The “Slave Coast,” so called from its prominence as a supplier of slaves for the transatlantic trade, comprised the coast from the River Volta to Lagos, including southeastern Ghana, the southern parts of Togo and Bénin, and the southwestern corner of Nigeria. Within this region, the African polities most involved in the slave trade were in the central section, in what is today Bénin: initially Allada and Hueda (Whydah), until these were conquered in the 1720s by the inland kingdom of Dahomey (or Fon). Academic study of the history of the region has generally concentrated on these three states, especially Dahomey. One of Fuglestad’s aims in this book is to “re-dress” this “imbalanced historiography” by dealing with the entire region (p. 39), which in practice means dealing at length with its western portion—though he has been partly preempted in this by the recently published work of Silke Strickrodt (*Afro-European Trade in the Atlantic World*, 2015). However, the main focus remains on Allada, Hueda, and Dahomey, and the main interest of the book is its interpretation of these.

This is an explicitly revisionist work, seeking to contest earlier interpretations, beginning with the pioneering work of I. A. Akinjogbin (*Dahomey and its Neighbours*, 1967) and including later work by me (especially *The Slave Coast of West Africa*, 1991) and Edna Bay (*Wives of the Leopard*, 1998). This revision is not, to any significant degree, based on new evidence: by comparison with earlier work, Fuglestad makes more systematic use of Portuguese archival sources, but it does not seem that this has turned up anything startlingly new. Rather, he offers a reinterpretation of the known range of evidence—which is course an entirely legitimate and indeed salutary enterprise. He also emphasizes the deficiencies of the available evidence—“how hopelessly little we really know … about the past of the Slave Coast” (p. 292), presenting an account that is avowedly “tentative and incomplete,” with “more questions than answers” (pp. 13, 18). Such skepticism is also healthy, although it seems in some tension with Fuglestad’s own willingness at times to base large speculations on fragmentary evidence. He also critiques the tendency of earlier work to offer a “Europeanized history” of African societies, that is, to present them as essentially similar to European models, and downplay cultural difference. This, again, is a valid criticism of some earlier work—including Akinjogbin’s presentation of Dahomey as a European-style “nation state” (p. 53)—but is arguably pushed too far: it is difficult to see why the suggestion that some of those incorporated into Dahomey by conquest came over time to identify themselves as Dahomians is somehow to impose a European model (p. 54).

Beyond this, Fuglestad devotes much greater detail than earlier historians of the region to the details of intra-European competition and conflict, in order to show how these interacted with local developments. His purpose is not, however, to suggest that the European factor was decisive in shaping events. On the contrary, he insists with great emphasis that Africans, rather than Europeans, took the lead in initiating and sustaining the slave trade on the Slave Coast: hence the title of the book, which alludes to his argument that it was the Africans who “invited” the Europeans to trade, rather than vice versa (pp. 10-11). This partly reprises the argument of a paper of Fuglestad’s published in 1995, which stressed
the difficulty presented for European maritime enterprise on the Slave Coast, which offered no “port” in the sense of a sheltered harbor, and difficult landing through the surf on sandbars parallel to the shore as well as on the beach itself, so that Europeans had no incentive to initiate trade unless encouraged by the locals to do so. In this, however, Fuglestad seems to be knocking at a door long open: the difficulties of landing on the coast were noted by historians even before his own intervention in 1995, and the primacy of African agency in the local operation of the slave trade is generally accepted, rather than an idea which challenges existing orthodoxy. Fuglestad muddies the waters somewhat by seeming to conflate this issue of African agency with that of whether the slave trade was driven by European demand or African supply (p. 126): there is no contradiction in holding both that Africans were the dominant partners in the trade and that they were motivated thereto by the high (and rising) prices which Europeans offered for slaves.

Fuglestad’s revisionism relates more to the rise of Dahomey, and more particularly the nature of the Dahomian state. The uncontested starting point is that the founders of the royal dynasty of Dahomey were people without any hereditary claim to authority—indeed, traditions present them as incomers from outside the immediate region—who seized power by force. The extension of Dahomian rule south, over Allada and Hueda in the 1720s, was likewise effected by force, and was initially strongly contested, being followed by a series of incidents of resistance and rebellion that continued into the 1750s. Earlier historians have been centrally concerned with the process whereby Dahomian rule was consolidated and won the consent of the conquered peoples, and therefore especially interested in questions of political legitimacy and ideology. Akinjogbin argued that Dahomey was a self-consciously “revolutionary” state that differed radically from those which it displaced, whereas Bay and myself suggested that it appealed to and manipulated existing traditions (for example, claiming continuity with the royal dynasty of Allada). On this, Fuglestad basically supports the thesis of “rupture” rather than “continuity” (p. 43). However, in opposition to both schools of thought, he denies that the Dahomian monarchy’s attempts to win legitimacy for the Dahomian monarchy were really successful, or that Dahomey was ever effectively stabilized.

