

AFRICAN WOMEN IN THE ATLANTIC WORLD

African Women in the Atlantic World: Property, Vulnerability & Mobility, 1660–1880.

Edited by Mariana P. Candido and Adam Jones.

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At the start of their edited volume, Mariana Candido and Adam Jones note the relative paucity of recent scholarship on African women's experiences in the period from the late seventeenth to the late nineteenth century. They observe that this small output correlates with a historiographical era in which the study of the Atlantic slave trade has thrived more generally and significant growth has occurred in the study of African women in other time periods, particularly during and after the 'formal imposition' of European colonialism in the late nineteenth century.

This volume makes an important contribution in responding to this gap in the scholarship. It includes twelve essays from historians whose research ranges from the Upper Guinea Coast to Angola. Chronologically, more than half of the volume focuses on the nineteenth century. Esteban Salas, writing on women's economic activities in Catumbela, Angola, focuses mostly on the late eighteenth century; so too does Natalie Everts, who writes on women's use of both local kin networks and the resources of European colonial administrators to navigate their familial and social needs on the central Gold Coast. In his chapter, Jones covers over three centuries of European documents between the 1600s and 1800s, dissecting how colonial powers interpreted what they deemed unusual sexual relationships in multiple West African communities. Lorelle Semley's study of a biracial woman from Senegal, who lived what Semley incisively characterizes as a 'Trans-African' life between West Africa, France, and the Americas, stretches from the 1730s to the 1830s (193). Only Colleen Kriger, in a similar microhistory of a Luso-African woman who lived most of her life between the Gambia and England, focuses on the seventeenth century.

The essays work well together as a group, and many authors directly engage with their fellow contributors, referencing either other chapters in the collection or broader themes in the volume. Candido and Jones seek specifically to address the coastal regions of West and West-Central Africa as an 'intercultural space' constituted by Africans and non-Africans, with the latter being mostly Europeans engaged in the Atlantic trade (2). But the dominant analytical objective of this collection is to focus on women's experiences, their economic activities, their social networks, 'their intimate relationships, their daily lives and the roles they played in West Africa's Atlantic ports' (235).

In a noteworthy strength, all the authors avoid casting women in oversimplified ways, as either collaborators in, or victims of, the Atlantic slavery system. Many of the essays also fruitfully explore the surprising ways that some women used European institutions and colonial laws, often manipulating those non-African structures for their own purposes. Usually the women who did so were not simply reworking a European system for their

own ends. Rather, these women both embraced and sought to maneuver within that system. Nowhere is this dynamic clearer than in Everts' case study of Aquassiba, an Akan woman who used her marriage to a Dutch slave trader to make an appeal to the Dutch court at Elmina Castle, earning a successful ruling against a local man who wished to claim her as a slave. Everts stresses the 'initiative [which Aquassiba] took to negotiate her position' and eventually secure a resolution, which not only certified her freedom but also allowed her to establish a household and become a successful trader — an outcome that economically benefited her biological children as well as her *abusua*, or maternal clan (114–15). As in the case of Aquassiba, most essays in this volume illuminate ways that women deeply embedded within the multicultural and colonial context of the Atlantic coast simultaneously maintained cultural and practical ties to their local institutions and communities.

Another strength of this project is the self-conscious and transparent presentation of archival and other sources. Candido and Kristin Mann, for example, leave their readers with intimate knowledge of the physical condition and analytical challenges of researching nineteenth-century legal documents in Angola and Nigeria. Ademide Adelus-Adeluyi weaves geography and spatial history into the biographies of her two female subjects who lived in Southern Nigeria in the mid-1800s. Biographical microhistories form the core of many essays here, and Semley directly calls for more creative versions of that kind of work (214).

This collection presents a rewritten African Atlantic history that accounts for more diverse female experiences than commonly imagined. The volume features mostly free and often prosperous women, but never loses sight of the racialized slavery at the center of the whole Atlantic enterprise. Authors provide intricate analyses of the assets that women sought to 'maintain' once they had acquired them, whether they consisted of material wealth, social status, or protection from enslavement or other harm (233). The volume is an accomplishment in subtle, feminist, and methodologically astute historical writing which makes a significant contribution to African history, the history of Atlantic slavery and slave trading, as well as to global women's history.

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