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# African Cowboys on the Argentine Pampas: Their Disappearance from the Historical Record

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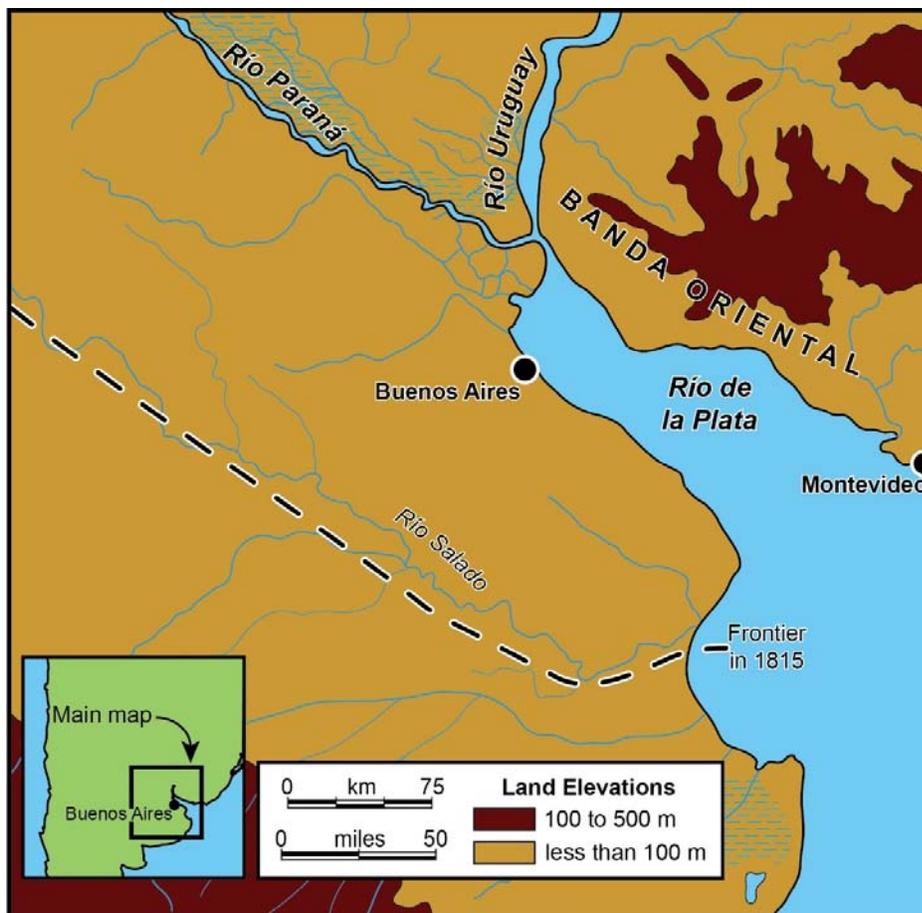
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## African Cowboys on the Argentine Pampas: Their Disappearance from the Historical Record

