to historians, was not the most careful observer and often provided rather shallow remarks. Believing that he was watching Gold Coast children learn to swim, Hemmersam wrote that “they tie their children to boards and throw them into the water.” Jean Barbot wrote the next known account in 1679 when he noted that children at Elmina learned “to swim, on bits of boards, or small bundles of rushes, fasten’d under their stomachs, which is a good diversion to the spectators.”<sup>49</sup> African parents undoubtedly did not teach their children to swim by tying them to boards and throwing them in the surf. As previously documented, many coastal Africans learned to swim at an earlier age and certainly with more positive reinforcement. Additionally, such swimming lessons would be highly dangerous, probably resulting in a large number of drowned children rather than a population of proficient swimmers. These Gold Coast children were probably doing what many at Cape Coast, Elmina and elsewhere still do, which is to catch waves or whitewash while laying and sometimes kneeling on small boards.<sup>50</sup>

Later accounts of surfing are unambiguous. On 16 November 1834, while at Accra, Ghana, James Edward Alexander wrote that “[f]rom the beach, meanwhile, might be seen boys swimming into the sea, with light boards under their stomachs. They waited for a surf; and came rolling like a cloud on top of it.”<sup>51</sup> In 1861, Thomas J. Hutchinson published the most comprehensive description of African surfing, detailing fishermen surfing in present-day southern Cameroon in much the same fashion as their Peruvian counterparts. These fishermen caught waves in small, lightweight dugout canoes that were “no more than six feet in length, fourteen to sixteen inches in width, and from four to six inches in depth...[and] being made of light wood, are carried from the sea on the shoulders of their owner,” making them shorter than many of today’s modern surfboards and much shorter and lighter than many types of ancient Hawaiian surfboards. Describing how fishermen’s work turned to play, Hutchinson penned:

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<sup>49</sup>Jones (ed.), *German Sources*, 98 and 109; and Hair, *et al.* (eds.), *Barbot on Guinea*, II, 532. Barbot is known for borrowing from earlier travellers and may have done so here. But since Barbot’s account is more substantive than Hemmersam’s, it is probably based at least in part on direct observation.

<sup>50</sup>Author’s observations while in Ghana, 1998-1999.

<sup>51</sup>James Edward Alexander, *Narrative of a Voyage of Observation among the Colonies of Western Africa, in the Flag-Ship Thalia; and of a Campaign in Kaffir-Land, on the Staff of the Commander-in-Chief, in 1835* (London, 1837), 192.

During my few days stay at Batanga, I observed that from the more serious and industrial occupation of fishing they would turn to racing on the tops of the surging billows which broke on the sea shore; at one spot more particularly, which, owing to the presence of an extensive reef, seemed to be the very place for a continuous swell of several hundred yards in length. Four or six of them go out steadily, dodging the rollers as they come on, and mounting atop of them with the nimbleness and security of ducks. Reaching the outermost roller, they turn the canoes stems shoreward with a single stroke of the paddle, and mounted on the top of the wave, they are borne towards the shore, steering with the paddle alone. By a peculiar action of this, which tends to elevate the stern of the canoe so that it will receive the full impulsive force of the advancing billow, on they come, carried along with all its impetuous rapidity. Sometimes the steerer loses the balance of his guiding power; the canoe is turned over; its occupant is washed out, and the light little piece of wood gives a few lofty jumps from wave to wave, reminding one of a horse at a steeple-chase, that, having thrown his rider, takes it into his head (or rather his heels) to gallop about the country, and jump over ditches on his own account. Yet despite...these immersions, no one is ever drowned, as they are capital swimmers – indeed, like the majority of the coastal negroes, they may be reckoned amphibious. In their piscatorial excursions, it sometimes happens that a prowling shark, tempted to pursue the fish which the fisherman is hauling on the line, comes within sight of the larger bait of the negro leg and chops it off without remorse. A case of this kind has happened a very short time before the period of my visit, and the poor victim had died; but this did not diminish the number of canoes riding waves, nor render one of the canoe occupants less energetic or daring than before.<sup>52</sup>

Hutchinson's account is unique for several reasons. It is the only one that describes adults surfing. Surfing apparently had not taken any deep cultural meaning, yet these Cameroonian fishermen seem to have been quite passionate about it. Like many ancient Hawaiian and modern surfers, they were ardent enough to risk life and limb surfing in waters known to contain sharks.

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<sup>52</sup>Hutchinson, *Ten Years' Wanderings*, 227-228. Billow usually refers to open ocean swells rather than waves breaking upon the shore.

