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BOOK REVIEW

Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving 'Port' 1727-1892. Robin Law. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004. 308 pp.

This book provides a welcome addition to the Western African Studies series published by the Ohio University Press, several of which have been previously reviewed in this journal. It is important in two ways. First, with the pre-colonial focus on West African history, the author clearly demonstrates that while sources may be problematic or incomplete, much can be understood of the differing African motivations in the slave trade. Second, using Ouidah (Bénin) as an example, the author provides a detailed account of the complex development and decline of one of West Africa's premier mercantile towns during the height of the Atlantic slave trade, and consequently the uneven shift to 'legitimate' trade in the nineteenth century. While much historical and archaeological work has focused on the pre-colonial capitals of African states in Bénin and elsewhere in West Africa, coastal hinterland towns such as Ouidah provide a unique window into the interaction between African and foreign traders and the structuring of the Atlantic trade away from the administrative centers. This work provides an interesting counterpoint to other recent studies of coastal communities in West Africa, in that while the town of Ouidah was part of the Heuda and later the Dahomian Kingdoms, European influence at the 'port' was limited, their presence non-military and the trade not monopolized by a single company or European nation.

The author's primary aim is to provide as detailed a history as possible on the 'port' town of Ouidah – from prior to European contact to the beginning of the colonial period. This marks a shift in focus, where the emphasis is not necessarily on the elites in the capital (the area of much of the author's previous research), but on the lives of the principal traders on the periphery of the Kingdom's borders at one of the more important provincial centers. To this end, the book is roughly divided into three parts, the first dealing with the origins of the town, when Ouidah was part of the Heuda Kingdom. This brief introduction is then followed by the initial Dahomian conquest over Heuda in 1727, and the period covering the height of the slave trade. Finally, the author deals with the shift to 'legitimate' trade in nineteenth century and the continuing illegal slave trade, until the imposition of French colonial rule in 1892. It is this middle portion, and the role of the town and its inhabitants in the Atlantic slave trade while under Dahomian rule, which forms the strongest part of the work. In part this is due to the availability of sources used, which although composed primarily of European accounts, also include oral traditions and local histories. While much archaeological work has been undertaken in Savi (the Heuda capital), only limited work has been carried out in Ouidah itself.

The town of Ouidah was not a port in the traditional sense, in that it lay 4 kilometers inland. The ocean, while of religious importance, had little commercial significance prior to the arrival of Portuguese vessels in the Bight of Benin beginning in 1472. Though it is difficult to precisely date the foundations of the town without archaeological data from the oldest portions of the settlement, they probably lay in an agricultural community that made use of lagoon resources, rather than a strong maritime economy. Initially the French West Indies Company (1671), then the English and Portuguese (1670s) and the Dutch (1690s) set up factories or forts in, or near, the expanding town. These forts served as warehouses for goods and slaves, but did not exercise military power and were subject to strict indigenous control from Savi, the capital of the Heuda Kingdom through which all international trade was conducted. By 1720, it was estimated that the town was divided into at least 4 quarters, and had a population of approximately 2000. The author suggests that Ouidah's success as a 'port' was partially due to the Heuda Kingdom's desire to keep the port neutral, and taxes on trade lower than elsewhere on the coast.

In 1727, Dahomey conquered Heuda, and Ouidah is brought under the administrative control of the former, though this political control is undertaken, it would initially seem, by officials not resident in the town itself. One of the more interesting elements of the book is the discussion of how this conquest also altered the ethnic composition of the town, with the introduction of new settlers, including those

from Dahomey itself, slaves from further inland, traders and canoemen from the then Gold Coast and, to a limited extent, Europeans. Dahomian commercial and political control in the town was formalized with the position of Yovogan ('chief of the whites') from 1745, though earlier individuals may have performed similar roles. The Yovogan was responsible to the Mehu, one of two chiefs who reported directly to the king in Abomey. This marked an important change in focus, where under Heuda rule, trade was organized from Savi, whereas under Dahomian rule, the business-side of trade was now organized in Ouidah itself. What becomes increasingly clear, however, is that the international slave economy of Dahomey was integrally tied to the local market in several ways, the most obvious being the rise of independent slave traders in the town of Ouidah who worked outside of the Royal market. The most famous of these, who operated during the illegal trade of the nineteenth century, was the Brazilian-born Francisco Felix de Souza.

This well written and researched work, clearly showing the author's familiarity and mastery over a wide range of disparate material, will be of great interest to those studying the transatlantic slave trade and the various roles Africans played in it, both in terms of its political economy and its legacy. The author critically, yet seamlessly, integrates varying strands of data to present a complex picture of the slave and legitimate trade from the perspective of the traders, administrators and to some extent the enslaved themselves, all of whom passed through the 'port' town of Ouidah.

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