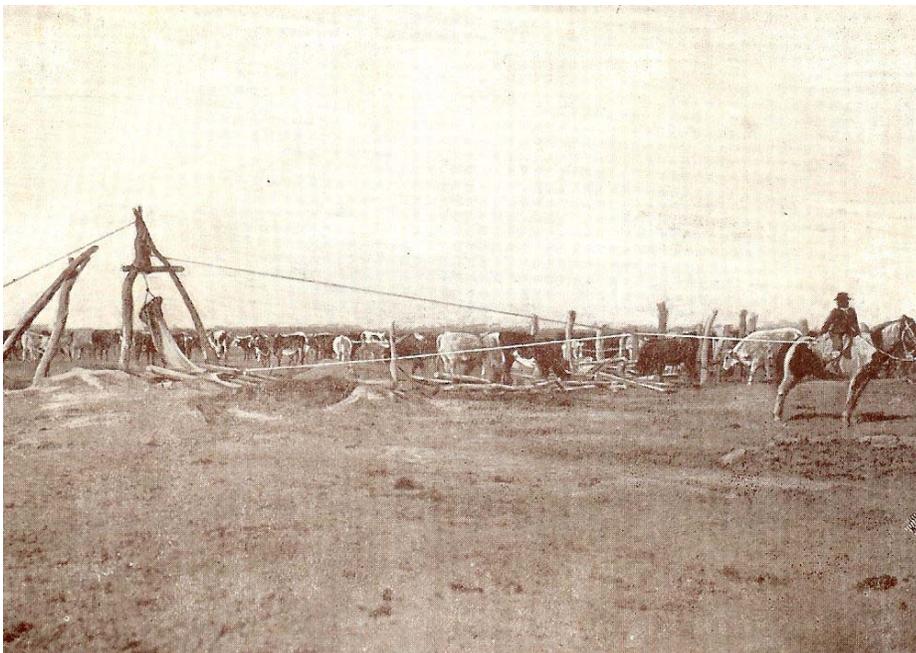
Following the introduction of cattle into the Caribbean in 1493, during Christopher Columbus's second voyage, cattle ranching proliferated in a series of frontiers across the grasslands of the Americas. While historians have recognized that Africans and their descendants were involved in the establishment of those ranching frontiers, the emphasis has been on their labor rather than their creative participation. In part that bias occurred because historians have traditionally relied on archival documents created by racially biased whites who emphasized their own roles rather than black ideas and creativity. In a recent book—*Black Ranching Frontiers: African Cattle Herders of the Atlantic World, 1500-1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012)—I addressed that issue by drawing on a range of complementary evidence such as landscape vestiges, oral histories, and material culture. As a consequence, I was able to demonstrate the African contribution to the expansion of cattle ranching in Louisiana, Mexico, the Caribbean, and the Pampas of Argentina. This essay summarizes one aspect of the chapter about the Pampas that illustrates how material culture evidence can reveal the biases inherent in the archival documents.



**Figure 1.** The Pampas of what are now Argentina and Uruguay in the early nineteenth century, showing the frontier with indigenous people in 1815.

Although Africans do not seem to have played much of a creative role in establishing cattle ranching on the Pampas during colonial times, in the early nineteenth century the presence of people from Senegambia on ranches resulted in the introduction of an African water-lifting device: the bottomless bucket, or *balde sin fondo*. With victory over Spain in 1818, Argentinean independence, and the opening of new export markets for livestock products, ranching expanded across the vast Pampas grasslands, and new practices dramatically changed the colonial herding ecology. An aspect of that transformation in which Africans played a particularly creative role involved the supply of drinking water to the herds as they expanded into pastures distant from major perennial streams. That challenge was familiar to Senegambian herders who had to supply water during the long drive southward from the fringes of the Sahara to the banks of the Senegal and Gambia rivers as the rains ended and the vegetation of the Sahel turned from green to brown.

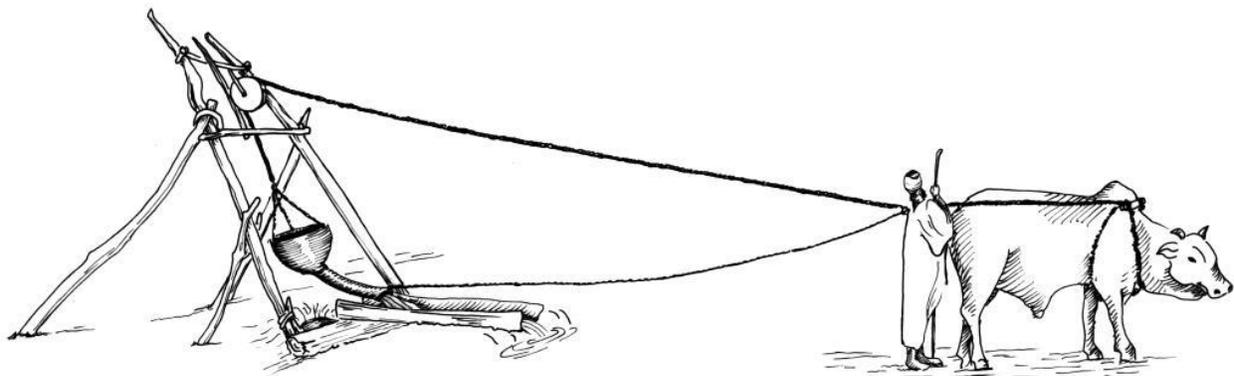
The bottomless bucket provided the solution before windmills rendered it obsolete in the early twentieth century. The bottomless bucket lifted water from wells with the labor of a single person, even a child, on a horse. Observers at the time claimed that a single worker with a change of horses could use a bottomless bucket to water two thousand head of cattle in eight hours. It achieved that efficiency with a large, calfskin bucket that was open at both ends and had two ropes attached. A thick rope lifted the bucket and a thin rope held the bottom closed until it had emerged from the mouth of the well and could spill the water into a flume that then discharged into a drinking trough. It thereby had the capacity to raise three times as much water with each lift as the wells dating to the colonial period, which used a small bucket pulled up by hand on a single rope. A photograph from about 1900 illustrates the operation of the bottomless bucket.



