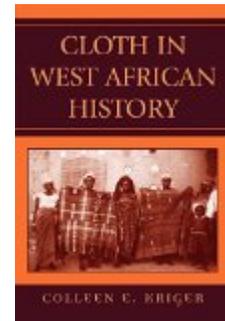


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Colleen E. Kriger. *Cloth in West African History*. Lanham: Altamira Press, 2006. xix + 213 pp. \$32.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7591-0422-8.

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Threads of Time in West Africa

Colleen Kriger's book *Cloth in West African History* provides us with a comprehensive history of pre-colonial and colonial cotton textile production. Sources on this history tend to be spotty, with European sources heavily outweighing Africans ones. Successfully overcoming such obstacles, Kriger gives detailed and insightful attention to a massive quantity of literature, including everything from archaeological sources and early Muslim and European trade accounts, to scholarly work on every and any aspect of West African textile production, her own work in Nigeria included. Drawing on these sources, Kriger posits a number of social, religious, and economic factors that might explain the evolution and spread of textile production. Kriger's stated intention is to test, flesh out, and challenge previous claims while also proposing new avenues for investigation and research, making her book immensely useful for scholars and students.

Of the five chapters that make up this 200-page book, the three middle ones comprise its main body. Each addresses the history of a different type of textile, with a single example of cloth serving as the primary focus. For her chapter on brocaded weaving on an upright frame (often called the women's) loom, she draws on a Nupe cloth from Bida; an example of Hausa woven and embroidered pantaloons for the chapter on narrow strip (mostly men's) weaving; and a Yoruba *Adire Eleko* cloth called "Olokun" for the one on indigo dyeing. She argues that these three types of textiles, each collected in the twentieth century, are the end products of their own enduring historical trajectories that she then sets out to recon-

struct.

In her chapter on narrow-strip weaving, for example, Kriger uses the Hausa pantaloons as a springboard for her discussion of the history of cotton cultivation and narrow-strip weaving throughout West Africa. Her discourse on the history of cotton production alone takes us to some of the earliest relevant archaeological sites, from ancient Nubia in what is now Egypt and Sudan (pp.10-11), for example, to the Tellem region in modern Mali (pp.76-78), and even Nok in contemporary Nigeria (p.71)—where she infers the presence of weaving from the clothing depicted on sculpture. As well, she documents the wide variations in men's strip weaving throughout West Africa, noting two factors, the spread of Islam and the early use of cloth strips for currency, as the cause for its distribution. Building on this larger picture, she then returns to the Hausa pantaloons, with particular attention paid to the *saki* cloth used in its construction, the particular style of the pantaloons (there is more than one), and their embroidery designs and techniques. The discussion here is rich and thought-provoking, with a careful interweaving of a wide array of sources, including Islamic texts dating back as early as the 1640s and from as far away as Timbuktu.

Kriger's chapter on indigo dyeing also asks us to think more broadly than just the Nigerian Yoruba *Olokun Adire* around which it is organized. Rightly so: discussion of *Adire* leads her to address the history of European cloth trade, and the profound influence that African taste has had on it. I found this section to be very well

documented and conceptualized. Less convincing to me was her analysis of the designs on *Olokun Adire*, which, like her discussion of textiles in many areas of the book, lacked the voice of the artisans. Kriger concluded from her comparison of eight different examples that the designs appearing most frequently were those less time-consuming, and therefore more cost-effective, to execute. I would be hesitant to draw such a conclusion without also consulting the *Adire*-makers themselves, or without considering Yoruba design principles in general, neither of which she did. She would also have done well to look more broadly at the possible sources of the designs on *Olokun Adire*. As it is, she suggests that, because of the latter's resemblance to Asante *Adinkra* from Ghana, the two cloth types may share historical roots. While an interesting theory, it begs consideration of artistic sources from within Yoruba culture, such as the designs the Yoruba once applied to the walls of shrines or carved on wooden doors.

Kriger loves tables, and provides us with many of them, some comparing terminologies, others cloth dimensions, and yet others the types of cloths found in archaeological sites or listed in European accounts. Although the tables are potentially useful for scholars, they are not particularly well integrated into her text or sufficiently used as supporting evidence, leaving me to question why she included some of them. As well, the tables lacked consistency. For example, one of the lists compares the cloth width of Hausa narrow-strip weaving to that of nine other cultures in West Africa, while others look at the vocabularies for treadle-loom weaving or for indigo dyeing only among the Yoruba, Nupe, Hausa, and Kanuri, and not more broadly. Also, why did she only list weaving vocabulary for the Yoruba and Edo when it

was the Nupe whose weaving framed the chapter on brocaded weaving on the upright frame loom? In general, it felt like she was simply putting available data out there (perhaps for others to use) without necessarily relating it to specific arguments.

I also take issue with the book's illustrations, which are too few and of very poor quality. Kriger frequently refers the reader to images published in other sources to support her assertions, arguing, for example, that there might have been cotton-weaving at Nok based on what she saw in a single Nok figure published elsewhere. As an art historian, I often yearned to have those images before me. As it is, some of the roughly 20 black and white images, the one of the Yoruba *Olokun Adire* in particular, were too dark to be readable. I also wanted just some to be in color. I understand full well the economic constraints that book publishers face, but, at the very least, Alta Mira should have allowed for good color illustrations of the three textiles that were the springboards for Kriger's arguments. The failure to provide appropriate illustrations resulted in Kriger's having to go to great lengths to describe the colors and patterns of each of the three cloths, reminding me of the old adage that a picture is indeed worth a thousand words.

These few criticisms aside, *Cloth in West African History*, with its thorough coverage of the literature on West African textile history, offers much grist for the scholarly mill. It will be useful to students and scholars in a wide range of fields, from archaeology, (it was published as part of Alta Mira's African Archaeology Series) and history (her own field), to art history and anthropology, as well as to textile specialists at large. I, for one, will be using it extensively in my teaching of African textiles.

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