Neither Alexander nor Hutchinson seems aware of Polynesian surfing. But the language in these accounts was echoed in the late nineteenth-century descriptions of Hawaiian surfing by authors like Mark Twain, Jack London and others. Indeed, if references to race were omitted, it probably would not be possible to determine if accounts by these travellers referred to Africa or Hawai‘i.<sup>53</sup>

While surfing in Africa physically resembled Polynesian surfing, it remained at a relatively rudimentary level, never developing into a complex sport with considerable social and cultural meaning as it did in Hawai‘i. Today in Ghana surfing is largely regarded as a childish game that is not worthy of adults’ time. On the weekend, some adult men can be seen frolicking in the surf and occasionally body surfing or using wooden boards, some of which are painted, to ride waves in a prone position. But unlike ancient Hawaiian or modern surfing, most do not seem passionate or devoted to surfing. Perhaps similar attitudes prevailed in the early modern period.<sup>54</sup>

As with Polynesians, it is unknown when Africans first realized the possibility of surfing and how the sport developed.<sup>55</sup> Someone playing in the surf may have been caught up in a wave and hurled towards the beach, or one of the many people that frequently used paddleboards to cross large bodies of water may have accidentally caught a wave. Coastal Africans undoubtedly saw marine animals, like dolphins, barracudas, sharks, orcas and even wayward crocodiles and hippopotami, catching waves. Perhaps thinking that it looked like fun, they decided to emulate these creatures.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>For Western accounts of Hawaiian surfing, see Twain, *Roughing It*, chap. 73; Stoddard, *Cruising*, chap. 6; Charles Nordhoff, “Hawaii-Nei,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, XLVII (August 1873), 399 and 402; and Finney and Houston, *Surfing*, 21 and 97-113.

<sup>54</sup>Author’s observations in 1998-1999.

<sup>55</sup>Finney and Houston, *Surfing*, 21; and Finney, “Surfboarding in West Africa,” *Wiener Völkerkundliche Mitteilungen*, V (1962), 41-42.

<sup>56</sup>All these aquatic creatures have been observed catching waves. For theories on how surfing may have been invented by Hawaiians, see Finney and Houston, *Surfing*, 21. For types of marine animals that frequent the waters off the coast of Ghana and are known intentionally to catch waves, see Frederick Robert Irvine, *The Fishes and Fisheries of the Gold Coast* (London, 1947), 81-92, 119-120 and 314-319; and de Marees, *Description and Historical Account*, 156-157. Mark Twain saw porpoises playing in waves while he was in Hawaii; Twain, *Roughing It*, 392. The author has seen porpoises, seals, sharks, barracuda, sea turtles, orcas and an American alligator catch waves. Crocodiles are known to frequent the surf in Jamaica; Chris Dixon, “Pressure Drop,” *Surfer Magazine*, XLII, No. 8 (2001), 133.

Canoemen may have provided the inspiration to surf. For centuries, Atlantic African fishermen and canoemen caught and rode waves in fast, responsive manoeuvrable dugout canoes.<sup>57</sup> Riding these canoes on breaking waves provides much the same rush as surfing. Simultaneously, canoemen became extremely familiar with how waves broke and how best to catch and ride them. Accounts also suggest that they enjoyed riding waves. Many European travellers detailed the exhilaration of riding waves in dugout canoes. In 1812, an impressed Henry Meredith wrote:

The sea breaks with such violence along the coast of Apollonia, [Gold Coast] that it cannot be approached without the utmost danger...but those who are acquainted with the art of paddling canoes, perform their office with much dexterity. They will go off to vessels, and convey merchandize on shore with safety: when they wish to display a proof of their skill, they can conduct a canoe on shore with surprizing velocity. They watch the sea when on the point of breaking, and every man betakes himself to steering; which they perform by keeping the flat part of the paddle parallel to the canoe, and giving it a quick motion, making nearly right angles with the canoe: when they have got the canoe on the summit of the sea, and when it is ready to break, this quick motion of the paddle is discontinued, and it is kept firmly in a parallel position; when the canoe flies on shore with great rapidity. The canoe must be kept on a balance, and as straight a course as possible be observed; otherwise it will overset.<sup>58</sup>

These and other accounts of riding waves in dugout canoes depict the experience as exhilarating and exciting. Thus, it is conceivable that canoemen may have attempted to replicate this on a smaller, more personal level.

The origin of the first surfboard is more easily surmised. Sources indicate that coastal and interior West Africans frequently swam several miles with the aid of long planks of wood that frequently resembled modern paddleboards or longboards, which are longer round-nose surfboards, in both form and function. But when a carved paddleboard was unavailable, a log, large

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<sup>57</sup>For design and usages of West African dugout canoes, see Robert Smith, "The Canoe in West African History," *Journal of African History*, XI, No. 4 (1970), 515-533; and W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African-American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), 47-53. For a video image of Ghanaian canoemen catching and riding waves, see Bruce Brown's surfing documentary "The Endless Summer."

