

The two final chapters concern Muslims in the Caribbean. Islam was brought to the islands and to South America by slaves. They were only a small minority of the victims of the trans-Atlantic trade and few were literate. Surviving documents are mostly in Arabic although some are in African languages written in Arabic script. Much of the information here comes from Christian missionaries, some of whom entered into discussions with slaves about the rival merits of Islam and Christianity. Some Muslim slaves established free communities. One enterprising Islamic 'priest' bought his freedom, emancipated others as they arrived on a slave ship, and thus established a self-supporting free community.

This book, as with all collections of conference papers with a wide focus, opens many questions on a range of subjects. It is a very welcome addition to slavery studies particularly because it breaks new ground, makes all the use possible of sparse sources and, most importantly, points the way to further research.

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JAY SPAULDING and STEPHANIE BESWICK (eds), *African Systems of Slavery*.

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2009, 304 pp.

This book contributes some valuable empirical evidence and ideas to the study of African slavery. Yet, overall, it is a disappointment. The editors' introduction fails to acknowledge a good many other studies that have offered in-depth analyses of slavery in African societies. If this material had been considered, it would have nuanced the view that the study of African slavery 'should not be reduced to merely the abused hinterland of a hegemonic Black Atlantic system focused on the Americas' (p. 9). Following the lead of a recent paper by Thomas McCaskie, a critical genealogy of the peculiar problematization of Atlantic slavery produced by a 'tradition of scholarship generated by Afrocentrism and white guilt' (p. 2) would have been timely. But Spaulding and Beswick's introduction attributes to this school of thought a dominance that it has not achieved: 'The present study does not regard Africa as one shore of the Black Atlantic. It hopes to help reclaim Africa for Africans' (p. 2). In this ambitious effort, the editors could have considered Ibrahima Thioub's insight that African scholars and publics contributed to the silencing of the history of African slavery, thereby partly amplifying the distortions created by 'Black Atlantic' perspectives.

The notion of 'African systems of slavery' is used vaguely. Watson's influential *Asian and African Systems of Slavery*, which, for better or worse, applied the notion of 'system' consistently, is not mentioned. Why focus on 'systems', which suggests that the cases discussed in the volume are seen as components of integrated wholes, when the editors conclude that 'no simple formula suffices to explain the numerous and diverse forms of African servitude' (p. 9)? If this is a political stance ('The continent asks for consideration in its own right and on its own terms . . .', p. 9), it risks repeating the mistakes of the Afrocentric paradigms it criticizes. We are told that in African systems of slavery 'it is not always self-evident who should be considered a slave in the Western sense' (p. 3). Presumably 'slavery in the Western sense' is meant to correspond to the model of enslavement that dominated the trans-Atlantic trade, to which the introduction ascribes a generality that falls short of explaining forms of slavery as diverse as those found

in Ancient Greece and Rome, medieval trade across the Mediterranean, feudal serfdom . . . the list is long. This crude opposition between 'Western slavery' and 'African systems of slavery' reproduces the flaws it aims to challenge.

Weaknesses in the volume's conception should not detract from the value of several of its contributions. Klein's chapter offers a compelling overview of slavery in the Western Sudan from medieval times to the nineteenth century, which will be useful to teachers of African slavery at all levels. Baum's chapter on slavery amongst the Diola of Senegambia is stimulating, though it leaves many questions open. For example, we are told that people of slave status 'often' inherited the wealth of their childless masters. But how 'often' were the masters childless? Social and economic mobility appear so accessible to slaves in Diola communities that one wonders why the label 'slave' was so sticky. Achebe's chapter discusses the state-led banning of the worship of the Efurú deity in Igbo communities (Nigeria). The category 'slave' is mobilized by different actors with clashing perspectives on Efurú, to whom girls were ritually married by their families in expiation of past sins. Achebe, who appears sympathetic to the arguments of Efurú's devotees, could have analysed more critically the interpretative struggles described in the chapter. In a rich analysis of human rights violations committed by post-colonial regimes in Equatorial Guinea, Fegley highlights the failures of the UN and international community to prevent these situations. Does the inclusion of this chapter in the book suggest that we ought to analyse systematic violence by the ruling elites of independent African countries as intrinsically *African* 'systems of slavery'? Similar questions are raised by Fegley's second chapter, on Ugandan child soldiers. Is it being suggested that the use of children for military purposes should be analysed from the perspective of *African* understandings of childhood and slavery? If so, why does Fegley not tell us what these understandings might be, rather than use the analytical framework of international advocacy? Harms's chapter on slavery in politically decentralized societies of Equatorial Africa is a much-needed and sharp reassessment of the debate over the interpretation of African slaves as, variously, kin-like or non-kin *par excellence*. Using texts on slavery from the Swedish missionary K. E. Laman's corpus of responses by native KiKongo speakers (*ca* 1915), McGaffey's chapter provides an outstanding analysis of Kongo slavery. This excellent contribution reconfirms that, lacking an epistemology of 'slavery' in different African contexts, the persistent obsession with classifying 'African slavery' as more or less 'benign' than 'Western slavery' is pointless. Spaulding's concluding chapter reconstructs the history of slavery in Nubian tradition, arguing that 'the Nubian community may be viewed as creator of its own culture and architect of its own history' (p. 247). This is contrasted to Islamic influence in the area: 'In West and Central Africa the most conspicuous alien terminology and standards have been European; both slavery itself and its antitheses have often been interpreted in Eurocentric terms as part of a much wider and conceptually coherent Black Atlantic discourse. In the Sudan the correspondingly intrusive terminology and standards have been Islamic' (p. 247). In one sentence, the major role played by Islam in West and Central African history is brushed away, together with the substantial historiography devoted to it. What replaces it is a culturalist history that conceals the ways in which different views of slavery often coexist within the same society, and historical processes and concepts are shaped by both internal and external stimuli. The volume would have benefited from accompanying maps and a much more rigorous editing of the text.

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