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Ibrahim K. Sundiata. *From Slaving to Neoslavery.* Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996. xii + 250 pp. $47.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-299-14510-1.

Reviewed by John E. Philips (Department of International Society, Hirosaki University)

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For its size, the island of Fernando Po in Equatorial Guinea is one of the most important places in Africa. This may not sound like much, in light of the small size of Fernando Po, but its importance for Nigerian foreign policy is arguably equal to that of any other nation in Africa.

When this reviewer lived in San Francisco during the Angolan Civil War of the mid-1970s, an American guard at the building where the Nigerian consulate was located pointed to Fernando Po on an unlabeled, outline map of Africa and firmly told this reviewer that it was "Angolia."

He had asked a Nigerian visitor to the consulate to locate this place in Africa where all the fuss was. The Nigerian had unhesitatingly pointed to Fernando Po, then undergoing a crisis in its relations with Nigeria that was, from the point of view of many Nigerians, at least as important as the Angolan crisis that then preoccupied Americans so much.

The tremendous importance of Fernando Po (and therefore Equatorial Guinea) in Nigerian foreign policy continues even today. It is not unusual to find lurid exposes about slavery in and slave smuggling to Fernando Po in the Nigerian press.[1] The book under review here is therefore of immense interest to Nigerian specialists in foreign affairs. When this reviewer showed the review copy of the work reviewed here to the director of the Research and Documentation Centre at Nigeria's National Boundary Commission he was in turn given a copy of a recently published, bilingual joint study of Nigerian-Equatorial Guinean border conflicts.[2] Given the importance of Fernando Po in Nigerian foreign relations it is surprising that this is the first book entirely in English about Fernando Po.

Well, perhaps it is not so surprising. Ibrahim Sundiata reports in the Preface to this work that "During my first visit twenty-five years ago, I was placed under house arrest and my research destroyed" (p. xi). Most of his work was carried on outside of Equatorial Guinea, in libraries and archives in Spain, Britain, Sierra Leone, the United States, Nigeria, and elsewhere. The author has also used a wide range of secondary sources and dissertations in English and Spanish.

This book has thus been a long time in preparation, but it has been worth the wait. It should be of interest to scholars of international relations, colonialism and European expansion, missionary activity in Africa, slavery, the slave trade, Britain's stuggle against the slave trade, contemporary forms of slavery, island plantations, the Atlantic expansion of European economies, European settlement in Africa, the Creoles of Sierra Leone and elsewhere in west Africa and many other topics.

The first chapter, "The Island Background," puts the origin of the islands inhabitants in historical perspective. It lays out the geography and ecology of the island and how they fit the island into the environment of west Africa and the Bight of Biafra.

Chapter 2 deals with the attempt of the British to use the island as a base for anti-slave trade activities between 1827 and 1835. Sundiata takes issue with David Eltis's emphasis on the inefficiency of Britain's efforts. He interprets the markedly decreased captures of slaves by the British during the years in which they held a base on Fernando Po as proof that slavers chose to avoid the Bight of Biafra during those years. Sundiata makes a good case that the importance of Fernando Po in the history of Britain's struggle against the Atlantic Slave trade has been seriously underestimated.

Chapter 3, "Spain in the Bight," deals with that country's gradual assertion of authority over the island. Although the British occupation of a settlement on the island had come to an end, Britain's interest in ending the slave trade had not. At the same time that Spanish interest in sending more slaves to its New World Colonies

was increasing, Britain was putting pressure on Spain to give British vessels the right to search Spanish ships.

The next chapter's title, "Trade and Politics," is an allusion to the history of the Niger Delta, calling to mind Fernando Po's propinquity and close connections to that area of contemporary Nigeria. In fact, as Sundiata points out, K. O. Dike wrote about the importance of Fernando Po for the trading states of the Niger Delta.[3] To a very large extent it was from this island, with its large settlement of Creoles and recaptives, and (after 1849) a British Consul (sometimes the same person as the nominal Spanish governor), that British influence extended over the Niger Delta.

Yet the island was never legally a British colony. Here, unlike in Sierra Leone, recaptives lived in a society largely of their own regulation, but with access to western education.

Chapter 5, "Islanders and Interlopers," turns to the story of the indigenous Bubi during the nineteenth century. In the first half of the nineteenth century, despite their political fragmentation, the Bubi had developed an elaborate system of social stratification involving distinctions between nobles and commoners, as well as subdivisions within each group. Sundiata details how Bubi warfare became increasingly destructive in the early decades of the nineteenth century. He explains this as a response to external pressure, largely from the Creole settlement.