<sup>58</sup>Henry Meredith, *An Account of the Gold Coast of Africa with a Brief History of the African Company* (London, 1812), 57-58.

branch or miscellaneous plank from a Western ship served the purpose. Paddleboards were buoyant enough to carry both their paddlers and small cargoes. Most likely these boards were the prototype for Atlantic African surfboards.<sup>59</sup> While at Elmina in the 1640s, Michael Hemmersam wrote that two canoemen used a plank as an impromptu paddleboard. When these Africans went below *Ambtsforth's* deck, "their canoes drifted away; so, without being at all afraid of drowning they laid themselves on a board thrown out to them be the skipper and swam ashore with it. We were all quite amazed at this great feat of daring."<sup>60</sup> When Robert Rattray visited Lake Bosumtwi, he described and photographed *mpadua* that probably closely resembled early Gold Coast surfboards. "The ends of some *padua* are cut away at both extremities so as to offer less resistance than a blunt prow, and a few were seen in which these ends stood out of the water higher than the center," wrote Rattray. Indeed, *mpadua* are surprisingly similar to ancient Hawaiian surfboards and even modern longboards.<sup>61</sup>

### Blood Sports

Africans and members of the African diaspora fused swimming to blood sports when they fought crocodiles, alligators, manta rays and sharks. Men of African descent probably waged these contests to amuse themselves and publicly demonstrate their skill, bravery, strength and possibly masculinity. Their bravery was undoubtedly further enhanced by many white witnesses' fear of the water and the creatures that resided in it.<sup>62</sup>

Many Westerners regarded water as a dangerous, "unnatural element" for humans to submerge themselves in and were terrified of the creatures that slaves battled. While describing South Carolina in 1769, a poet wrote: "Frightful creatures in the water/Porpoises, sharks and alligators" swam. For centuries, cartographers captured the imagination and fears of many Westerners' when they depicted terrifying beasts attacking ships in the uncharted waters of their maps. Alain Corbin documented early European fears of water, explaining that "[t]he ocean, that water monsters' den, was a damned world in whose

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<sup>59</sup>Finney, "Surfboarding in West Africa," 42; Jones (ed.), *German Sources*, 103 and 109, and Hair, *et al.* (eds.), *Barbot on Guinea*, II, 532.

<sup>60</sup>Quoted in Jones (ed.), *German Sources*, 103.

<sup>61</sup>Rattray, *Ashanti*, 60-65. The first known image of a Hawaiian surfboard, rendered in 1778 during James Cook's third voyage to the Pacific, shows a Hawaiian using a surfboard as a paddleboard. The man is paddling a surfboard to meet Cook's ship in Kealakekua Bay; Finney and Houston, *Surfing*, 12.

<sup>62</sup>Dawson, "Enslaved Swimmers and Divers," 1341-1342.

darkness the accursed creatures devoured one another,” as well as anyone who ventured into it.<sup>63</sup> Thus, blacks’ ability to negotiate such perilous waters, with what whites perceived to be apparent ease, while fighting creatures that petrified them, was doubly impressive.

Africans waded and swam out into the water to fight crocodiles (see figure 2), while their New World protégées carried on the practice by fighting smaller and less aggressive American alligators and perhaps crocodiles. In the late seventeenth century, Jean Baptiste Labat narrated such battles, saying that “[n]otwithstanding the Fierceness of this Animal, the Negroes will venture to attack him if he be in shallow Water: For this Purpose they wrap a piece of Ox-Hide about their left Arm, and taking a Bayonet, or Assagaye [assegai], in their right Hand,” they waded into the water in hopes of stabbing the crocodile in the eye or throat before they themselves are destroyed. An African near Fort St. Louis, on the Senegal River, had a vendetta against crocodiles, making “it his daily Exercise to engage these Animals wherever he saw them. He generally killed them and brought them ashore, but often came-off sadly bitten or torn; and one Time was so disabled, that he had been devoured but for the timely Assistance of a Canoa.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>Quoted in Walter Edgar, *South Carolina: A History* (Columbia, 1998), 155; and Alain Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea: The Discovery of the Seaside, 1750-1840* (Paris, 1988; reprint, Berkeley, 1994), 1-18, esp. 7.

<sup>64</sup>Quoted in Thomas Astley, *A New General Collection of Voyages and Travels: Consisting of the most Esteemed Relations, which Have Been Hitherto Published in Any Language: Comprehending Every Thing Remarkable in its Kind, in Europe, Asia, Africa, America, with Respect to Several Empires, Kingdomes, and Provinces; their Situation, Extent, Bounds and Division, Climate, Soil and Produce; Their Lakes, Rivers, Mountains, Cities, Principal Towns, Harbours, Buildings, &c. and the Gradual Alterations that from Time to Time Have Happened in Each: Also the Manners and Customs of the Several Inhabitants; Their Religion and Government, Arts and Sciences, Trades and Manufactures: So as to Form a Compleat System of Modern Geography and History, Exhibiting the Present State of all Nations; Illustrated with Charts of Several Divisions of the Ocean, and Maps of Each Country, Entirely New Composed, as well as New Engraved, by the Best Hands, from the Latest Surveys, Discoveries, and Astronomical Observations: But Likewise with Variety of Plans, and Prospects of Coasts, Harbours, and Cities; Besides Cuts Representing Antiquities, Animals, Vegetables, the Persons and Habits of the Peoples, and Other Curiosities: Selected from the Most Authentic Travellers, Foreign as well as English* (4 vols., London, 1745-1747), II, 370.



**Figure 2:** Negro Method of Attacking the Crocodile

*Note:* This image depicts how some Africans in Senegal killed crocodiles, apparently to showcase their strength and bravery.

