

# Book Review

- João José Reis, Flávio dos Santos Gomes, and Marcus J.M. Carvalho, translated by Sabrina Gledhill. *The Story of Rufino: Slavery, Freedom, and Islam in the Black Atlantic*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. ix + 244. Bibliography and Index. \$ 34.95 (cloth)

Fluidity remains a potent metaphor for historians and theorists of the Black Atlantic. Tracking the peripatetic life of Rufino José Maria, also known as Abuncare, from his origins in the Kingdom of Òyó to the later decades of his life in mid nineteenth-century Recife, Brazil, brings to light how highly adaptable individuals navigated between the currents of slaving and enslavement in the nineteenth century South Atlantic. João José Reis, Flávio dos Santos Gomes, and Marcus J.M. de Carvalho follow Rufino's oceanic crisscrossing in a vivid microhistory that brings together the histories of slavery, illegal slave trade ventures, and Islamic communities in West Africa and Brazil.

An 1853 police interrogation conducted in Recife documented much of what we know of Rufino's life. During their interview, clerks and witnesses to the investigation drafted a transcription of Rufino's autobiography as he related it to the officers. Another key source is a report of the interview published later as an article by one of the witnesses in the Rio de Janeiro newspaper *Jornal do Commercio*. Police caught Rufino in a dragnet in the midst of widespread rumors of a possible slave revolt conspiracy in the city and arrested him in particular for possessing Arabic manuscripts. The police discovery of Arabic writings fearfully recalled the Malê Revolt of 1835, a slave rebellion launched by Muslims who took inspiration from their compatriots in Haiti. Rufino's narrative provides his biographers a lens through which to better map and understand the relationships that developed between slavery, Islam, healing, and Diasporic African communities in this period. From Atlantic Africa to Brazil, Rufino's identity proved to be fluid, as he changed from enslaved captive to freedman, and later a slaver himself, and from his work as a cook to his later labors as a healer-diviner and *alufá*, or priestly teacher.

*The Story of Rufino* is divided into three parts that shift from Rufino's origins in Òyó and his enslavement in Bahia, to his career in the illegal slave trade that carried him from Rio de Janeiro towards Angola and Sierra Leone, and finally to his life as healer and *alufá* in Recife. In addition to the police transcript, the authors rely on newspapers, missionary memoirs, natural histories, dictionaries and grammars, journals, and personal narratives that add depth to Rufino's odyssey.

Rufino was born in Ọ̀yó sometime in the early nineteenth century to a Yorùbá-speaking Muslim family. War between the Hausa Kingdoms that later formed the Sokoto Caliphate and Ọ̀yó shaped Rufino's childhood. His biographers speculate that Rufino's parents practiced a syncretic form of Islam that incorporated devotion to Yorùbá Ọ̀rìṣàs such as Šàngó, a powerful axe-wielding ọ̀rìṣà associated with royalty who wields the powers of thunder and lightning. After a Hausa-led slave rebellion erupted in Ọ̀yó in 1817, relations between Muslims of Yorùbá, Hausa, and Fulani ancestry and those who practiced Ọ̀rìṣà worship worsened. During a conflict between the Ilorin Emirate and Ọ̀yó, Hausa slavers captured and sold Rufino to traffickers in Lagos. Instructors who teach about the first and middle passages will appreciate these opening chapters for their in-depth discussion of politics and religion in the Bight of Benin, as well as their descriptions of slave ship voyages.

From Lagos, Rufino boarded a slave vessel bound for Salvador da Bahia in approximately 1823 or 1824. In Bahia, he labored as a domestic slave for a *pardo* apothecary whose business included supplying drugs to hospitals, orphanages, and the Medical-Surgical College. The apothecary trained Rufino as a cook, but it is likely that he learned much of the everyday workings of his enslaver's shop, and perhaps served him as a *prático de botica* handling medicinal compounds and the instruments of his enslaver's trade such as mortars, amphorae, and funnels.

After eight years in Salvador, Rufino accompanied the apothecary's son southward to São Pedro do Rio Grande do Sul, where he was sold again in 1831, first to a merchant and later a judge residing in Porto Alegre. Here he may have rubbed shoulders with Muslim participants of a "black Mina club" that studied and copied verses of the Qur'ān in secret (29). In 1835, Rufino paid for his manumission from the judge, and moved on to Rio de Janeiro where he joined the crew of the illegal slaver *São Jose* as a cook. The ship's owners exchanged goods like fabrics for captives between the Brazilian cities of Recife, Salvador, and Rio de Janeiro and West Central African ports, especially Luanda and Cabinda. On the return voyages, captives, euphemistically termed by slavers as "settlers," would be secretly delivered on beaches before being sold. Illegal slavers often explained their lack of return cargo due to pirate attacks. Ships like the *São Jose* plied the illegal slave trade between Brazil and Angola in this period, since after 1830 Brazil joined the United Kingdom and other nations in treaties that legally abolished the Atlantic slave trade.

