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INTRODUCTION

On a sticky June afternoon in 2002, I stood at the front door of an elegant home not far from the University of Ibadan, waiting to meet a woman whose grandparents, I had recently read, were “an Afro-Cherokee slave of Egba descent in North Carolina and a Benin princess.”¹ I had come to Nigeria on different business, but I was intrigued by the American origins of this well-known local family. A friend helped me locate some of its members, and despite transportation difficulties, side trips, delays, and all of the usual impediments of bad infrastructure and few working telephones, we had actually arrived to find the person we sought, Lande Ejiwunmi, at home. She graciously welcomed us into her sitting room, where I hoped to learn about her family’s history.

Mrs. Ejiwunmi did not relate much herself, although she did put me in contact with two of her cousins, whom I soon visited as well. Curiously, I had the same experience with both of them as I did that day with Mrs. Ejiwunmi: after a nice chat and cup of tea, they asked me to wait while they rummaged through some dark cabinet stuffed with papers. Finally, each of them in turn emerged with a timeworn copy of *Ebony* magazine—the black American glossy—from 1975. In it was a feature story entitled “The Vaughan Family: A Tale of Two Continents.” This, they each announced, would tell me everything I wanted to know.²

Sure enough, the article told a remarkable tale. It began with a man named Scipio Vaughan, a “member of the Egba family of the Yoruba tribe” taken captive and shipped to South (not North) Carolina around 1805. There he became the slave of a Camden planter who gave him his American name. One day a Cherokee woman whom Scipio encountered outside of



Great, great, granddaughters of patriarch Scipio Vaughan, Ayo Vaughan-Richards (l), and Jewel Stradford Lafontant, first met in 1956 when Nigeria's principal nursing officer visited Chicago cousin, first woman U. S. deputy solicitor general. Mrs. Lafontant has visited African relatives several times. Her mother wrote only biography of Scipio.

THE VAUGHAN FAMILY: A Tale Of Two Continents

African and American descendants of former slave have kept in touch for more than a century

BY ERA BELL THOMPSON

MORE than two decades before the Emancipation Proclamation, an ex-slave named Scipio Vaughan lay dying in Camden, S. C. Calling two of his sons to his bedside, he made them promise that they would leave the South and its "oppressive laws against colored men" and go to Yorubaland (now Western Nigeria), their ancestral home. Burrell Churchill and James Churchill Vaughan carried out their father's wishes. A prosperous merchant, James later returned to Camden to see his family. From that reunion began a trans-Atlantic communication between the African and American branches of the Vaughan tree that has continued uninterrupted for more than 100 years.

While other black families delve into genealogy in search of identity,

the descendants of Scipio know who they were, where they are and enjoy each others company.

The great-great-grandchildren of Scipio, like Ayo (pronounced eye-oh) Vaughan-Richards of Lagos, and Jewel Stradford Lafontant of Chicago, take their kinship seriously.

"We've kept in touch through the years," says Mrs. Vaughan-Richards, principal nursing school officer. "But I have a commitment to persuade all of our relations in the States to come home. Those who have visited us had tears in their eyes when I showed them the graves of their ancestors."

"Mother was always talking about our African relatives," recalls

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Front page of Era Bell Thompson, "The Vaughan Family: A Tale of Two Continents," *Ebony* (1975). Courtesy of Johnson Publishing Company, LLC.

town offered him a drink of water. Later she became his wife and bore him thirteen children, including James Churchwill (J. C., or Church) Vaughan. On his deathbed years later, Scipio urged his descendants to return to his ancestral homeland.

Eventually J. C. Vaughan and his brother did set out for Africa, with help from the American Colonization Society. His brother remained in Liberia,