*Source:* Frederic Shobel, *The World in Miniature; Africa, Containing a Description of the Manners and Customs, with Some Historical Particulars of the Moors of the Zahara, and of the Nations between the Rivers Senegal and Gambia* (London, 1821), 165 opposite. Courtesy of the Huntington Library, San Marino, CA, and used by permission.

Slaves in the American South waded and swam into rice fields to wrestle alligators to the shore where waiting bondpeople decapitated them with axes. These battles seem to have been well-attended venues where slaves and slaveholders, from the safety of rice field levees, closely observed bondmen conspicuously showcasing their strength and bravery. Slaves' egos and reputations were undoubtedly further inflated when white spectators expressed fear. The slaveholder Robert Mallard recalled that when he was young and "somewhat callow," he occasionally took "to a tree until assured that the decapitation was a success!"<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup>Robert Q. Mallard, *Plantation Life before Emancipation*. (Richmond, 1892), 26-28; Janet Schaw, *Journal of a Lady of Quality: Being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina, and Portugal, in the Years 1774 to 1776*, ed. by Evangeline Walker Andrews (New Haven, 1921), 149-151; and Ambrose E. Gonzales, *The Black Border: Gullah Stories of the Carolina Coast* (Columbia, SC, 1922), 121-124.

Africans' swimming dexterity and daring were most forcefully exhibited when they dove to fight sharks with knives. Jacques Joseph Lemaire asserted that when sharks turned on their sides to seize prey on the water's surface, "[t]he Negroes take this opportunity to strike him; and as he turns on his Side, they dive underneath, and cut open his Belly."<sup>66</sup> When New World slaves similarly fought sharks, they both impressed and terrified white spectators. After arriving in the Carolinas in 1700, John Lawson observed "some Negro's, and others, that can swim and dive well, go naked into the Water, with a Knife in their Hand, and fight the Shark, and very commonly kill him, or wound him so, that he turns Tail, and runs away." In 1790, an anonymous traveller to the West Indies wrote that "negroes have been known [to be] daring enough to go into the water, in order to give battle to a shark, and have returned victorious, towing their adversary." This display of courage so overwhelmed the chronicler that he or she then bemoaned the possible demise of slavery, speculating that "if they can go into an unnatural element, in quest of hideous monsters, for the sport of engaging with them, it will leave us to wonder at their submission to the yoke of slavery; to wonder that ever a rebellion can be suppressed; to wonder they do not prefer the gallows and the gibbet to the hoe and the whip."<sup>67</sup> While such accounts seem like hyperbole, Hawaiians went to even further extremes to prove their courage when they dove into the water to noose sharks before dragging them to shore alive.<sup>68</sup>

### Swimming Traditions of the African Diaspora

When Africans were taken to the New World, many carried swimming and underwater diving skills with them. From the early sixteenth century, slaveholders realized that slaves' swimming and diving abilities could be profitably exploited. Consequently, some slave traders targeted Africans with swimming skills for capture and resale to New World colonies in need of their skills.<sup>69</sup> The historian Richard Mandell has noted that "if there were indigenous sports among the imported Africans, they left no trace." Yet many slaves participated in recreational and theatrical swimming activities that were evidently based on

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<sup>66</sup>Quoted in Astley, *New General Collection*, IV, 362.

<sup>67</sup>Lawson, *New Voyage*, 158; Peter Wood, *Black Majority*, 123; and *A Short Journey in the West Indies, in which are Interspersed, Curious Anecdotes and Characters* (2 vols., London:, 1790), I, 27-30.

<sup>68</sup>*Sailors Magazine*, XIII, No. 1 (1840), 29; and Hawai'i Maritime Center Exhibit, Honolulu, HI.

<sup>69</sup>De Marees, *Description and Historical Account*, 186.

African-developed skills.<sup>70</sup> Slaves swam for recreation and enjoyment. In the evening, many slipped into the water to cool off, relax and wash away the day's troubles. In Guiana in the 1770s, John Stedman observed that swimming was slaves' "favourite diversion, which they practise every day at least twice or thrice." Former North Carolina slave Bill Crump recalled that "[w]e wucked in de fie'ls from sunup ter sundown mos' o' de time, but we had a couple of hours at dinner time ter swim or lay on de banks uv de little crick an' sleep. Ober 'bout sundown master let us go swim ag'in iff' en we wanted to do it." Bondpeople also competed in informal, self-organized swimming matches and formal, planter-organized contests.<sup>71</sup>

The analysis of enslaved occupational divers further demonstrates some blacks' swimming agilities and undoubtedly suggests techniques utilized by African salvage divers. Slave divers were highly skilled, and after Native American divers were killed off by disease and overwork, their diving abilities were unrivalled. Many could dive deeper than ninety feet. Importantly, when divers descend below about sixty feet, the air in their lungs is compressed to the point that buoyancy becomes negative, which causes them to sink rather than float.<sup>72</sup> Since divers descended to great depths, their eardrums sometimes burst. Though not necessarily fatal, this was painful and could cause the temporary loss of equilibrium. It is unclear how these divers acquired their abilities, but the lung capacity and composure required to work at such depths suggests that they learned to swim at an early age.<sup>73</sup>

Spanish colonists along Venezuela's Pearl Coast were the first Westerners to exploit enslaved African swimmers profitably when they employed them as pearl divers. They were probably also the first slaveholders to exploit the specialized skills of African captives. Prior to the 1545 discovery of silver deposits in Peru, enslaved divers probably generated more wealth there than

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<sup>70</sup>Mandell, *Sport*, 180.