**Figure 2.** Photograph of a bottomless bucket in use on the Pampas about 1900. From the collection of Andrew Sluyter, originally published in the *Agricultural and Pastoral Census of the Nation: Stock-Breeding and Agriculture in 1908* (Buenos Aires: Printing Works of the Argentine Meteorological Office, 1909).

The conventional wisdom has long been that in the mid-1820s a Spaniard named Vicente Lanuza invented the original bottomless bucket. That claim was first made by Carlos Pellegrini in 1853, years after Lanuza had died, in an article in the periodical *Revista del Plata*. Pellegrini was head of the Office of Industrial Patents at the time and based his conclusion on Lanuza's patent application of November 1826, now preserved in the Archivo General de la Nación in Buenos Aires. In his application, Lanuza claimed he had invented the bottomless bucket, and in December 1826 the government recognized his creativity by granting him the exclusive right of manufacture for a period of four years. So many economic, agricultural, and environmental historians have since uncritically repeated Pellegrini's claim that Lanuza was the inventor of the bottomless bucket that it has become conventional wisdom.

Somewhat oddly, in hindsight, neither Pellegrini nor the many who subsequently repeated his claim seem to have realized that Africans have used nearly identical water-lifting devices for many centuries. They occur in a broad belt that stretches from India in the east to Morocco in the west and southward into the Sahel. And they date to at least the late seventeenth century, when Engelbert Kaempfer saw them in Iran and published an illustration of what appears remarkably like a bottomless bucket in his *Amoenitatum Exoticarum Politico-Physico-Medicarum Fasciculi V* (Paris: Lemgoviaë, 1712).



**Figure 3.** The type of water hoist used in the Sahara and the Sahel. Drawing from A. Sluyter based on photographs in Johannes Nicolaisen, *Ecology and Culture of the Pastoral Tuareg, with Particular Reference to the Tuareg of Ahaggar and Ayr* (Copenhagen: National Museum of Copenhagen, 1963).

That striking resemblance raises the possibility that one or more of the many African residents of the Pampas in the early nineteenth century transferred the idea of the bottomless bucket directly from Africa and that Lanuza appropriated rather than invented it. Sources ranging from newspaper advertisements and censuses to probate inventories and account ledgers all demonstrate that the rural Pampas had a substantial African and Afro-descended population from colonial times through the middle of the nineteenth century. A census of August 1815, partially preserved in the Archivo General de la Nación, provides the earliest detailed enumeration and

reveals that Africans and Afro-descendants made up 13.6 percent of the population, 4,316 out of the 31,676 inhabitants of the rural districts that stretched from Buenos Aires southward to the frontier at the Salado River. Of the 1,402 inhabitants of African birth, some 64 percent came from West Africa, principally people of Guinea, Mina, and Hausa origin. Another 19 percent were from West-Central Africa: Angola, Congo, and Gabón. Only 2 percent came from Mozambique and Madagascar, in Southeast Africa. And 15 percent lacked any designation more specific than African.



**Figure 4.** Color lithograph of gauchos slaughtering cattle in the 1830s near Buenos Aires, Argentina. From the collection of Andrew Sluyter, originally bound with thirty-five other lithographs in César Hipólito Bacle, *Trajes y Costumbres de la Provincia de Buenos-Aires* (Buenos Aires: Bacle y Compañía, 1833).