This revision is not based on any newly discovered evidence: no instance of rebellion against Dahomian authority beyond the 1750s is cited. There were of course political problems subsequently—one king was assassinated (in 1797), another deposed (in 1818). But the evidence that these incidents involved a challenge to the authority of the dynasty, as opposed to divisions within the ruling elite, is slight. The main evidence adduced for continuing disaffection comprises traditions (already cited by earlier historians) that suggest tensions between the monarchy and the cult of Sakpata, the god of the earth. Fuglestad’s argument that Sakpata represented “the old order” that the kings of Dahomey had overthrown is difficult to square with other traditions (which he does not cite) that assert that this was not an indigenous cult (p. 166), but introduced from the region to the north of Dahomey in the early eighteenth century; but in any case, there is nothing in the evidence to suggest that the cult ever represented a serious threat to the authority of the Dahomian monarchy.

Rather, the argument is a priori, based on a “model” of African political organization and legitimacy which Fuglestad expounds in chapter 3. His argument (originally advanced in a journal article published in 1977) is that ritual control of the land always belonged to the descendants of its first inhabitants, whose leader functioned as the “earth-priest” or “owner of the land.” He presents this as “a universal phenomenon,” which seems to mean that it was not restricted to the African continent, rather than that it was “universal” within Africa (p. 65). Under this model, the only way in which a parvenu dynasty could legitimize its rule was by recognizing the ritual primacy of the original “owner of the land,” thus creating what anthropologists have termed a “contrapuntal primacy” (p. 66). In Dahomey, however, no such arrangement existed. The Dahomian kings themselves claimed to be “owners of the land [ayinon],” basing this claim not only on the right of conquest but also on having purchased the land from its original owners—this purchase being ceremonially re-enacted at the installation of each new king, who symbolically “bought Dahomey” by a distribution of money. Fuglestad does not deny that this claim was made, but insists that it could not have succeeded in winning acceptance, because ownership of land was “inalienable” (p. 65). Consequently, for Dahomey the problem of legitimacy was “unresolvable” (p. 290).

There are two sorts of difficulties with this thesis. First, although certainly widespread in Africa, the institution of the “contrapuntal primacy” as conceived by Fuglestad was far from being universal. To take one example which he cites (pp. 66, 73), in the kingdom of Oyo (which dominated and culturally influenced Dahomey during the eighteenth century) the power of the king, the Alafin, was certainly balanced by that of the head of
the council of “chiefs,” the Basorun, but it was the Alafin,
not the Basorun, who held the title “Owner of the Land
[Onile].” The grounds for believing that a “contrapun-
tal primacy” operated in Allada, prior to the Dahomian
conquest, are also tenuous (p. 148). Essentially, this is
inferred from a ceremony documented in the twentieth
century, which dramatized a confrontation between the
priest of Ajahuto (the ancestor of the royal dynasty of
Allada), who was in effect the successor to the kings of
Allada, and another official called the Aplogan: Fuglestad
cites speculations that the Aplogan might represent the
local “owners of the land,” but the title Aplogan is in fact
that of the Dahomian governor of Allada, appointed from
outside the community (cf. p. 164). But, if the “contra-
puntal primacy” was not universal, then logically it can-
not be taken for the only possible basis for legitimization
of an alien dynasty.

But perhaps the more compelling objection can be ex-
pressed in the words attributed to Galileo: E pur si muove,
“and yet, it moves.” After all, the Dahomian kingdom did
survive, until it was overthrown by the French coloniz-
ers in the 1890s; and indeed, the Dahomian identity sur-
vived the destruction of the kingdom, so that there are
today people whose ancestors were incorporated into the
kingdom by conquest or enslavement, but who now re-
gard themselves as Fon. This implies that the kings of
Dahomey were more successful in winning the consent
of their subjects than Fuglestad is willing to believe. In
fact, he himself acknowledges the “resilience” of the Da-
homian state, which he finds “surprising” and “hard to
explain” (p. 264). It may be suggested that his difficulty
in understanding the survival of Dahomey is in large part
due to his reluctance to envisage any other possible ba-
sis of political legitimacy than his own conception of a
“contrapuntal paramountcy.” While, therefore, Fuglestad
offers a robust and salutary challenge to the evidential
basis of earlier analyses, he is less persuasive in his own
alternative interpretation.

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Citation: Robin Law. Review of Fuglestad, Finn, Slave Traders by Invitation : West Africa’s Slave Coast in the Pre-

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