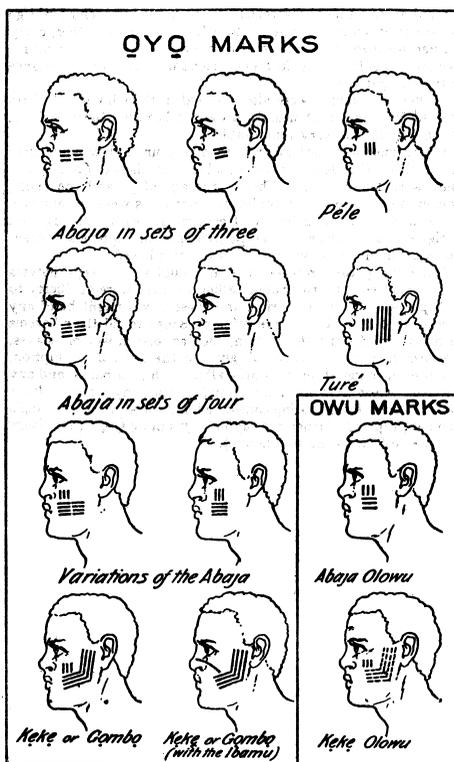
but J. C. Vaughan proceeded to Yorubaland (now southwestern Nigeria), employed as a carpenter by Southern Baptist missionaries. There, he met people bearing the same “tribal marks” (ritually cut facial scars) as those on his father’s face, confirming that he was indeed in the land of his relatives.

Though he faced setbacks, Vaughan ultimately prospered in Yorubaland, and he founded an influential family. Together with the missionaries, Vaughan “played a leading role in establishing the Baptist church in Nigeria,” despite the violence of continued slave raiding and “tribal conflict.” Twice he was plundered of his property: first during a brutal war in which thousands were captured and enslaved; and again when Christians were expelled from the town of Abeokuta, where Vaughan and his wife, who was from the nearby Kingdom of Benin, had settled. Taking refuge in Lagos with his spouse and young son, Vaughan established himself again. Ultimately he became a successful merchant under early British colonialism, with children and grandchildren who were wealthy, educated, and politically active. Vaughan also returned to South Carolina for visits, fostering connections with American relatives that some of his descendants maintained to the present.³

Wow!

James Churchwill Vaughan had evidently accomplished a feat that no other African American of his time had done: he traveled to Africa and actually found his father’s people, reestablishing ties broken by the Atlantic slave trade.⁴ The crucial evidence was the facial scars he saw in Yoruba country, which matched those of his father. “Tribal marks” (or “country marks”), as I knew, had typically been cut into children’s skin in nineteenth-century Yorubaland to show their affiliation to specific political and geographic communities.⁵ Such facial scars were especially important in the era of the slave trade, and in fact it was usually free-born members of communities, not slaves, who were marked. One observer wrote that “tribal marks” allowed people to trace those carried away into slavery.⁶ So in Vaughan’s story, country marks did what they were supposed to do: they allowed kin and community members dispersed by slaving to find each other again. The tale seemed almost too perfect to be true — and in a way, it was.

A couple of years after that Nigerian trip, after I had already begun to confirm many aspects of Vaughan’s extraordinary life story, the poignant tale of ancestral ties remembered in America and reconnected in Africa began to unravel. In Columbia, South Carolina, I visited the home of a genealogist distantly related to the Vaughan family. She generously shared with me some of her sources, including a heavy, frayed Bible first owned by J. C. Vaughan’s niece Maria Sophronia Lauly. In 1869, Mrs. Lauly began compiling an exten-

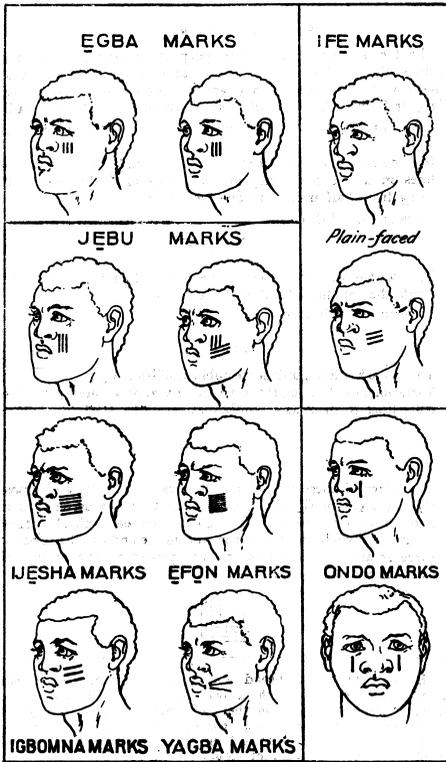


Facial marks as depicted in Samuel Johnson, *History of the Yorubas* (1921). “The facial marks are for the purpose of distinguishing the various Yoruba families.”