In 1841 Rufino joined another slaving voyage to Luanda aboard the barque *Ermelinda*, this time as a cook and a "small shipper" looking to purchase several slaves for himself (111). In their chapters on illegal slave trade voyages between Brazil and Angola, the authors emphasize the mutable nature of slaving and slave ship crews. Like Rufino, other captives who gained their status as freedman became slavers themselves, including one man, Antonio Nacizo, identified as being of the Jeje nation. After surviving the middle passage and enslavement, Nacizo ultimately became a slave ship captain himself, leading

voyages from the Slave Coast, Cabinda, and Molembo to Bahia, between 1812 and 1815 (91).

While *en route* to Luanda, a British cruiser, the *Water Witch* of the West Africa Squadron, seized the ship and its cargo. Under the terms of the Equipment Act of 1839, Royal Navy ships could lawfully capture suspected slavers if their ships contained particularly suspicious tools of the slave trade, such as leg irons, excessive provisions of food and water, barrels of cowries, or materials for building temporary holds on deck.

After being escorted by the *Water Witch*, the captain and crew of the *Ermelinda* arrived in the Sierra Leone Colony in December 1841 to await trial by the Mixed Commission Courts for the Suppression of the Slave Trade. In the multilingual environs of Freetown, Rufino joined a *madrasa* of Wolof, Fulani, Mandinka, and Aku—a term for Yorùbá-speakers in Sierra Leonean Krio—Muslims practicing their faith outside of the evangelical confines of the colony’s Christian overlords. In the Fourah Bay *madrasa*, Rufino deepened his studies of the Qur’ān and learned how to fashion amulet necklaces, known in South America as *bolsas de mandinga*. He also learned healing techniques and ritual divination, including the use of magic squares and love potions.

Ultimately, after discovering a plot to plant evidence, the Mixed Commission Courts acquitted the *Ermelinda* and its crew, who returned to Brazil in 1842. After a second voyage to Sierra Leone to seek damages from the loss of the ship’s cargo, Rufino settled in Recife where he built a life for himself as a healer-diviner. A good deal of his practice involved crafting love spells and amulets, divining with a rosary, and other forms of “science that comes to him from the prophet” (225).

While his life was uncommon, Rufino’s biography reminds historians of the frequently shifting boundaries between enslaved and enslaver in the Black Atlantic. Like the narratives of Olaudah Equiano or Little Ephraim Robin John and Ancona Robin John, Rufino’s story makes clear that enslaved people could later become slavers themselves, and vice versa. Rufino’s narrative also brings into focus the development of both syncretic and orthodox forms of Afro-Brazilian Islam in nineteenth century Brazil, as Rufino and other Malês clashed with more conservative worshippers in the city’s mosques and other places of worship. The authors also place Rufino and his medico-magical practice within the contexts of other Atlantic African religious traditions, namely the Candomblé and Xangô ritualists who he competed against for clients in Pernambuco.

The authors close their account by characterizing Rufino as a multilingual cosmopolitan fluent in Yorùbá, Portuguese, the pidgins spoken in Atlantic slaving ports, the Krio *patois* found in Sierra Leone, and some Arabic. Like James Sweet’s biography of Domingos Álvares, the authors argue that Rufino should be understood as a “sort of cultural and even psychological affront to the world of Brazilian whites, because he was a black man who took pride in being different, a Muslim with the powers of healing, divining, making

people fall in and out of love, and casting and removing spells, which made him an eminent person among the Africans of Recife” (243). They further add that he was an “Atlantic *ladino*” who ably negotiated between unfreedom and freedom throughout his life. Rufino’s story thus makes for an excellent case study of the complexities of the African Diaspora and the Black Atlantic worlds, in which slaves could and did become slaveholders in their own right. Teacher-scholars in global history will find the book a useful volume for tying together threads from histories of Atlantic slavery, Islam in West Africa, Britain’s suppression of the slave trade, and the illegal slave trade in Brazil. Instructors will find *The Story of Rufino* appropriate for undergraduate courses and graduate seminars that involve these topics, as well as courses on the Black Atlantic. Courses on the African Diaspora and Islam that use well-known narratives of individuals such as Ayuba Suleiman Diallo, Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua, or Abdul-Rahman ibn Ibrahima Sori would also find *The Story of Rufino* to be a valuable text. Finally, the book’s discussion of Rufino’s healing business in Recife is a welcome addition to other studies of medicine and healing knowledge in the Black Atlantic.

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