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Philip Havik’s book is in many ways a landmark in the writing of African history in which one can see just how far historians have moved from the old certainties that characterized the work of the post-1960 generation. The history of Africa began to be written seriously in the 1960s when the decolonization process was being negotiated, and most African historians were, to a greater or lesser extent, politically committed to African independence. They were preoccupied with uncovering the origins of African nationalism in resistance movements, civic associations, churches and pre-modern ideologies. Parallel discourses also arose from the study of the slave trade, which was seen entirely in terms of the ruthless exploitation of Africa by Europeans, while feminist historians spoke of the dual struggle of African women for independence–from colonial oppression and from patriarchy.

This was history painted in vividly contrasting colors with few nuances or midtones. Africans were either collaborators or resisters; the colonial experience was one of unmitigated oppression which resulted in the structural underdevelopment of Africa; the slave trade was European agency and was responsible for the economic, social and political backwardness of Africa; and the disasters that overtook Africa after independence were entirely due to the colonial legacy, the machinations of international capitalism and the interference of outsiders ranging from the World Bank to white mercenaries.

With few exceptions, historians subscribed to the general thesis that Africans were victims and, in spite of the often heroic resistance of archaic societies, were essentially passive and not active participants in their own history. Over the centuries Africans had things done to them and their history was one of constant manipulation by outsiders. Historians of this school were reluctant to recognize that Africans could be active agents in their own destinies and could take responsibility for what was happening to their societies. Moreover, this highly politicized history was written largely from within the old imperial divide. British scholars sought to understand Africa by studying, almost exclusively, the Anglophone colonies and successor states. The experience of the francophone and lusophone regions of Africa were little understood.

One by one the certainties of this historiography have crumbled like sand castles before the tide and Philip Havik’s book is a model of a new African historiography that has begun to appear. Referring, for example, to the old way of describing West African trade relations in terms of “landlord and stranger,” Havik observes that “these binary concepts, although useful to describe a first encounter ... failed to take account of the gendered complexity of Afro-Atlantic relations” (p. 22). With this principle to guide him, he has set out to write a history in which Africans are very much the active agents in their own destiny. The book is a study of African coastal society in upper Guinea (the region that was to become Portuguese Guinea, Senegal and Gambia). In particular it focuses on the role played by powerful female political and economic “brokers” who prospered in a world where the “strategic engagement between African women and male outsiders result[ed] in the reinforcement of feminine forms of knowledge, power and authority in local communities” (p. 29).

Significantly, Havik places this region in an Atlantic as well as an African context. One of the features of ear-
lier African historiography was the intellectual contor-
tions which allowed historians to claim that Egypt and
South Africa shared something fundamental in common
simply because they occupied the same continent. It is
now widely appreciated that different parts of Africa be-
long to different oceanic zones—the North to the Mediter-
ranean, the East and South to the Indian Ocean and the
West to the Atlantic. The concept of the "Portuguese
South Atlantic," seen as a coherent cultural and economic
sphere, united by the flow of people, goods and services
between Europe, the islands, Africa and South America,
has rapidly gained currency. West Africa is now seen as
having been linked developmentally to the other Atlantic
seaboard countries as much as, if not more than, it was
linked to other regions of Africa.

As this Atlantic world took shape from the fifteenth
century, economic and cultural interaction created new
identities, new languages, new religions and new eth-
nicities. Havik shows how complex the ethnic kaleido-
scope of upper Guinea became. Gone are the days when
Africans could be represented as belonging to distinct
groups, confronting white European exploiters with a thin layer of “mixed-race” peoples as mediators.
All the peoples of upper Guinea were involved one way
or another in the Atlantic world? "providing maritime
services, growing food, arranging markets, brokering
commercial relations and selling slaves—and their ethnic
identities were formed and endlessly modified by these
activities. There was an extensive "renegotiation of iden-
tities" (p. 18) as individuals sought to place themselves
advantageously alongside the communities with which
they did business. Intermarriage consolidated commer-
cial relations, usufruct rights in land and political al-
liances.

European, Cape Verdian or Brazilian traders had to
adapt to these local practices and also use marriage ties
to gain or consolidate a position in trade. One of the new
ethnicities to evolve from these exchanges was that of the
Kriston, who were characterized by close commercial ties
with the Cape Verde Islands and political alliances with
the Portuguese, who practiced a form of the Christian re-
ligion, and who spoke one of the many varieties of Kriol.
The Kriston were emphatically not a "mixed-race" group
but one of the new African ethnicities precipitated from
the mixing and remixing of the coastal peoples and the
Atlantic traders. As for the Portuguese, they resided as a
tiny trading community in the praças on the rivers, pay-
ing tribute to the local lords of the land and maintaining
commercial and marriage relations with local Africans,
including the Kriston, and with Cape Verdians.

For Havik, not only are Africans active agents in
their own history but women are very active agents in
the politics of their societies. Gone is the image of the
"two colonialisms" of patriarchy and colonialism. (p.10)
In the coastal communities, and particularly among the
Kriston, women played not only an active but a lead-
ing part. The term “matronage” is essential for under-
standing the working of this society. “With and without
male Atlantic outsiders, these women exercised an un-
paralleled influence over economic and political domains,
thereby extending notions of female agency” (p. 37). Pape-
pel women, for example, were described as “controlling
extensive networks and, backed by indigenous chiefs to
whom they were related, some of these women directly
challenged Portuguese authorities to the point of staging
coups and kidnapping governors” (p. 111). By contract-
ing marriages with Atlantic traders they assumed the role
of brokers in Atlantic commerce—becoming large-scale
owners of slaves and trading capital. And they were also
brokers in the often tumultuous political activities of the
coast. Here is Havik on Na Rosa, one of the great matri-
archs of the nineteenth century:

“Na Rosa established the first ponta or plantation in
the region, which was initially worked by slaves who
produced rice for export…. Na Rosa used her power base
to launch the career of her son Honório Pereira Barreto,
who held important posts in local and regional govern-
ment in Portuguese Guinea…. Na Rosa was venerated as
a stalwart of Portuguese interests in the region. Her me-
diation was often requested by both African rulers and
garrison town commanders in order to settle quarrels by
means of palavers” (p. 253).

For two, and possibly three, centuries the most valu-
able item of commerce was slaves and this book shows, as
so many other books have stressed recently, that Africans
were active agents in all aspects of the trade, from orga-
nizing and financing the acquisition to the transport and
sale of the slaves. Moreover, the domestic slavery, which
was practiced by all societies in upper Guinea, was not
something separate and distinct from the Atlantic trade
but has to be understood as part of a wide and very perva-
sive social system which classified people, not so much
by their ethnicity, as by whether they were of slave or
free descent.

Havik, like a good annaliste, explores all aspects of his
subject? "the geography, the significance of ethnic labels,
the economic transitions—and he does this not only from
a close acquaintance with the archival sources but with
a knowledge of the Kriol language, so that his history
is constantly presented using the terms and expressions of the coastal peoples themselves. He has also demonstrated for an English-language readership the immense unexploited resource of the Portuguese archives.

This book, with its extensive bibliography and exploration of the intimate details of the lives of coastal peoples, is not only essential reading for all historians of upper Guinea but should be read by all Africanists and Atlanticists as a practical example of an innovative and stimulating new approach to the history of this oceanic region.

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