sive family history in its front pages, probably copying entries from an older family Bible. Her listing commenced under “Marriages” with the 1815 union of her grandparents (J. C. Vaughan’s parents), Scipio Vaughan and Maria Conway. On the next page, under “Births,” Lauly wrote of her grandfather, “Sippio Vaughan was born March the 26th in Richman [*sic*] Virginia 1780.” The handwriting was faded but its message was clear: J. C. Vaughan’s father had been born in America, not Africa. Like other African American enslaved people, he was unlikely to have been given “country marks.”⁷

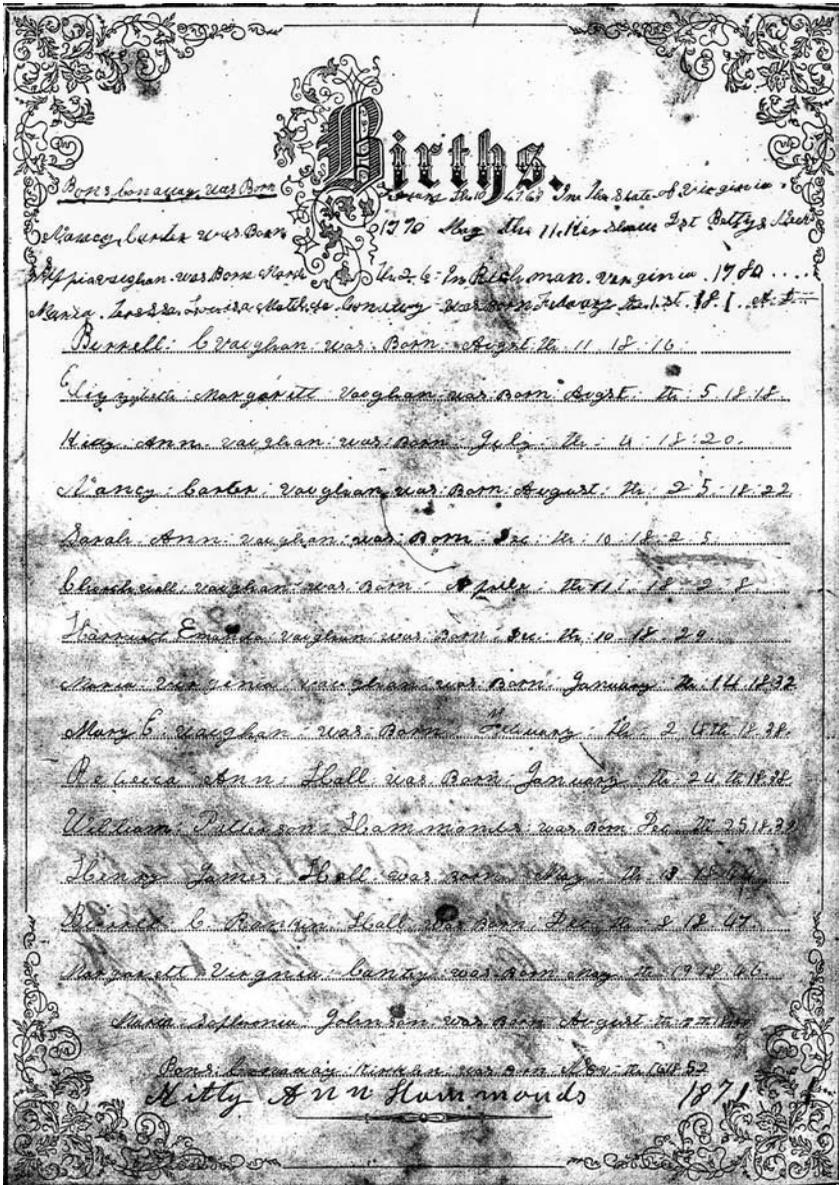
At first, the revelation of Scipio Vaughan’s birthplace was terribly disappointing. I tried to imagine ways that the country marks story could still be true: the Bible entry could have reflected misinformation; or the story could have been about Scipio’s own father or grandfather rather than himself. (Later, when I shared what I had learned about Scipio’s origins with Vaughans in Nigeria, they incredulously offered the same scenarios.) But further evidence removed any doubt.⁸

It began to dawn on me, though, that J. C. Vaughan’s story was even more intriguing now than before. If the country marks version had in fact been



true, then the Vaughans would represent a fascinating but utterly unique and specific back-to-Africa journey. Without the country marks, however, their story opened up new ways of viewing connections between Africa and America, new glimpses of mobility and affiliation in the nineteenth-century Atlantic world. If Scipio Vaughan had not originally come from Yorubaland, then why did his son go there? If J. C. Vaughan was in fact an outsider in what is now southwestern Nigeria, how did he integrate so well that his descendants became important leaders? And if the story of Scipio's putative Yoruba scars was not literally true, then where did it come from?