Chapter 7 concerns the attempts to fill the chronic labor shortage that affected attempts to develop the island. As the nineteenth century wore on, more and more Europeans became convinced that, if not slavery, at least some form of compulsion was necessary to make Africans work. The results were such that the definition of slavery itself became largely a matter of semantics. While the colonial powers satisfied themselves with the fact that forced laborers could not be sold, Sundiata points out that the fine legal distinctions they made were probably lost on Africans providing forced labor. In addition, he reports that a "contract worker on Sao Tome in 1900 probably approximated various definitions of 'slave' more than did those persons in 1800 who, while legally slaves, were left to devote most of their time to the cultivation of small subsistence plots."

The struggle between the British and Spanish governments caught African small farmers in the middle. As the economy squeezed them slowly out of business they acquired a reputation as the worst labor abusers on the island, and increasingly became the focus of attention by both the Spanish authorities and British critics of Spanish colonialism. New labor regulations hit the small farmers especially hard. While the British government was largely indifferent to their fate, the Spanish administration was downright hostile. It was hoped that the future of agriculture on the island would involve large plantations only. As the small farmers were squeezed out, many of them found employment as labor recruiters, a position which their status as English-speakers in a Spanish territory eminently suited them for.

For most of the period during which the island was nominally ruled by Spain, its European culture was predominantly British, its economy was oriented towards the British Empire, and its lingua franca was pidgin English. In contrast to the Catholicism of the Spanish authorities, the creole community maintained Protestantism as its dominant religion, regardless of the changing religious policies of the administration.

The gradual encroachment of Spanish authority put this English-speaking community in a delicate situation. While most maintained their Protestant identity, the Catholic church was subsidized by the government and there was pressure on the Fernandinos to convert. Knowledge of the Spanish language was a necessity for those who wished to succeed in the colonial environment, and those who did not leave for British West Africa became bilingual of necessity. Their accomodation with the Spanish establishment was such that when the Spanish Civil War broke out the majority of Fernandinos supported Franco. The Bubi were likewise under great pressure to Hispanicize. By 1949 98 percent of them had been baptized Catholics and 86 percent of them had been married in the Catholic Church.

Spanish authorities saw the Bubi as a possible solution to the perennial problem of labor shortage. Indeed by the turn of the century most workers on the new plantations in the San Carlos area on the western side of the island were Bubi. Attempts to force labor led to conflict, and efforts to impose "civilization" (in the form of unpaid labor) on the indigenous inhabitants.

It was the cash economy and cocoa farming that did more to assimilate the Bubi to Spanish culture. Christian converts could gain legal freehold title to their land. Title to a minimum of one hectare of land yielded exemption from forced labor. Who could refuse such an offer? "By 1930 what remained of the Bubi population seemed to be firmly under European cultural and political control." (P.175) As with the creoles, much traditional culture continued in a syncretic form.

Sundiata brings the story up to date in a brief epilogue. The problem of labor shortage and the "solution" of labor abuse have been constants in the history of the island since Europeans first became interested in it. Under the regime of Generalissimo Franco Spanish Guinea became a "model" colony. Its economy was dominated by forestry, plantations and Spanish companies. It was an economic success thanks to the guaranteed market it enjoyed in metropolitan Spain, where its products sold at prices above those of the world market.

Migrant labor, including over 10,000 Nigerians, was the sine qua non of this economic success, of course. By the mid-1960s it is estimated that the majority of the population was actually Nigerian, mostly from the Eastern Region. It was on these landless and rightless laborers that the burden of building the success of the island fell most heavily.

While the Fernandinos and the Bubi became nearly as staunch supporters of the Spanish regime as the corporate interests who most benefitted from it, African nationalism and independence movements were attracting support in the mainland section of Spanish Guinea. The nightmare that Equatorial Guinea became under the rule of Macias Nguema is too well known to bear repeating here (or in Sundiata's book). He well sums up experience the experience of the island's permanent inhabitants in his final sentence: "The Bubi and the Fernandinos, having weathered the onslaught of European imperialism in the nineteenth century, were dispossessed by an indigenous dictatorship in the twentieth."

[1]. Ambrose Akor, "Slave Dealers: The Booming Business of Nigeria's Modern Slave Merchants," *The Guardian Sunday Magazine* (March 2, 1997).

[2]. A. I. Asiwaju, B. M. Barkindo, and R. E. Mabale, eds., *The Nigeria-Equatorial Guinea Transborder Cooperation* (Lagos, National Boundary Commission, 1995).

[3]. *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta* (Oxford, 1956).

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