<sup>71</sup>Stedman, *Narrative*, 214; Benjamin A. Botkin (ed.), *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves. North Carolina Narratives*, Volume XI, Part 1 (Washington, DC, 1941), 208; Clinkscales, *On The Old Plantation*, 7-9, 26, 29 and 35-36; Stacy Close, *Elderly Slaves of the Plantation South* (New York, 1997), 20; Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York, 1855), 36 and 65; Charles L. Perdue, Jr., et al. (eds.), *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville, VA, 1976), 325; Kate E. Pickard, *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed: Being the Personal Recollections of Peter Still and his Wife "Vina" after Forty Years of Slavery* (Syracuse, 1856), 229-230; and Dawson, "Enslaved Swimmers and Divers," 1340-1343.

<sup>72</sup>Sinclair and Henry, *Swimming*, 110-111.

<sup>73</sup>Dawson, "Enslaved Swimmers and Divers," 1346-1347.

was produced anywhere else in the Americas.<sup>74</sup> Pearls from this region were an important international commodity. Most were exported to Europe, where some were re-exported to the Middle East and still others carried to Africa, where they were exchanged for slaves, ivory, gold and other goods.<sup>75</sup>

Native Americans initially were forced to dive for pearls. But as diseases depleted their numbers, Spanish colonists looked to West Africa for labourers. When they did so, they often targeted regions and ethnic groups known to possess strong swimmers.<sup>76</sup> Enslaved pearl divers descended to depths of eighty feet or more. They carried small nets that were fastened by a rope to a boat above. After they ripped pearl oysters from reefs, they deposited them into the nets (see figure 3). While visiting Margarita Island in the late sixteenth century, Richard Hawkins was impressed with the abilities of the island's "expert swimmers, and great deevers," saying "with tract of time, use, and continual practice, having learned to hold their breadth long underwater, for the better achieving their worke."<sup>77</sup>

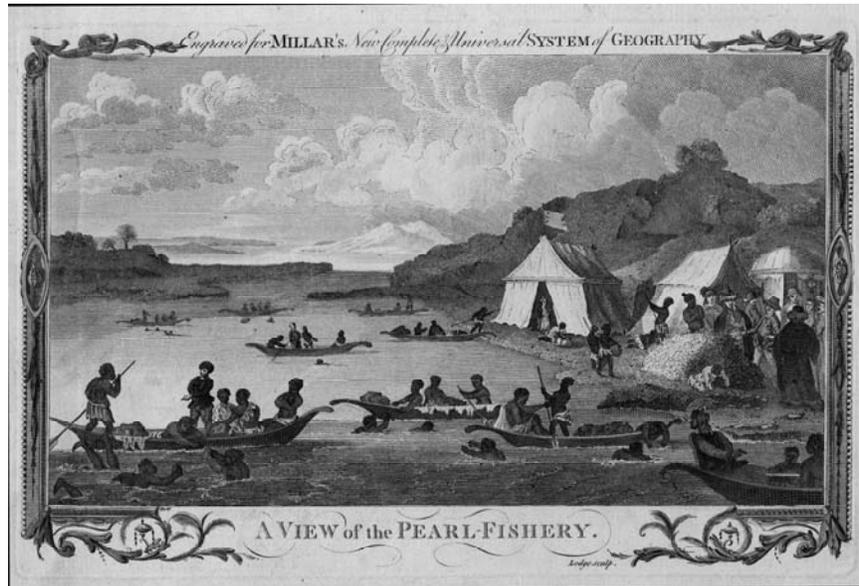
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<sup>74</sup>J.H. Parry, *The Spanish Seaborne Empire* (Berkeley, 1990), 51; R.A. Donkin, *Beyond Price: Pearls and Pearl-Fishing, Origins to the Age of Discoveries* (Philadelphia, 1998), 318-324; and Sanford A. Mosk, "Spanish Pearl-Fishing Operations on the Pearl Coast in the Sixteenth Century," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, XVIII, No. 3 (1938), 397.

<sup>75</sup>Donkin, *Beyond Price*, 324, 327 and 328-329; Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 10; and Van den Broecke, *Journal*, 27 and 58.

<sup>76</sup>Jose de Acosta, *Natural and Moral History of the Indies: Descriptions of Notable Things about the sky, Elements, Metal, Plants, and Animals, and Rituals and Ceremonies, Laws and Government of the Indians. Including Information on the Religion and Beliefs of the Indians of Mexico* (Lima, 1590; reprint, Buenos Aires, 1962), chapter 15; Mosk, "Spanish Pearl-Fishing," 392-402; Donkin, *Beyond Price*, 321-322; and Francis Augustus MacNutt (ed.), *Bartholomew de Las Casas: His Life, His Apostolate and His Writings* (New York, 1909), 374-383.

