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Transformation in Slavery in the Southern Atlantic World

In recent years, a number of studies have been devoted to the organization of the Atlantic slave trade in individual African slaving ports. This literature has mainly concentrated on West African coastal communities. In her book on Benguela, Mariana Candido shifts the focus to West Central Africa and the southern Atlantic. This is the first English-language book on Benguela, one of the major outlets for slaves in the Atlantic commerce. Earlier research on Benguela is scarce; Ralph Delgado’s studies, published in the 1940s, are part of Portuguese colonialist historiography, in which Portuguese officials occupied a central role. By contrast, Candido’s work highlights local African people in Benguela and its interior.

Following the introduction, the book outlines the history of Benguela in two chronological chapters from the late sixteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century. These are followed by three thematic chapters. In chapter 3, Benguela is placed in the context of the southern Atlantic world. Candido discusses the organization and extent of the transatlantic slave trade, stressing that Benguela was integrated into the Atlantic economy earlier than previously recognized. Chapter 4 deals with mechanisms of enslavement and the factors that made people vulnerable to capture. It includes an important discussion on the ways enslaved individuals sought to defend their freedom. In chapter 5, Candido turns to political reconfigurations of the hinterland, showing how people organized into states with different degrees of centralization. Sparsely illustrated with six images, the book includes maps that will help the readers unfamiliar with the region place Benguela and its hinterland in their geographic context.

The story of Benguela began with the establishment of a port by the Portuguese in 1587 although this early settlement did not last long and became later known as Benguela-Velha, or old Benguela. Motivated by the search for minerals, especially copper, a new Benguela was founded in 1617 in a location near swamps south of the Catumbela River, truly a “white man’s grave.” The early settlers struggled not only with diseases but also with the nearby communities, leaving the early Portuguese presence marked by armed conflict. With the expansion of the Atlantic slave trade in the course of the eighteenth century, these conflicts only increased.

The slave trade in Benguela was characterized by its lack of Crown control, with officers ruling Benguela “as if it was a state within the Portuguese empire” (p. 95). Although the Portuguese occasionally attacked populations living near the coast, administrators were incapable of controlling trade in the interior. Constantly fearing invasion by its African neighbors, colonial power was apparently weak in Benguela.

The transatlantic slave trade is presented as the driving force affecting African polities in the region. Candido refers to several chiefdoms that collapsed due to the pressure of the slave trade. Political reorganization, cycles of violence, and transformation of African societies...
were the key effects of the rise of this Atlantic port. The population in the interior of Benguela lacked an overarching ethnic identity, and multiple political powers and polities of different sizes competed for resources in the region.

In writing the history of Benguela, Candido challenges several earlier interpretations in the historiography of West Central Africa. One of the major issues is the idea of a slaving frontier, a moving frontier zone of slaving violence implying progressive movement away from the Atlantic shore, as defined by Joseph Miller.[3] Candido argues that, although captives were imported to Benguela from the interior, traders were constantly enslaving people along the coast, emmeshing the interior of Benguela and the port itself in slave raids. She emphasizes rather than minimizes the Portuguese involvement in the enslavement process and in the slave trade. Contrary to Miller’s arguments that drought and disease were the key challenge for local societies in West Central Africa, Candido argues that the transatlantic slave trade had far more devastating consequences than climatic and disease factors.[4] In Candido’s view, it was the slave trade that led to political and social turmoil and forced people to migrate when threatened by violence. She also argues against John Thornton’s claim that, in Angola, the slave trade did not have an impact on agricultural production and natural reproduction of the population because women were able to reproduce fast enough to recuperate from the demographic loss caused by the slave trade.[5] Candido also revives the dormant debate on the jaga, concluding that the jaga did not represent a single group. Rather, they seem to have been a Portuguese creation, referring to nameless enemies who resisted the Portuguese advance in the region.

Several recent works have discussed cultural transformations in Atlantic Africa from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century. Candido takes on the creolization debate and clearly recognizes the processes of cultural exchange and creation in and around Benguela. She treats creolization as a sociocultural transformation affecting both Portuguese and African institutions and cultural practices in which different actors negotiated elements of each other’s culture. Although in the introduction Candido states that “most people living in West Central Africa, deliberately or not, ignored Christianity and the adoption of Portuguese names” and “resisted allying themselves with the colonial state and identifying themselves as Portuguese vassals” (p. 12), the examples presented throughout the book seem to imply that, in Benguela and its hinterland, creolization was widespread nevertheless. Like elsewhere in Atlantic Africa, identities were flexible and unstable.

The structure of the book, namely two chronological chapters followed by three thematic chapters, makes the book a bit repetitive, especially in chapters 2, 3, and 4. The comparative perspective regarding the Atlantic slave trade could have been taken much further continentally. Benguela’s differences from and similarities with other slaving ports are hardly discussed in the book.

Candido has written a rich history of Benguela and its hinterland. The main strength of the book lies in firm arguments that challenge the existing historiography on the slave trade in West Central Africa. Overall, Benguela’s history in the era of the transatlantic slave trade was characterized by conflict, power struggles, collapsing states, and steadily increasing insecurity. Eloquently written, Candido’s book deserves a wide audience and should be mandatory reading for courses on the history of slavery and slave trade in Africa.

Notes

[2]. Ralph Delgado, A famosa e histórica Benguela: Catálogo dos Governadores (1779 à 1940) (Lisbon: Cosmos, 1944), and O Reino de Benguela (Do descobrimento à criação do governo subaltern) (Lisbon: Imprensa Beleza, 1945).


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