My efforts to follow J. C. Vaughan wherever he led, and to uncover the layers of meaning in his life history, eventually took me to archives, libraries, museums, private houses, churches, graveyards, ruins, cities, and villages in the United States, Britain, Nigeria, and Liberia. Although it has been possible to recover his story, Vaughan did not lead the kind of life best suited for conventional biographies, with direct written evidence of his thoughts and interests. He left in the historical record exactly one signed letter—written to a missionary society in 1872—along with a handful of other documents



Vaughan family Bible. The record of Scipio Vaughan's birth appears on the third line from the top.

suggesting that he collaborated in their production. Yet our understanding of the world and its inhabitants remains woefully lopsided if we only concern ourselves with those who left evidence of their perspectives within easy reach. Just as social historians in the 1970s pioneered new techniques for peering into the lives of ordinary people, historians today are using a range of sources and tools to recover and interpret the experiences of those caught in the snares of slavery and its aftermaths, even when these historical subjects moved across national, imperial, or oceanic borders.⁹ The narrative of Vaughan's life recounted in this book emerged from a wide variety of sources, including early Lagos newspapers and administrative and commercial records in the Nigerian National Archives; accounts from American Baptist missionaries in the archives of the Southern Baptist Convention; information on Scipio Vaughan and his family in South Carolina archives, personal papers, and privately held family Bibles; American Colonization Society records; as well as from the generous contributions of Vaughans currently living in Nigeria, the UK, and the United States.

Like a collection of discrete marks that merge to form a recognizable image, these sources together have enabled me to reconstruct Vaughan and his actions as well as the broader contexts in which he lived. Not surprisingly, Vaughan emerges more clearly in some parts of his life than in others. His encounters with missionaries, for instance, are well documented. On the other hand, I read Vaughan's relative absence from historical records during his sojourn in Liberia as itself indicative of his experience there. Even as Vaughan's presence becomes stronger or fainter in particular moments, *Atlantic Bonds* illuminates the social, political, and even physical landscapes around him to reveal the opportunities, pressures, dangers, and possibilities for local people as well as newcomers.

The result is a tale ultimately more authentic and illustrative than the version offered up in 1975 and repeated as authoritative since then. It is, like the *Ebony* account, a story of unexpected journeys, unlikely encounters, deadly perils, bold escapes, and—almost incredibly—ultimate success, in a place where one might not expect an African American to fare so well. James Churchwill Vaughan (or Church Vaughan, as he was known during his lifetime) did in fact heed his father's deathbed request and travel to Africa (without his brother), arriving in Liberia in 1853. What he saw there, however, gave him little incentive to stay. He accepted an offer of employment in Yorubaland, twelve hundred miles to the east, with missionaries from the Southern Baptist Convention, a religious denomination founded on its support of American slavery. Over the next forty years in today's southwestern

Nigeria, Vaughan was taken captive, served as a military sharpshooter, built and rebuilt a livelihood, led a revolt against white racism, and founded a family of activists. He witnessed wars that fed the Atlantic slave trade, the effects of foreign antislavery initiatives, the beginnings of missionary Christianity, the expansion of Lagos as a commercial metropolis, and the imposition of British colonialism. And he kept in touch with his relatives in America, who were embroiled in their own struggles for survival, prosperity, and dignity in South Carolina and elsewhere. Politicians, diplomats, entrepreneurs, and educators, the Vaughans of modern Nigeria and the United States have maintained contact with one another over the past century, remembering their forefathers in ways attuned to their own times.