<sup>77</sup>Antonio Vázquez de Espinosa, *Compendium and Description of the West Indies* (c. 1634; reprint, Washington, DC, 1942), 51-52, John Ogilby, *America: Being the Latest and Most Accurate Description of the New World; Containing the Original Inhabitants, and the Remarkable Voyages Thither. The Conquest of the vast Empires of Mexico and Peru, and Other Large Provinces and Territories, with Several European Plantations in those Parts. Also Their Cities, Fortresses, Towns, Temples, Mountains, and Rivers. Their Habits, Customs, Manners, and Religions. Their Plants, Beasts, Birds, and Serpents. With an Appendix, containing, besides Several other Considerable Additions, a Brief Survey of what Hath Been Discov'd of the Unknown South-Land and the Artick Region. Collected from Most Authentic Authors, Augmented with Later Observations, and Adorn'd with Maps and Sculptures* (London, 1671), 227; Donkin, *Beyond Price*, 323; Markham, (ed.), *Hawkins' Voyages*, 313-315; and Samuel de



**Figure 3:** A View of the Pearl Fishery

*Note:* This stylized image with its exaggerated piles of pearls represents the wealth enslaved divers harvested for their owners.

*Source:* George Henry Millar, *The New and Universal System of Geography, Being a Complete History of the Whole World* (London, 1982).

Pearl diving was strenuous, life-threatening work. An oceanic trench near the Pearl Coast channels cold water into the otherwise warm Caribbean, causing the year-round ocean temperature to hover in the sixties Fahrenheit. These cool waters induced exposure-related illnesses that sometimes culminated in death. Pearl divers' eardrums sometimes burst so that "the blood gushed out of their Mouths and Noses when they came above Water to breath." Sharks attacked divers; some drowned; and pirates kidnapped, injured and killed others.<sup>78</sup>

While diving was an arduous, dangerous occupation that taxed divers' health and claimed many lives, enslaved divers were granted privileges most other slaves were denied. Divers gained respite from the monotony of field

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Champlain, *Narrative of a Voyage to the West Indies and Mexico in the Years 1599-1602* (London, 1859), 7.

<sup>78</sup>Acosta, *Natural and Moral History*, chap. 15, Ogilby, *America*, 227; Mosk, "Spanish Pearl Fishing," 295 and 399; and Donkin, *Beyond Price*, 321-329.

labour. They were granted a portion of the pearls they harvested, which provided them with material rewards and enabled some to purchase their freedom. Hence, like other skilled bondmen, divers lived existences of privileged exploitation. Their skills brought them rewards, while earning substantially more rewards for their owners.<sup>79</sup> While a fortunate few were able to purchase their freedom, typically the wealth pearl divers generated for their owners did not lead the latter to reduce divers' workloads or manumit them. Rather, their valuable skills encouraged their use in other marine occupations. For instance, when Spanish treasure galleons sank, enslaved divers were often employed in salvage work.

By about the mid-sixteenth century, the Spanish had decimated the population of indigenous West Indian salvage divers. Consequently, they began employing Africans to recover goods from sunken ships. The nearly complete shift to enslaved salvage divers occurred after a twenty-eight-ship treasure fleet sailed into a hurricane on 6 September 1622, one day after leaving Havana. Twenty enslaved pearl divers were dispatched to the wreck area where they recovered significant quantities of sunken treasure and other goods.<sup>80</sup>

These Spanish successes set the precedent for employing enslaved salvage divers. When Bahamians, Bermudians, Caymanians and Floridians began "wrecking," or recovering goods from grounded or sunken ships, in and around the Florida Straits during the eighteenth century, they typically employed at least one slave who could dive to a depth of seventy feet. Through the nineteenth century, wrecking was a significant industry for this region's residents.<sup>81</sup>

In the antebellum American South, some bondpeople's swimming abilities were used to clear fisheries of debris that could ensnare fishing nets. Slaves toiled in two types of fisheries that required clearing. Some worked for their owners on waterways near the owners' property. Others were hired out to commercial fisheries located in coastal estuaries. Charles Ball, who by his own account was an expert swimmer, explained that while he and two other South Carolina field slaves were employed as seasonal fishermen by their owner,

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<sup>79</sup>Dawson, "Enslaved Swimmers and Divers," 1347-1348 and 1352-1354.

<sup>80</sup>John Viele, *The Florida Keys, Volume 3: The Wreckers* (Sarasota, FL, 2001), xii and 5-10.

