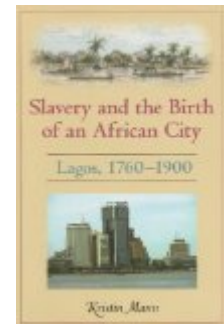


Kristin Mann. *Slavery and the Birth of an African City: Lagos, 1760-1900.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007. xii + 473 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34884-5.

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Published on H-Atlantic (June, 2008)



The Emergence of a West African City

Few studies have focused on specific western African slave ports. Following the path of Robin Law's *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving Port* (2004), Kristin Mann's *Slavery and the Birth of an African City* analyzes the evolution of Lagos as a slave port during the transatlantic slave trade, an important Atlantic commercial center during the legitimate trade of palm oil, and as a prominent British colonial capital.

The book shows, on the one hand, how the rise of the slave trade in Lagos during the second half of the eighteenth century profoundly transformed the local society by expanding local slavery. On the other hand, it examines how the slave trade modified the way the elites controlled the local population. By examining the transition from the slave trade to the legitimate trade in palm oil, the author develops a meticulous study of the end of slavery and the slave trade in the region and the emergence of new labor organization. Chapter 1 retraces the Kingdom of Lagos's precolonial history. Combining oral traditions and demographic data, the chapter examines the development of the town as a slave port. The influx of Europeans (Portuguese, English, Dutch, and French) and the growth of the slave trade transformed Lagos into an international port connecting West Africa and the Atlantic world. Mann describes social and economic daily life as well as the context connecting (and sometimes opposing) the Kingdom of Lagos and the neighboring states and empires, such as Benin, Allada, and Oyo. She explains how in the mid-seventeenth century the development of the plantation system in the New World provoked the rise

of slave exports and its intensification during the eighteenth century. The chapter also examines indigenous narratives of the kingdom's history. However, the connection between the intensification of the slave trade and the oral narratives are revealed only in the next chapter.

The author scrutinizes the organization of the Atlantic slave trade at Lagos in the second chapter. She shows the impact of the external slave trade on different social groups, but especially on the local elites, as the "growth of the external slave trade at Lagos brought substantial new income into the town" (p. 59). The data provided by David Eltis, Paul Lovejoy, and David Richardson helps to give an overview of the income generated by the external slave trade at Lagos. It shows how Obas, chiefs, and state officials benefited from the growth of the slave trade, which contributed to the development of the precolonial state. Local rulers "expanded their commercial and productive capacity and increased their political and military power" (p. 66), by investing in canoes, arms, and slaves. Finally, Mann argues that the expansion of the trade intensified what she calls "factionalism." The conflicts within the kingdom ended up opening the doors to the British colonization.

Chapter 3 focuses on the British intervention in Lagos in 1851. The author's main argument is that the British invasion and occupation of Lagos were both the result of the country's campaign to end the slave trade and of economic self-interest in the trade in palm oil. These two elements would then contribute to the expansion of British

international trade and to the stability of the country. The chapter also gives an overview of the antislavery movement, showing how by the 1840s British antislavery action in West Africa allowed the British to identify Lagos as a major slave port and the kingdom of Dahomey as a main opponent to the end of the slave trade. At the same time, the “British bombardment opened Lagos to Christian missionaries in addition to new European merchants” (p. 93). With the annexation of Lagos, the basis for the creation of Nigeria was settled. The rest of the chapter explains in detail the economic, social, and administrative transformations of Lagos during the first two decades of British rule, as well as the role of some members of Lagos’s elite.

The development of the palm oil and palm kernel trades in Lagos is examined in chapter 4. Palm oil was used as lubricant for machinery, while glycerine, its derivate, was used in medicines. Later palm oil was used to produce soap and candles as well. Industrialization and urbanization generated a new market for vegetable oils in Europe. During the second half of the nineteenth century, palm kernel oil was employed in the production of soap and in the food industry (cakes, margarine, lard). Technological changes, such as the emergence of the steamship, created new opportunities for Lagosian merchants. Mann explains in detail how the growth of palm oil production increased the use of slave labor. In this chapter, she also gives a particular attention to the role of women in the palm oil industry. The organization of production and trade created new economic conditions, including credit. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, the oscillation of the trade, essentially based on international demand, indicated the fragility of Lagos’s exchanges with the external market.

Chapter 5 deals with British policies on slaveholding, the slave trade, and slaves themselves. Abolishing the external slave trade was a priority on the British agenda for Africa’s west coast. However, after the occupation of Lagos, the government and missionary agents did not intervene in “domestic slavery,” which they saw as a lenient institution. They rather left “Africans themselves to organize the growing quantities of labor needed in trade, transportation, and production” (p. 161). The chapter also examines how the British officials dealt with fugitive slaves. Facing this situation, in 1861 the British started liberating slaves who sought their protection. Women were the majority of these liberated slaves. This can probably be explained by several factors: “gender imbalance in the slave population, the more limited opportunities of females to rise out of bondage through military ser-

vice, and their greater opportunities to escape by entering domestic and sexual relations with men” (p. 167). Despite some British intervention, slavery and slave-dealing (including child slaves, male and female) continued during the second half of the nineteenth century. The main strength of this chapter is to provide detailed information on the profile and the experiences of female and child slaves.