These family members are extraordinary for the odyssey of their ancestor and the endurance of their transcontinental ties. In spite of their distinctiveness, however, the Vaughans also lead us to histories much wider than those of their family. Church Vaughan's life story forms one thread in a larger fabric of interconnections during a transformative period in Atlantic history: when slavery was abolished in the United States and colonialism began in West Africa, and when black people in both places confronted challenges to their security and autonomy. Following Vaughan's journeys from South Carolina to Liberia to several parts of Yorubaland enables a view of linkages across the nineteenth-century Atlantic world as well as a comparison of related and similar phenomena in various settings.

Fundamentally, Vaughan's odyssey reveals the pervasiveness of slavery and slavelike conditions in multiple Atlantic world locations. With every move he made, Vaughan left one slave society only to arrive in another. This was not simply bad luck, but rather the result of deep transoceanic connections. By the nineteenth century, as many historians have detailed, linked processes of empire building, trade, and migration had produced an integrated Atlantic world.¹⁰ This world was built on a foundation of slavery and racial terror that developed colonial economies in the Americas, transformed politics in Africa, and channeled profits to Europe.¹¹ Moreover, slavery in any one place was reinforced by slavery elsewhere, with effects reverberating across long-distance circuits including those that Vaughan traveled. While slaving in Africa had peopled upcountry South Carolina, for instance, New World demand for captive labor fueled violence and expanded slavery in Africa itself.¹² Similarly, former American slaves sought refuge in Liberia even as slave exports from its shores to the Americas persisted.¹³ Despite these linkages, Atlantic world slavery took various forms, shaped by local contexts.¹⁴ As a young man, Vaughan may have assumed—as some still do—that its

form in the American South defined slavery, both in nature and extent. But Vaughan's travels broadened his perspective. Through Vaughan's eyes, we can observe the contours of slaving and slavery in antebellum South Carolina, newly independent Liberia, and politically volatile Yorubaland, while taking account of the linkages between them.

Further, as his story shows, an evolving range of power relations blurred distinctions between slavery and freedom on both sides of the Atlantic. Church Vaughan was technically free his entire life, but *freedom* was not clear-cut for people of African descent anywhere. In each place he lived, Vaughan's security, autonomy, and livelihood had to be carefully guarded. In South Carolina, free African Americans could be sentenced to slavery or simply spirited away, and they needed the support of white patrons in order to own property or pursue a decent living. In Liberia, settlers confronted international slavers while depriving indigenous people of their own liberty. And in Yorubaland, political wars and kidnapping raids generated thousands of slaves destined for Brazil and Cuba as well as servitude within Africa. In fact, as the war that would eventually end slavery in the United States began, Vaughan himself was held prisoner in a devastating conflict between two Yoruba city-states.

Even emancipation did not result in clear-cut freedom, on either side of the Atlantic.¹⁵ The British takeover of Lagos in 1861 was justified as an antislavery intervention. But a generation later, most residents of Vaughan's adopted home remained slave owners, slaves, or bonded dependents of some kind or other.¹⁶ And as British colonial control over Yorubaland was consolidated—a process begun and largely completed during Vaughan's four decades there—even elite, free people were increasingly unable to participate in politics, trade, and social life as they had before. Meanwhile, Vaughan's relatives and others in the post-Reconstruction South were facing their own struggles for autonomy, safety, and citizenship, despite the abolition of slavery. Labor exploitation and white supremacy took different forms in different places, but by the end of the nineteenth century, they shaped both Jim Crow America and colonial West Africa.

Vaughan and some of his fellow Lagosians were well aware of the similarities. He had left South Carolina, as an inscription on his tombstone put it, "owing to the oppressive laws then in force against colored men in the Southern States."¹⁷ His migration, in fact, anticipated the mass movements of African Americans after the Civil War and, on an even larger scale, in the early twentieth century.¹⁸ But Vaughan was not only *departing from* an oppressive American South; he was *going to* Africa. Like a range of other

African Americans from the eighteenth century to our own time, he looked to the continent where his ancestors had lived as a refuge from the horrors and aftermaths of American slavery. If part of the trauma of enslavement was being taken away from kin and community, relocation to the African “motherland” promised to mitigate the damage for captives’ descendants. Yet many African American sojourners to Africa have been disappointed by what they found there: not so much the comfort of literal or psychological kinship but a reminder of the differences in experience and outlook between people raised on different shores of the Atlantic Ocean.¹⁹ The family legend about Church Vaughan’s encounter with long-lost relatives bearing his father’s country marks, in fact, suggests that he did not stay with them because they did not accept his Christianity.²⁰ The story thus encapsulates the broader dilemmas of an African diaspora conceptualized as family but differentiated by nationality and background.²¹

