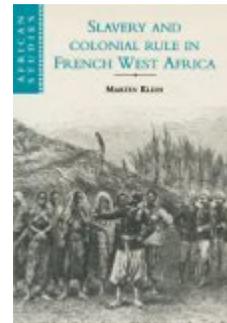


**Martin A. Klein.** *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa.* New York and England: Cambridge University Press, 1998. xxi + 354 pp. \$33.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-59678-7; \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-59324-3.

**Reviewed by** Andrew F. Clark (Department of History, University of North Carolina at Wilmington)

**Published on** H-Africa (March, 1999)



## Slavery And Colonialism In French West Africa

Slavery has existed in many societies throughout history and West Africa was no exception. In the Western Sudan, the broad belt of grassland that stretches across West Africa just south of the Sahara Desert, slavery and the slave trade were common for centuries before the arrival of Europeans and the imposition of colonial rule. Colonial administrations, intent on maintaining order and encouraging production, had to deal with the complicated issues of slavery and its abolition. Some work has been done on British activities, but French anti-slavery efforts have not received the same attention. Martin Klein's major and much anticipated work breaks significant new ground in discussing the history of slavery and its demise during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the three former French colonies of Senegal, Guinea, and Soudan (Mali).

Rather than giving primarily the story of French policy and activity, Klein proposes to examine the dynamic nature of local slavery in the region over time, and changing French attitudes towards the institution, slave-owners and slaves, with particular attention to the period between 1876 and 1922. Given the extensive nature of the literature of slave studies in Africa, much dating from the late 1970s and 1980s, there may be a tendency to view this book as a synthesis or summation of Klein's already extensive published work on the topics, or an end to the various debates within the literature. On the contrary, this study presents significant new material and opens up fresh lines of inquiry and investigation.

Klein sets out four major themes in his work. First, he analyzes throughout how Africans and Europeans responded to changes in the practice of slavery caused by the imposition of colonial rule, moves toward abolition, and the post-emancipation situation. Secondly, he argues that considerable tension existed among the different levels within the French colonial administration. Third, he examines the role of Islam in regional slavery and abolition. Finally, the author analyzes the complex struggles between masters and slaves throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Drawing on extensive archival research, numerous oral interviews and a comprehensive reading of the large secondary literature, Klein sheds considerable if sometimes uneven light on his four major themes both on the regional and local levels. Klein's discussion is at its best when focused on the French colonial administration and officials. He illustrates well the dichotomy between metropolitan pronouncements and local interests. The weakness theme concerns the role of Islam and Muslim authorities in local and regional slavery and abolition issues, an area that warrants further investigation.

The author begins with an overview of slavery in the Western Sudan as well as the now familiar debates over the interpretation of slavery in Africa, although his discussion is rather cursory and one-sided. Klein argues that slaves were property, produced by an act of violence, and takes the discussion to 1960, the year of independence for

Senegal, Mali and Guinea. Under colonialism, the process of renegotiating ties of servility continued, although under new conditions, as slavery legally and theoretically did not exist anymore. While the terminology of social categories remained the same, the meaning of the words changed. Archival sources on the topic, reflecting the official position that slavery had been completely abolished, virtually disappear except for isolated circumstances of public slave trading. A resurgence of pawning in the 1930s warranted some attention on the part of the administration but the topic quickly faded from view.

Thus, oral testimonies from former slaves and slave owners provided the only data for the period and, as Klein notes, informants were often reluctant to discuss the topic. Descendants of slaves and ex-slaves among many ethnic groups still occupy a distinct social category in all three countries. Klein recounts the history of their ancestors as a story of triumph and successful adaptation to changing conditions. Rather than colonial policies, slaves and their descendants irrevocably transformed slavery and ties of servility in French West Africa. The period after World War One has received scant attention from scholars, perhaps owing to the scarcity of sources or the mistaken belief that slavery and slave status had been abolished by 1920, the traditional ending date for many secondary studies on the topic. Klein makes a start at opening up this period for much needed investigation. Oral data will provide the most significant evidence for this period.

Klein draws on the extensive archival materials avail-

able in French, especially for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He includes extended excerpts from reports as well as numerous tables of data. While he rightfully suggests caution when dealing with official figures from the colonial record, he does rely heavily on their numbers. By reproducing so many tables directly from the archives, with no mention of how officials may have arrived at their numbers, he may give the results more credence than they warrant. A more detailed discussion of the problems inherent in colonial archives, especially on the topics of slavery and abolition, and how Klein overcame those obstacles would have strengthened his conclusions and assisted other researchers working with this material. A more extended examination of the oral testimonies he collected and used, including the methodology and the reliability of oral sources on slavery, would likewise have added to the book's conclusions and usefulness for researchers. Finally, a more close and careful reading of the secondary literature published in the 1990s would have strengthened the otherwise comprehensive bibliography.

This book warrants close attention and will open up new debates. It represents a major and no doubt lasting contribution to slave studies and to African history in general.

Copyright (C) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if provenance is shown. For other permission, please contact <Books@H-Net.MSU.Edu>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-africa>

**Citation:** Andrew F. Clark. Review of Klein, Martin A., *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa*. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. March, 1999.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2920>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).