The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database (<http://www.slavevoyages.org>) helps to further specify the Senegambian origins of many of the West Africans. That online database tabulates 67,246 disembarkations of enslaved Africans along the Río de la Plata between the 1650s and early 1830s, about half arriving before 1750 and the rest afterwards. Of the 34,280 disembarkations before 1750, 74 percent originated in West-Central Africa, 6 percent in Southeast Africa, and 20 percent in West Africa. That pattern shifted and became less concentrated after 1750, when out of 32,964 disembarkations only 29 percent originated in West-Central Africa, 45 percent in Southeast Africa, and 26 percent in West Africa. The vast majority of the West Africans, both before and after 1750, embarked in the Gold Coast, Bight of Benin, and Bight of Biafra rather than Senegambia. Only 2,569 originated in Senegambia, a mere 3.8 percent of the total. Nonetheless, 85 percent of those Senegambians disembarked between 1800 and 1806 from fifteen vessels variously flying the Spanish, Portuguese, Danish, and US flags. The rural African and Afro-descended population therefore seems to have included a disproportionate number of the West Africans recorded in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, only about one-quarter of the 32,964 disembarkations after 1750 but two-thirds of the rural Africans in 1815. That the 1,402 rural Africans of 1815 therefore included at least some of the 2,175 Senegambians who disembarked between 1800 and 1806 seems reasonably certain.

The census provides much less information on the occupations of most of those rural Africans and Afro-descendants but does demonstrate that many were involved in ranching. Probate inventories from the late colonial and early national periods demonstrate that some of them even owned their own small herds of cattle, awarded to them by ranchers to discourage escape from enslavement.

One or more of those Africans, therefore, perhaps some of the 2,175 Senegambians who disembarked between 1800 and 1806, might have built a bottomless bucket based on their prior experience herding cattle across the Sahel, between the valleys of the Gambia, Senegal, and Niger rivers into the southern fringes of the Sahara. Impressed by the efficiency of their water hoist, Lanuza used his social power to appropriate the design as his own invention.

Much remains uncertain about the past, but no direct documentary evidence exists that Lanuza independently invented the bottomless bucket other than his own claim in a patent application through which he hoped to derive a financial benefit. Nor, by the same standard of evidence, does any direct documentary evidence exist that one or more of Lanuza's slaves built the first bottomless bucket on the Pampas and that Lanuza appropriated that African knowledge and labor. The second possibility, however, seems the most likely because of the many Senegambians who arrived on the ranches of the Pampas in the early nineteenth century and the likelihood that some were familiar with the nearly identical form of the bottomless bucket so common in the Sahel of West Africa.

Pellegrini's claim that Lanuza invented the bottomless bucket thus begins to appear to be part of the process through which Argentineans erased Africans and Afro-descendants from their history, as demonstrated by George Reid Andrews (<http://www.blackpast.org/contributor/andrews-george-reid>) in *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires, 1800–1900* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980). With political independence from Spain, the substantial African presence in Argentina began to decline. Between 1810 and 1887, their number in Buenos Aires fell from 9,615 to 8,005 and their proportion from 30 to less than 2 percent of the total population. Explanations for that decline include the abolition, at least

in law, of the slave trade in 1813 and the resulting reduction in the number of African arrivals. Parallel legislation emancipated children at birth and adult males through enlistment in the army, resulting in a disproportionately high death rate among enslaved males in the many regional and civil wars of the nineteenth century. Other causes for the decline of the population of African origin include disproportionately high death rates among them due to poverty, the overwhelming influx of European immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and discursive elision through their obfuscation in censuses and history books.

A major reason for making Africans and Afro-descendants disappear from Argentinean history books was that they helped form the armies that kept the dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas in power from 1829 until 1852, as Richard W. Slatta and others have written about (<http://www.blackpast.org/perspectives/cowboys-color-south-america>). The liberals who ousted Rosas, such as Pellegrini and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, characterized Rosas, *gauchos*, blacks, and indigenous peoples as categorically backwards. The Liberals therefore minimized the roles of nonwhites in creating Argentinean culture and society in an effort to categorize it as white, European, modern, and progressive. Whites were the protagonists in that nationalist narrative, and Pellegrini therefore uncritically attributed the invention of the bottomless bucket to Lanuza. Historians and others have just as uncritically accepted and reiterated that claim for the past century and a half.

By becoming more critical of such received ideas about our history, we can revise our understanding of how people of African origin contributed to the establishment of novel environmental, social, and cultural relations in the Americas. Such efforts to achieve a measure of cultural justice go well beyond recognizing the African role in the history of musical genres such as jazz. Ultimately we will be able to write more complete histories of how actors of African, European, indigenous, and mixed origins jointly participated in a creative process through which the distinct places of the Americas emerged over the colonial and early national periods.

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