In chapter 6, the author examines how the annexation affected the lives of slaves. Mann looks at three elements which created opportunities for slaves: 1) the principles of their work; 2) local ideology regarding slavery; 3) the increasing demand for people. Despite the fact that Britain did not liberate “domestic slaves,” the new colony created opportunities for some of them. Mann points out that during the second half of the nineteenth century Lagosians “employed slaves in many kinds of activities, including fishing, farming, palm produce manufacturing, craft production, and domestic work” (p. 209). Slaves were also used in transportation and wealthy slaveowners continued to use slaves to supervise different kind of activities. Some slaves ran away and others were able to gain access to land and develop new activities, especially agriculture. The author explains that after 1860, a male slave could achieve emancipation by purchasing a female slave, marrying her, and later claiming the paternity of their children. One important element examined in this chapter is the use of ideology to justify slavery in Lagos. Some slaves could be rewarded for good service: they could win more autonomy in their work, receive support to establish families, and even accumulate property. Some slaves were able to gain their freedom and were incorporated into families. The strength of this chapter in showing that age and gender were important elements that modulated slaves’ experiences.

Chapter 7 examines the transformations of the use, tenure, and value of land. Mann argues that “changes in land tenure, and in the uses, value, and meaning of the land in the colony, lies at the heart of the story of emancipation of Lagos” (p. 238). The author presents the evolution of land tenure during the precolonial period. She also explains the development of alienation, commercialization, and privatization of land during the nineteenth century. But she also reminds the reader that the introduction of new forms of land tenure did not put an end to family ownership. Some slaves and former slaves had access to land in the city or in the neighboring regions. This new situation gave them new rights and new opportunities. However, it also led to disputes between landowners and their dependents regarding control of land. These

transformations also gave place to new uses of houses and land, by changing their value and meaning.

The last chapter essentially examines court records. Mann studies the strategies used by owners to continue exerting control on people of slave origin and other dependents. Even though most of the sources used in this chapter are court records, the author expresses some thoughts about memory. She argues that “slavery’s slow death” in Lagos explains why dealing with oral data in Lagos is more complicated than in other regions of Africa: “Although descendants of former slaveowners would sometimes talk discreetly about their families’ *àrótà*, few descendants of slaves would acknowledge their unfree ancestry and some appear to have erased it from memory” (p. 277). She shows how in these documents “traditional” religions and the fear of witchcraft were instruments of social control, especially over women. She also explains how property owners controlled people who depended on them to live in the town. Credit and debt also became mechanisms of control.

Mann has used a large number of written sources from archives in Britain, Nigeria, and Italy. Despite the fact that the volume of sources for the period before 1800 is not significant, the nineteenth century is widely covered. However, the thirty interviews were conducted between 1974 and 1985, and although gender is a major concern in Mann’s work only four informants were women. This gap can be probably explained by the limits of the oral data collected. According to the author, at the time of her fieldwork it was much easier to get information from those Lagosians occupying higher economic and social positions. She explains that was difficult to find informants who admitted slave ancestry, this issue remaining a forbidden subject. This problem, also faced by other historians of Africa, can mask the extent and the depth of the impact of slavery and the slave trade on the local population. But as this attitude has slowly been changing over the last fifteen years, more recent interviews likely would have enabled Mann to present a more accurate picture of how Lagosians, men and women, see the slave past of their families.

The book does not offer a specific section that examines the role of Muslim networks and the impact of Islam on the treatment of slaves in Lagos. In chapter 6, Mann mentions that a “significant number of slaves imported into Lagos during the first half of the nineteenth century and subsequently were Muslims” (p. 203). Though she analyzes one case related to a Muslim trader, in general she does not explain who these Muslims were, where they came from, and what kind of labor they performed.

Moreover, the descendants of the community of returned slaves from Brazil are not represented among the informants interviewed by the author. In the fourth chapter, on the transition to the legitimate trade in palm oil, only one paragraph examines the role of Brazilian merchants. The author seems to not consider the importance of their activities because “most arrived with very little capital, and their commercial connections, so far as they existed, were to Bahia and the other Brazilian communities on the Slave Coast, not to Britain” (pp. 125-126). However, scholars such as Pierre Verger, Jerry Michael Turner, Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, Robin Law, and Milton Guran have shown that the Afro-Brazilian elite had an important economic and political role in Lagos, not only in developing agriculture but also in keeping the transatlantic connections alive through the trade with Brazil, especially with Bahia. Between 1877 and 1886, Brazilian products, particularly alcohol and tobacco, ranked third among Lagos’s imports.

In conclusion, *Slavery and the Birth of an African City* is a valuable contribution not only to African history, but also to the history of slavery on the both sides of the Atlantic. The book takes into account the diversity of slaves’ experiences, including those of men, women, and children. It offers new perspectives for the study of other West African ports that have yet to be investigated. The book is required reading for understanding the impact of the economic, social, and political transformations of Lagos between the second half of the eighteenth century and the end of the nineteenth century. Finally, the book is brilliantly organized, and Mann’s style makes the reading enjoyable.

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Citation: Ana Lucia Araujo. Review of Mann, Kristin, *Slavery and the Birth of an African City: Lagos, 1760-1900*. H-Atlantic, H-Net Reviews. June, 2008.

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