

WEST AFRICA'S SLAVE COAST

Slave Traders by Invitation: West Africa's Slave Coast in the Precolonial Era.

By Finn Fuglestad.

New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xvi + 443. \$74.00, hardcover (ISBN: 9780190876104).

doi:10.1017/S0021853720000638

KEY WORDS: West Africa, slave trade, precolonial, kingdoms and states, political culture.

Finn Fuglestad's *Slave Traders by Invitation* offers a broad and accessible interpretation of the history of the central Slave Coast from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century. Drawing on the extensive corpus of known sources for the region during this period and an enviably rich historiography — including over fifty publications by Robin Law — Fuglestad revisits the history of the rise and fall of Dahomey in relation to nearby polities such as Allada, Hueda, Keta, Little Popo-Glidji, and Oyo, with useful comparison to developments on the neighboring (but substantially different) Gold Coast during the same era. The book is divided into three parts of equal length. Part A provides a general discussion of the historiography of the Slave Coast, its sources, and an overview of key anthropological concepts addressed throughout the book. Part B offers a chronological overview of events in the region from the mid-1600s until the 1720s, while Part C covers the period from the 1720s to 1851.

The book's main argument hinges on a nuanced understanding of an archetypal political culture on the Slave Coast and elsewhere that Fuglestad, following Jack Goody and others, describes as 'contrapuntal paramountcy': a *modus vivendi* in which incoming rulers in a given society are formally obliged to honor the interests of its autochthonous members. In Fuglestad's telling, Dahomey's kings tried — unsuccessfully — to bypass and subvert this tradition in order to legitimize their unilateral seizure of power at their neighbors' expense. Fuglestad is careful to acknowledge that other scholars have provided different interpretations in which Dahomean leaders eventually did adopt some form of 'power-sharing arrangement' or mutual obligations toward peoples they had conquered (compare with Law's *Slave Coast of West Africa* or Edna Bay's *Wives of the Leopard*).¹ In evaluating these arguments, he concludes that Dahomey's rulers deliberately rejected preexisting political structures, including the traditional system of reciprocity. Instead, Fuglestad argues, they enforced their rule in quasi-totalitarian fashion and attempted to manipulate ideologies of kinship and religion in ways that reinforced Dahomean authority.

While questions regarding eighteenth-century Dahomey's perceived political legitimacy are not exactly new, one of the most striking qualities of *Slave Traders by Invitation* is its deep engagement with several decades of scholarship by Law, Bay, Nicoué Gayibor, Patrick Manning, Suzanne Preston Blier, and many others, including some recent studies.

1 R. Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa, 1550–1750: The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on an African Society* (Oxford, 1991); E. Bay, *Wives of the Leopard: Gender, Politics, and Culture in the Kingdom of Dahomey* (Charlottesville, VA, 1998).

Even when voicing disagreement with the conclusions of other historians and anthropologists, Fuglestad alerts readers to the existence of divergent interpretations and in some cases briefly summarizes them. The book includes nearly one hundred pages of notes. In addition to archival materials, its excellent 41-page bibliography lists an abundance of printed primary and secondary sources published in Danish, Dutch, English, French, German, Portuguese, and Spanish.

Despite its title, *Slave Traders by Invitation* is primarily a study of political culture. It contains a wealth of information on political and geographical factors that shaped the slave trade from the Slave Coast, but seldom delves into the experiences of enslaved people or provides analysis at the level of specific slaving voyages or cohorts of captives. Whereas Fuglestad is content to cite Pierre Verger's *Flux et reflux* (1968), readers interested in any of the latter themes should be aware that Brazilian scholarship on diasporic and maritime connections to the Bight of Benin has surged in the past two decades, extending and surpassing Verger's classic study.² Although it falls beyond this work's chronological scope, one is also reminded of the newly recovered wreckage of the slave ship *Clotilda*, which sailed from Ouidah to Mobile in 1860, and the experiences of its surviving captives as recounted by Emma Langdon Roche, Zora Neale Hurston, and Sylviane Diouf.³

Fuglestad's engaging and frequently witty writing style makes *Slave Traders by Invitation* a surprisingly enjoyable read (though closer editing might have corrected a few quirks, such as the author's unfortunate habit of occasionally referring to female scholars as 'Ms.'). For specialists, this book is a revisionist study that challenges and complements standard scholarly works in the field, and as such should be a useful reference. For nonspecialists and graduate students, it offers a productive point of entry and guide to the voluminous historiography of the Slave Coast from the late seventeenth through the nineteenth century.

DAVID WHEAT

Michigan State University

-
- 2 P. Verger, *Flux et reflux de la traite des negres entre le Golfe de Benin et Bahia de Todos os Santos, du XVII au XIX siècle* (Paris, 1968). See also M. Florentino, A. V. Ribeiro, and D. Domingues da Silva, 'Aspectos comparativos do tráfico de Africanos para o Brasil (séculos XVIII e XIX)', *Afro-Ásia*, 31 (2004), 83–126; M. de Carvalho Soares, *People of Faith: Slavery and African Catholics in Eighteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro*, trans. J. D. Metz (Durham, NC, 2011 [orig. pub. 2000]); J. J. Reis, F. dos Santos Gomes, and M. J. M. de Carvalho, *The Story of Rufino: Slavery, Freedom, and Islam in the Black Atlantic*, trans. S. Gledhill (New York, 2019 [orig. pub. 2010]).
 - 3 E. L. Roche, *Historic Sketches of the South* (New York, 1914); S. A. Diouf, *Dreams of Africa in Alabama: The Slave Ship Clotilda and the Story of the Last Africans brought to America* (New York, 2007); Z. N. Hurston, *Barracon: The Story of the Last 'Black Cargo'* (New York, 2018).