<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*, 24, 26 and 71-72; Daniel McKinnen, *A Tour Through the British West Indies, in the Years 1802 and 1803, Giving a Particular Account of the Bahama Islands* (London, 1804), 140; Virginia Bernhard, *Slaves and Slaveholders in Bermuda, 1616-1782* (Columbia, MO, 1999); and Michael Craton and Gail Saunders, *Islanders in the Stream: A History of the Bahamian People* (Athens, GA, 2000).

they cleared the Congaree River of debris. Though the work was cold and hard, it was a welcome escape from field labour.<sup>82</sup>

In the mid-1850s, Frederick Law Olmsted penned a detailed description of North Carolina's substantial intercoastal fisheries that reveals enslaved divers' dexterity. Work in this fishery entailed long, dangerous hours. In many places, coastal subsidence submerged swamps, leaving the stumps of large cypress trees protruding from the bottom of the sound. Enslaved divers were vital to their removal. After divers had ascertained the debris' position, they bore holes into the stumps, filled the cavities with explosives and blew the stump from the bottom. These skills earned them considerable privileges, including substantial cash bonuses, alcohol and the ability largely to work free of direct white supervision.<sup>83</sup>

### **Conclusion: Concepts of Race and Swimming**

Evidence indicates that people of African descent were generally stronger swimmers than people of European descent. Many Africans used these skills on a daily basis. They incorporated swimming into various occupations, such as fishing, canoeing and salvage diving. Africans also shifted these abilities into recreational activities, including surfing. As enslaved Africans were shipped throughout the Atlantic world, many took these skills with them, incorporating swimming and diving into their work and recreational activities.

It is interesting to note that the racialization of swimming is something in which both early modern Westerners and some contemporary North Americans, both white and black, have engaged, albeit for different reasons. Numerous Western accounts from the fifteenth through the nineteenth century reveal a fascination with the fact that people of African descent were usually better swimmers than whites. Rarely, though, do they indicate why this skill fascinated them. These authors' literary objectives differed significantly. Some were interested in scientific inquiry, adventure or discovery. Some supported the slave trade and slavery; others did not. Yet, as historians have explained, from the sixteenth through the nineteenth century, xenophobia and ethnocentrism led many writers to emphasize differences between Africans and Westerners as a means of championing whites' purported biological, social, religious, cultural and political superiority, while alleging African savagery and

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<sup>82</sup>Charles Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains; or, The Life of an American Slave* (New York, 1859), 206-213.

<sup>83</sup>Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States; with Remarks on Their Economy* (London, 1856), 351-355, esp. 351.

barbarism. Thus, it seems that Western comments on Africans' swimming abilities were often intended to differentiate them from whites.<sup>84</sup>

When chroniclers noted that Africans were proficient swimmers, some were signalling that they were animal-like. Travellers often compared blacks' genitals to those of animals and contended that they engaged in bestial, lascivious intercourse. Travellers also argued that African women were like animals because they did not suffer labour pains, which were considered a punishment for Eve's transgression, and thus they were not part of the same divine creation as white women.<sup>85</sup> Likewise, sources indicate that many Westerners perceived blacks' ability to swim as proof of animal-like inferiority. When chroniclers noted that African children learned to swim at a young age, some were apparently expressing the belief, as Philip Curtin has documented, that children of African descent were like animals because they matured more quickly than children of European extraction.<sup>86</sup> The speed, endurance and strength of African swimmers impressed Westerners. Many, however, dismissed Africans' preferred method of swimming – the freestyle – as uncouth and uncivilized compared to the favoured Western swim stroke – the breaststroke – which was regarded as sedate, harmonious and refined. Swimming theorists indicate that many Westerners probably felt Africans' ability to swim was proof of animalistic instinct. Many whites felt that while animals instinctively knew how to swim, it was unnatural for humans to swim without instruction. In 1658, William Percey declared that “man doth not altogether naturally Swim as other creatures do, but immediately descends towards the bottom.” The editor of the 1840 edition of Benjamin Franklin's swimming treatise similarly noted that “man cannot swim with the same faculty as many of the inferior animals, which seem to be led by instinct to use the proper action for their preservation, while rational creatures, being aware of their danger, grow fearful or impatient, and begin to struggle, which has the effect of

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<sup>84</sup>David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Oxford, 1966), 446-482; Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes towards the Negro, 1550-1812* (Baltimore, 1969), 3-43; Phillip Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780-1850* (Madison, WI, 1964), esp. 34, 43-44, 56, 318-319, 391-392 and 414-415; Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1996), 13-41 and 107-136; and Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia, 2004), esp. 12-16.

<sup>85</sup>Davis, *Problem of Slavery*, 446-482; Jordan, *White over Black*, 33-35, 39-40, 158-159, 163, 464 and 501; Curtin, *Image of Africa*, esp. 28-57 and 391-392; Betty Wood, *The Origins of American Slavery: Freedom and Bondage in the English Colonies* (New York, 1997), 20-29; Brown, *Good Wives*, 39; and Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 16.

<sup>86</sup>Curtin, *Image of Africa*, 43.

making them sink in the water.” The editor instructed would-be swimmers to use logic to “divest yourself of fear” before learning to swim.<sup>87</sup> Since theorists stressed that logic enabled humans to swim, whites could have conceivably concluded that people of African descent swam because they were capable of reason. But this was not the case: whites argued that blacks were incapable of logic and intellect. For example, Thomas Jefferson claimed that “in memory [blacks] are equal to whites; in reason much inferior...and in imagination they are dull, tasteless and anomalous.” Since Westerners felt people of African descent were incapable of logic and reason, they implied that animal-like instincts enabled black people to swim naturally. This, of course, ignored the fact that Africans learned to swim through instruction, a phenomenon well documented by European observers.<sup>88</sup>

