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Adding to Black History

MU professor paints complex picture of slave trade.

Story by Kelsey Allen

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As Daniel Domingues' career moves forward, his research moves backward. Domingues, originally from Paraná, Brazil, received his bachelor's degree in history before receiving his master's and doctorate from Emory University in Atlanta. He started his studies with a project called Voyages, a trans-Atlantic slave trade database that catalogs information about ships carrying slaves from Africa to the Americas. Now, the assistant



Photo by Nicholas Benner.

professor of history at MU is contributing to the African Origins Portal, a database that documents where the slaves were coming from within Africa before they were loaded onto vessels.

In his paper titled “Enslavement and Consumption in Angola during the Nineteenth Century,” Domingues uses these databases as well as customs records and slave registers to show that most slaves leaving West Central Africa in the 19th century were coming from places closer to the coast than scholars had previously thought.



The Valongo Slave market in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, c.1820

Source: Valongo, c.1820. JPEG.
Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database.

“Historians used to think the majority of slaves were prisoners of war from the Lunda Empire [a pre-colonial African confederation in what is now the Congo, Angola and Zambia],” Domingues says.

“But my research shows the Lunda wasn’t expanding. Most of the slaves were [being traded within their] own societies for consumer

goods — goods that people didn’t actually need they just wanted — such as Asian textiles, alcoholic beverages and guns.”

Although Domingues calls his work with Origins a continuation of Voyages, his research is actually filling in the pieces geographically and farther back in time.

“From Voyages, we know where slaves embarked on the African coast and where they disembarked here on the coast of the Americas, but we didn’t know anything about where they were coming from in the interior of Africa,” Domingues says.

African Origins focuses on this issue. The portal contains records of more than 91,000 Africans liberated from slave ships intercepted mostly by British naval vessels in the Atlantic between 1808 and 1862. Back on land, court officials via African interpreters recorded identifying information about each of the individuals on board, including name and sex. Phonetically spelled names such as Obokay, Adoy, Oladday and Farsolay fill the archives. Domingues and other consultants on the project upload the information into the portal and ask scholars and the public — members of the African diaspora, descendants of Africans around the world, Africans,

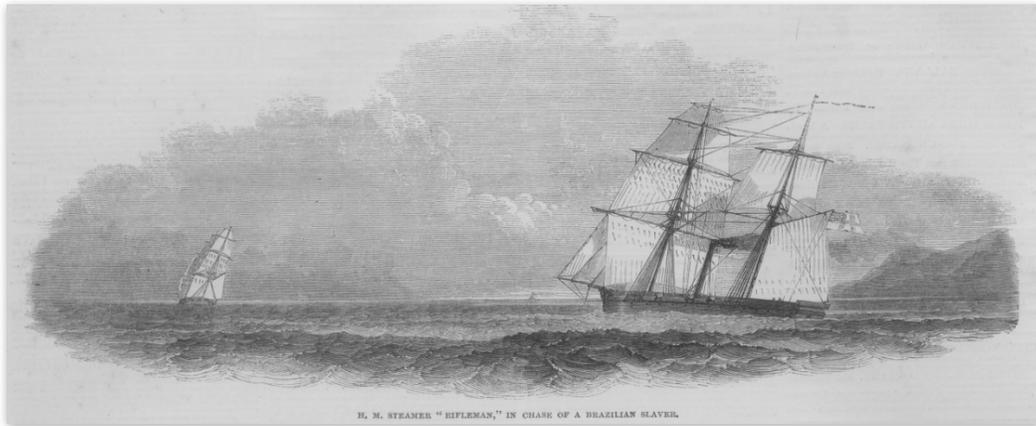


**West and West Central Africa
by Joan Blaeu, 1662**

Source: West and West Central Africa, c.1660. JPEG. Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database.

anyone familiar with African culture and languages — to identify to which languages the names belong.

“[After] tracing the inland origins of Africans, we can compare that with important events taking place in the interior of Africa, such as wars, droughts and famine, and verify the major cause of the slave trade and why these people were caught,” Domingues says. “It shifts the focus and provides a more complex picture of the slave trade.”



H.M.S. “Riflemen” pursuing the slaver “Esmeralda”

Source: H.M.S. “Rifleman” Chasing the Slaver “Esmeralda”. JPEG.
Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database.

The captions in this story have been updated to reflect proper attribution.

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