

Olaudah equiano: a man of many customs

Profession, Writer



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

James Pajich Prof. Carla Lovett Hist. 105 18 October 2012 Olaudah Equiano:
A Man of Many Customs The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano describes the life of a native African who was kidnapped from his homeland in the Eboe Province (which is now the Nigerian town of Isseke) at age eleven and thrown into the horrors of the African slave trade. Unlike most victims of the slave trade, Equiano regained his freedom and experienced multiple facets of life that no one could have expected.

Equiano became a man of diverse customs and values. However, due to the absence of written records' it is often a matter of debate as to what his true origin really was. Throughout his autobiography, Olaudah Equiano defined himself as a native African. He used vivid illustrations of his homeland and experiences on the Middle Passage, and was even willing to defend the public's view of him as a man of Africa. I personally define Equiano as a European citizen according to his customs, personal desires, and behavior.

Equiano's narrative played a key role in a variety of cultural, historical, and literary issues, therefore, the identification and ultimately the validity of its author take on special importance. While reading The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano I found it very apparent that Equiano viewed himself as an African born individual. He illustrated his culture and customs as an Igbo African in vivid details of culture, religion, law, and agriculture. (43-56) He also described the atrocities of the Atlantic slave trade as if he had recently experienced them: stating the smell, appearance, and reaction of his fellow slaves. 64-68) " Although culturally Equiano became " almost and Englishman," embracing Christianity and British customs, the experiences Equiano shared with slaves and free people of color, and living in a world

that did not differentiate between members of separate African communities, led him to consider himself also a son of Africa. " (21) Equiano embraced his African heritage throughout his life and even fought to uphold his reputation as such. There was an instance where two anonymous notes appeared in London papers charging that he was not from Africa at all, but was actually born on the Danish island of St. Croix in the Caribbean. Equiano realized that this claim falsified the validity of his Narrative and immediately confronted and threatened those responsible for the papers with legal action, providing actual witnesses of the fact that upon his arrival in England he was only able to speak an African language (24-25). This reaction shows that Equiano held much pride in his African identity and was willing defend it against those who claimed otherwise. However, there is evidence of significant authority that claims Equiano may have fabricated the origins of his identity.

There are two certain documents, discovered by literary historian Vincent Carretta, that pinpoint the birthplace of Equiano in South Carolina that keep modern day scholars and historians from absolute certainty of his actual birthplace. One of these documents was written on February 9, 1759 in the baptismal registry of St. Margaret's Church in Westminster, England. It read, " Gustavus Vassa (Olaudah Equiano) a Black born in Carolina 12 years old. " (26) The second document was from Equiano's Arctic expedition in 1773. It claims that he was currently 28 years old and born in South Carolina.

Neither of these findings is conclusive as to whether Equiano was African or American-born, but they certainly leave plenty of room for uncertainty. (26-27) I personally define Equiano as European, particularly an Englishman.

Notions of English nationality are found in great abundance throughout the text. Equiano's narrative repeatedly expresses his desire for a male English identity. He doesn't view Englishness as a racially exclusive nationality, but one that evokes an ethnic identity that Equiano defines through Christianity, and citizenship.

Two to three years after arriving in England Equiano claimed " I no longer looked at them as spirits, but as men superior to us; and therefore I had a stronger desire to resemble them; to imbibe their spirit, and imitate their manners I therefore embraced every occasion of improvement; and every new thing that I observed I treasured up in my memory. " (83) Here we see Equiano's envy for his new " superiors" and his wish to possess their culture and belongings. This desire strongly encouraged my opinion of Equiano's identity as European.

My opinion was also influenced by Equiano's acculturation into English society and customs during his early teen years. " I could now speak English tolerably well, and I perfectly understood everything that was said. I now not only felt myself quite easy with these new countrymen, but relished their society and manners. " (83) It is clear that Equiano identified his shipmates as his " countrymen" and personally enjoyed the interactions he had with each one of them. It was now between three and four years since I first came to England, a great part of which I had spent at sea; so that I became inured to that service, and began to consider myself as happily situated; for my master treated me always extremely well; and my attachment and gratitude to him were very great. From the various scenes I had beheld on ship-board, I soon grew a stranger to terror of every kind, and was, in that respect at

least, almost an Englishman. ” (83) This passage shows that Equiano developed an affectionate relationship with his master and also that their bond strengthened Equiano’s identity as an adult man.

Even more important, the identity Equiano is trying to proclaim for himself as an adult man, “ a stranger to terror of every kind”, is as a European. There are also certain actions and beliefs that Equiano maintained that provoked the establishment of his European desires. For instance, he believed the only manner towards proper adulthood is as an Englishman. Equiano doesn’t come right out and say this but there is a point in the text where he noted that he considers himself very fortunate that he didn’t receive his family members’ tribal marking on his face, as it would have represented his entrance into mature Ibo manhood. As I was now amongst a people who had not their faces scarred, like some of the African nations where I had been, I was very glad that I did not let them ornament me in that manner” (69). Also, during Equiano’s voyage to Jamaica and the Mosquito Shore he went to see a Guineamandoctorto purchase slaves to cultivate a plantation. He even chose them according to their native land in hopes that it is near his own. (189) The identification of Olaudah Equiano is of the utmost importance because of the critical role he played in the antislavery movement. Even the timing of a personable voice speaking out against slavery was important because it was a time when opposition to slavery was scattered throughout Britain and America and Equiano’s narrative, along with other factors, helped assemble the movement into one of the greatest in British history. It was Equiano’s personal accounts and experiences that validated his narrative. He possessed the intelligence and capability to spread his ideas to men and

women on all levels of British society. He also had the members of significant political authority to support his narrative to yet further its validity.

Unfortunately, Equiano never had the opportunity to bare witness to what he worked so hardly toward because the slave trade ended in both England and the United State ten years after his death (1807). Conclusively, it is very apparent that Olaudah Equiano distinguished himself as an African-born man, even though I personally identify him as a man of European customs based on his desires, influences, and his acculturation into European society. Most importantly, Equiano's narrative played a key role as an abolitionist tool in the fight against slavery and the identity of its author deems it valid as a historical document.