Likewise, Westerners were impressed when people of African descent incorporated swimming into blood sports. Yet most apparently did not believe that fighting sharks, crocodiles and alligators demonstrated black bravery. Many seemingly concluded that Africans’ ability to swim with ease and to overpower dreaded creatures was further proof that they were animal-like savages. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson discussed prevailing views on blacks’ bravery, writing that “[t]hey are at least as brave, and more adventuresome. But this may perhaps proceed from a want of forethought, which prevents their seeing a danger till it be present.”<sup>89</sup> This perception, as Winthrop Jordan and Philip Curtin have argued, enabled whites to dismiss and recast African bravery as instinctive ferocity, like that of a lion, and not true courage, which required intellect and virtue. Such a view, despite the apparent contradictions, enabled Westerners to describe blacks as both cowardly and ferocious. In 1774 the Jamaican slaveholder Edward Long asserted that blacks were “savage, cruel, and...cowardly.” This perception apparently enabled John Lawson to depict nude, knife-wielding Africans as so savage and ferocious that their very presence beneath the water terrified sharks. Thus, virtuous bravery remained the domain of whites, who reaffirmed their sense of superiority and downplayed the threat to bondage that filled the anonymous Caribbean sojourner with such distress.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup>Digby, *Short Introduction*, 4-5; Percey, *Compleat Swimmer*, 2 and 6-9; Franklin, *Art of Swimming Rendered Easy*, 3; and Thévenot, *Art de Nager*, 1-3.

<sup>88</sup>Dawson, “Enslaved Swimmers and Divers,” 1332.

<sup>89</sup>Thomas Jefferson, *Writings: Autobiography, A Summary View of the Rights of British America, Notes on the State of Virginia, Public Papers, Addresses, Messages, and Replies, Miscellany, Letters* (New York, 1984), 264.

<sup>90</sup>Dawson, “Enslaved Swimmers and Divers,” 1343-1344.

What history tells us about the swimming abilities of people of African descent, and the inabilities of people of European descent, raises several provocative issues concerning today's North American society, providing fodder for further analysis. Since, as sources suggest, many early modern black people were adroit swimmers, why are there statistically so few dominant African-American competitive swimmers today? Several twentieth-century factors apparently precipitated a decline in swimming in the African-American community. Segregation and the unwillingness of cities to duplicate expensive recreational facilities deprived black neighbourhoods of swimming pools. In 2004, Florida International University psychology professor Marvin Dunn explained that blacks traditionally have not had the resources to pay for swimming lessons or to utilize pools.<sup>91</sup> Denied access to swimming pools, African-Americans also chose not to swim in rivers, lakes and the ocean for several reasons. Andrew Kahrl argues that in at least some places in the Jim Crow South, as well as in the North, racial violence transformed natural waterways from places of leisure to foreboding "scenes of subjection." Rural bodies of water were sites of conflict, violence and subjugation. Rivers and lakes were the final resting place for countless numbers of murdered blacks. Perhaps the most infamous example of this was the lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till, who was savagely beaten to death and then dumped into Mississippi's Tallahatchie River after being accused of whistling at a white woman. For African-American youth, barred from municipal swimming pools, many rural lakes and streams became a dubious alternative.<sup>92</sup> As African-Americans were denied access to desirable swimming amenities, many apparently began to perceive swimming as a "white" or "un-black" practice, rendering it culturally unpopular.<sup>93</sup>

While any definitive conclusions about contemporary swimming practices in the African-American community must await sustained research and analysis, historical sources unequivocally indicate that until fairly recently people of African descent were usually stronger, more efficient swimmers and underwater divers than people of European descent, most of whom could not

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<sup>91</sup>Edwin B. Henderson, "The Participation of Negro Youth in Community and Educational Programs," *Journal of Negro Education*, IX, No. 3 (1940), 416-424; *Miami Herald*, 22 April 2004; and *Washington Post*, 27 August 1998.

<sup>92</sup>Andrew W. Kahrl, "On the Beach: Race and Leisure in the Jim Crow South" (Unpublished PhD thesis, Indiana University, 2008). For more on the relationship between terror and pleasure in the context of slavery and post-slavery racial domination, and the way in which it shaped self-practice in the black community, see Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1997).

<sup>93</sup>Dawson, "Enslaved Swimmers and Divers," 1354.

swim well enough to save their own lives. Many Africans incorporated swimming into numerous aspects of their work and recreational lives. They swam to set and collect fish traps, pan for gold, harvest shellfish, upright canoes and salvage goods from sunken ships. Many swam as a form of relaxation and recreation, using it to cool off and relax. The swimming dexterity of some Africans was strong enough to enable them to develop surfing, while other Africans and members of the diaspora entered the water to fight crocodiles, alligators, manta rays and sharks. Africans' swimming abilities were not lost on whites, who both profited from and demeaned these skills. Westerners debased the swimming dexterity of Africans, asserting that the freestyle, the strongest and most efficient swimming stroke, was unsophisticated and that Africans' ability to swim was proof of their bestiality. Paradoxically, swimmers of African descent saved the lives of many drowning whites, while slaveholders profitably exploited bondmen's underwater diving abilities.