Though scholars writing from an American context have considered the meaning of “return” to Africa for African Americans, Vaughan’s story also illuminates the diaspora from a perspective grounded in Africa. In the nineteenth century, refugees from slavery arrived in various parts of West Africa through multiple pathways, generating important effects in Africa itself.²² Southwestern Nigeria was home to an indigenous population (itself significantly altered by warfare and political upheaval) as well as “repatriates” from Sierra Leone, Brazil, and Cuba.²³ Liberia attracted thousands of African American settlers, some of whom—like Vaughan—struck out for other parts of Africa.²⁴ How did these transnational migrants—the “reverse” African diaspora—affect African societies? Even as slavery persisted, white supremacy flourished, and colonial rule intensified, diasporic Africans proved remarkably adept in gaining, and also challenging, various types of authority. In Nigeria, numerous “repatriates” and their descendants prospered under British administration as merchants, professionals, and government employees. Later, this same group produced many of the first generation of anti-colonial critics and Nigerian nationalists—Vaughan’s grandchildren among them.

How were they able to achieve such success and influence? Black Atlantic migrants often could draw on lessons learned in multiple contexts as well as dispersed practical networks in their struggles for security and dignity.²⁵ When Vaughan led a rebellion against white missionaries in colonial Lagos, for instance, he and his allies—some with diasporic or enslaved backgrounds and others without—linked colonial racism to the history of Atlantic slavery. This “diasporic consciousness” went beyond the level of analysis

and discourse, however, to something more concrete.²⁶ The rebels' strategy of separation from the mission church paralleled the contemporaneous development of all-African American religious and educational institutions, which Vaughan and some of his allies knew about from their contacts in the United States. Thus, Vaughan's links to America shaped his own life as well as broader developments in West Africa. In fact, the remarkable achievements of Vaughans on both sides of the Atlantic have likely been at least a partial result of their wide-ranging vision and connections.

Finally, one of the lessons of Vaughan's story as a "micro-history set in motion"²⁷ should be obvious: African and American history unfolded simultaneously. Contemporaries and historians have tended to imagine that African developments have transpired in a different temporal context than those in the United States or Europe.²⁸ The African diaspora concept, in fact, has often rested on two approaches to time: looking back, to a moment in which the enslaved were forcibly separated from their African communities; and looking forward, to a hoped-for restoration.²⁹ Early studies of African American cultural "origins" risked casting Africa as temporally frozen, with little change after the enslaved left its shores.³⁰ Similarly, twentieth century approaches to international development conceptualized Africa as "backward," chronologically behind the so-called West in its attainment of economic growth and personal liberties.³¹ Vaughan's journeys show us, though, that struggles over slavery and autonomy both spilled over national borders and occurred simultaneously in disparate places. Moreover, by the time he was well established in Lagos and continuing through the era of his grandchildren, Vaughan and his family on both sides of the Atlantic knew that West Africa was not *behind*. In fact, their prospects were arguably better there than in the United States.

This book recounts a story of survival, prosperity, and activism against a seemingly endless series of obstacles. It reveals an Atlantic world in which slavery was nearly ubiquitous and freedom was ambiguous. In that way, *Atlantic Bonds* is about ties of servitude and their legacies. But the title also invokes different types of bonds: of kinship lost, sought, or maintained across the ocean; of new communities created or joined in the aftermath of migration; and of political, ideological, and personal networks that connected far-flung locations. With his transatlantic outlook, Church Vaughan could compare the particular forms of oppression for black people in the American South and different parts of West Africa like almost no one else in his time. In his adopted homeland, Vaughan's transcontinental perspective opened up new possibilities and critiques as well as alliances beyond

those evoked by mythical country marks. Despite dangers of enslavement, limits on freedom, and constraints on citizenship, some determined, savvy, or lucky refugees from slavery and white supremacy were able to find shelter, and even make their own marks, in nineteenth-century Africa. One of them was Church Vaughan.