

BOOK REVIEW

An African Society's Perception of Slavery in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

Slavery, Resistance, and Identity in Early Modern West Africa, the Ethnic-State of Gajaaga

Makhroufi Ousmane Traoré. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2024. Pp. *xiii* + 459. \$150.00, hardcover (ISBN: 9781009282345); ebook (ISBN: 9781009282352).

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As the number and variety of scholarly studies about slavery in precolonial West Africa increase, so do new understandings to how specific states and societies of the continent conceived of this institution. In his recent and rich contribution to the scholarship of slavery in West Africa, Makhroufi Ousmane Traoré brings together the themes of resistance and ethnicity to demonstrate how the Soninke ethnic state of Gajaaga responded to and was impacted by the trans-Saharan and transatlantic slave trades. In the process, we learn how the people of Gajaaga conceived of slavery itself.

Traoré uses four bodies of sources for his study: Arabic sources; oral traditions; European travel accounts published from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century; and documents held in French, British, and Senegalese national archives (36–37). By reading along and against the archival grain, Traoré pays attention to Europeans' positionality as outsiders, while listening simultaneously for Soninke subjectivity (40). According to the author, written archives informed the book's central theme of resistance, which contemporary oral traditions did not (39).

Slavery, Resistance, and Identity in Early Modern West Africa is organized into three parts with six chapters. Chapter One traces the rise and formation of the Soninke diaspora after the demise of the Soninke empire, within the context of the trans-Saharan and transatlantic slave trades (43). Chapter Two is significant to the historiography of West African slavery; in it the author challenges the prevailing scholarly idea that the external slave trades in the region were extensions of local and institutionalized slavery systems in African societies (99). Rather, Traoré distinguishes between servile relationships within African social stratification and merchant slavery (100).

Chapter Three examines the geostrategic importance of the Senegal River in both trans-Saharan and transatlantic relations, and the opening of the inland societies of Gajaaga. The author also considers encounters stemming from the presence of the world's trading nations in the area, and the imperial rivalries over slave markets that developed. Chapter Four zooms in on the culture of violence deliberately instigated by slave traders against the Soninke people of Gajaaga, and the damaging

effects it had on people, environment, and agricultural activities. Because of this violence, Gajaaga transformed from a relatively fluid and inclusive state through which ethnic conversion persisted towards an exclusive ethnic one through retribalization — that is, a process of ethnic exclusiveness which was reduced to hardened borders and distinguish those who did not belong. This resulted in a strengthened sense of territoriality (17, 28, 52, 215).

In Chapter Five, the author uses French sources against the grain to fill in gaps and theorize the sources of conflict and resistance by the Bacili warriors (these are members of the Gajaaga royal families who occupied the state's political structure as warriors) towards the French in the latter's imperial efforts targeted at Gajaaga's gold mines. Chapter Six examines the role played by an individual — Ayuba Suleyman Diallo, a native of neighboring Bundu who was kidnapped, sold into slavery, taken to America, and returned to West Africa to become the representative of the British Royal African Company in Upper Senegal. Through the story of Diallo and the role he played in the region, Traoré demonstrates how global movements and encounters within the Atlantic and Sahara influenced individuals' identities and belonging. Neither static nor confined to the physical boundaries of the ethnic state, identity and belonging mapped along imaginary boundaries and concentric circles of identity (369–70).

The author concludes the book by offering a justification for Africans imaginative fear of European cannibalism which was attributed to the latter's culture of slavery and violence. He also notes from the database that there was no specific policy indicating preference for either male, female, or infant captives in either the European and African slave markets, as reported by some historians whom he does not reference (413). Finally, he reiterates his argument to consider the workings of African sociopolitical structures before the slave trades (417). Prior, in Chapter Two, the author analyzes widely shared servile relationships within West African social stratification. A type of social stratification specific to the western Sudan, where his study is based, is *jònya* (from the Mande word *jòn*, meaning “servant”). As demonstrated in the book, the *jòn* belonged to the lineage and could not be sold, rented, or transferred in any way (101–44). This however changed with the advent of the trans-Saharan and transatlantic slave trades.

Through this detailed study, Traoré makes numerous contributions, not only to the slave trade history of the Soninke of Gajaaga, but to that of West Africa generally. By focusing on the ethnic state of Gajaaga, the author demonstrates the importance of singling out societies to understand people's perception to slavery. This perception was reflected in how the populations of Gajaaga relied on their social, political, religious, and diplomatic capital to reject Arab and European merchant slavery which threatened their identity, sovereignty, and freedom (2, 77). The author also offers a compelling reasoning to African agency during this period by emphasizing different categories of agency (6–11; 417–18). By analyzing Gajaaga's intransigence to the external slave trades in addition to Diallo's act of protecting his own people from the slave trade (378; 383–85), Traoré, like Saidiya Hartmann, contradicts the popular belief that Africans sold their own families and people, but rather strangers.¹ The contribution of a gender perspective to understanding the impact of external slave trade is also emphasized in this study. Traoré examines how violence on the ecological environment forced women to abandon farming and in effect weakened the matricentric unit of production and power that traditionally had been under women's control (18) replacing it with patriarchy triggered by the introduction of Islam in the seventh century through the trans-Saharan trade (239–45).

Traoré's methodological approach to reading the colonial archives is also worth applauding as it allows for dual understandings and interpretations from the points of view of both imperial powers

¹Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother, A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 2.

and Africans. This perhaps explains why the author constantly combines the European time periods of Middle Ages and Early Modern to the century dating system (for example, seventeenth century) commonly utilized by African historians. Given the complexity and diversity of histories of the West African region where Traoré's study is centered, this book proves to be the result of patient and diligent research aimed at deconstructing understandings of slavery in one of the region's states.

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