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Sylviane A. Diouf. *Dreams of Africa in Alabama: The Slave Ship Clotilda and the Story of the Last Africans Brought to America.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 352 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-538293-8.

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The Slave Ship Clotilda

Sylviane A. Diouf has written an excellent social history of the *Clotilda* and the West Africans who were purchased at Dahomey and illegally transported on the ship to Alabama in the summer of 1860. This voyage occurred more than fifty years after the Constitution prohibited American involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. Diouf's first task is to convince readers that the *Clotilda* Africans in fact existed. This is necessary because, from the Buchanan presidency to Hugh Thomas's recent *The Slave Trade* (1999), official investigations and historians have denied the existence of the voyage and the 110 Africans brought to Alabama. Before Diouf's book, most historians believed that the *Wanderer*, making a trip to West Africa two years earlier in 1858, was the last American slaving passage. To prove the existence of the *Clotilda* voyage, Diouf identifies individual Africans and locates their African communities of origin. She then presents histories of the Dahomey Kingdom and its hinterland to demonstrate that particular Africans could have been captured only from certain areas after the *Wanderer*'s crossing. The result is a more complete picture of the process of transatlantic slavery and experiences and cultures of the people involved. By reconstructing specific African cultures and religions of enslaved persons, she demonstrates how these cultures helped sustain enslaved people during antebellum slavery and the transition from slavery to freedom after the Civil War.

More than twelve million Africans were forced to make the Middle Passage, but historians have identified only a few individuals and their African backgrounds. Historians accordingly know little about enslaved Africans' cultures of origin and how these cultures shaped their experiences in America. The most well-known account of an enslaved African transported to the Americas is the *Narrative of Olaudah Equiano* (1789), but recently a scholar has questioned whether Equiano was even born in Africa. Thus Diouf's historical recovery of certain *Clotilda* Africans is very significant for demonstrating African experiences before enslavement. She argues that it was the *Clotilda* Africans' cultures and the memories of being free people in Africa that shaped their responses to living in the South as slaves: "Their transition from freedom to servitude and back to freedom highlights the aspects of their cultures that were most useful to them as individuals and as members of a free community" (p. 4).

Another important contribution of the study concerns Africans adapting to life in Alabama after the Civil War and through the first decades of the twentieth century. Diouf documents how the Africans successfully made the transition to freedom and how they maintained their identity as Africans and created their own community during Reconstruction and Jim Crow segregation. In 1870, they established African Town on property that they purchased near Mobile. African Town, Diouf asserts, was the longest lasting black community in America and one that retained its ethnic identity longer than any other. Diouf attributes the success of the *Clotilda* people to having been free in West Africa.

Diouf bases her account on Alabama and national newspapers that reported on the *Clotilda*, narratives and interviews of the *Clotilda* owner and the captain, and interviews of *Clotilda* Africans and their children. *Dreams of Africa* is thus one of the few studies of transatlantic slavery that utilizes primary sources from the perspectives of both the slavers and the enslaved. Diouf also relies on writer and folklorist Zora Neal Hurston's unpublished manuscript based on two months of interviews with Cudjo Lewis, the last *Clotilda* survivor. Other sources include interviews of the Africans conducted by Booker T. Washington and local historians. Diouf places the Africans in the context of the historiography of the Dahomey region (modern Benin and northwest Nigeria),

southern historiography, and Mobile history.

Diouf begins the story of the *Clotilda* people in Mobile by discussing the financial motives for enterprising individuals to engage in the illegal slave trade. Mobile, financially dependent on cotton and thus on slavery, was Alabama's "slave emporium." And Alabama's most lucrative business after plantation slavery was the domestic slave trade. As the center of domestic slavery shifted from the eastern seaboard to the Southwest with the expansion of cotton production, the domestic slave trade could not keep up with the demand for enslaved labor. Diouf also reminds readers that some of the strongest defenders of slavery were born in New England as was the *Clotilda*'s owner, Timothy Meaher from Maine.

To make her case that the *Clotilda* Africans came after the *Wanderer* in 1858 and sailed from West Africa in 1860, Diouf describes 1860 as a boom year for slave trading in Dahomey. This was a change from the early 1850s, when Dahomey had signed a treaty agreeing to stop exporting slaves and agreed to only engage in the legitimate trade in palm oil. But palm oil did not bring as much profit to the royal house, and so in 1858, after increasing demand for slave labor in Cuba, King Ghezo resumed the slave trade. After his death in 1858, his son Glele intensified slave raiding into the interior of the Bight of Biafra.

Before enslavement, the *Clotilda* people were "Muslims and non-Muslims; farmers, traders, and fishermen; victims of kidnapping, raids, and wars" (p. 39). Diouf determines that most of the Africans were Yoruba or Bante from Benin. Bante was a town or market area where women usually sold agricultural products at market, which helps explain why the *Clotilda* women would become successful traders in Alabama after the Civil War. She makes the determination of origins by placing the Africans' descriptions of architecture, river names, distance traveled to the coast, community defense systems, and secret societies in the context of ethnographies and the new historiography on central African history. Much of her study focuses on the oral histories of Lewis, who gave the most interviews. His account of the enslavement process in Africa is one of only four such narratives by central Africans and is a valuable contribution to the study of African slavery and transatlantic slavery. Diouf's approach to locating the original homes of Africans should become a model for scholars attempting to retrace the social, cultural, and family backgrounds of enslaved Africans.

Diouf examines how the recently arrived Africans were initiated into slavery and how they related to American-born slaves in Alabama. Since African American slaves tended to denigrate the *Clotilda* people as "African savages," the Africans segregated themselves from other slaves on the basis of their African identity. Upon freedom, the Africans wished to return to their homelands. But as they could not find a way to finance a voyage to Africa, they tried to remain as independent as possible based on their African identity. Therefore, they attempted to recreate their lives as free African people in Alabama. With men earning wages at lumber mills and railroad yards, and women growing and selling produce in the market, they pooled their savings, and, in 1870, purchased land a few miles outside of Mobile that became African Town. Diouf argues that the reason they were able to accomplish economic independence with a degree of self-governing autonomy so soon after freedom was because of their shared African values and ethics: "The African tradition of collectivism was certainly a major part of the reason why shipmates were able to acquire land and housing early" (p. 155).

Once they established African Town, their experiences paralleled those of African Americans during Reconstruction and after. They converted to Christianity in the late 1860s, and, after the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment, they became American citizens, even as they continued to identify themselves as African. But even though they had achieved economic independence, and owned and governed their own community, African American leaders like Booker T. Washington denigrated them for clinging "to the memories and traditions of their savage life in Africa" (p. 181). By the 1930s, with the deaths of all the founding members, African Town lost its African character and become an African American town.

The greatest strength of the book is its broad theme of how West Africa influenced African American history. For this reason, it would have been beneficial to scholars for Diouf to have engaged with studies of African survivals and adaptations by Sterling Stuckey, Margaret Creel Washington, Michael Gomez, and Gwendolyn Midlo Hall. Another minor quibble is that perhaps Diouf could have been more critical of slave raiding in Africa and such practices as ceremonial human sacrifice.

Nevertheless, this is an exceedingly well and creatively researched study that greatly contributes to the fields of slavery and African American history.

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