

Reviews of Books

West Africa in Global Trade and Empires

Rebecca Shumway, *University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee*

Making Money: Life, Death, and Early Modern Trade on Africa's Guinea Coast. By COLLEEN E. KRIGER. *Africa in World History*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2017. 254 pages. Cloth, paper, ebook.

Freedom's Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution. By PADRAIC X. SCANLAN. *Lewis Walpole Series in Eighteenth-Century Culture and History*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2017. 315 pages. Cloth, ebook.

Whether by caravan, canoe, or dhow, trade brought West African goods and people into direct contact with the far corners of the Old World prior to the proliferation of the transatlantic slave trade. Long-distance trade drew West African elites across the Sahara Desert into the heartland of medieval Islam, to the Renaissance Vatican, and to the best universities in early modern Europe. As an integral part of the formation of the Atlantic world, West Africa's worldwide commercial ties expanded even further. These deep and long-lasting trading relationships can be viewed from many different perspectives. The Ghanaian novelist Ayi Kwei Armah portrayed this history as two thousand seasons of African suffering: "From the desert first, then from the sea, the white predators, the white destroyers came assailing us with the maddening loudness of their shrieking theologies."¹ On the other hand, trade with the outside world made possible the magnificence of urban centers such as Timbuktu and the wealth and power of kingdoms such as Asante.

Colleen E. Kriger and Padraic X. Scanlan have each written books that concern West African trade and the complex intercultural relationships that sustained it prior to the era of European colonial rule. Both primarily concern British trade in a part of West Africa previously known as Upper Guinea, which refers to the coastline from modern-day Senegal to Liberia and its hinterland, and both draw on the archival records created by British traders or government officials. Kriger's *Making Money: Life, Death, and Early Modern Trade on Africa's Guinea Coast* mines the records of the

¹ Ayi Kwei Armah, *Two Thousand Seasons* (Nairobi, 1973), 5.

Royal African Company from the 1670s to the 1710s, shedding light on the period when Britain significantly expanded its trade in captive African men, women, and children to British sugar-producing colonies in the Caribbean. In *Freedom's Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution*, Scanlan analyzes British trade and colonization in this region roughly a century later, from the 1780s to the 1820s, with a focus on Sierra Leone and Britain's shifting interest from slaving to the production and export of agricultural products—what was referred to at the time as “legitimate” trade.

Despite their similarities, these two books represent very different approaches to West Africa's history and the intercontinental relationships that made trade possible. Kriger shows how West African traders, producers, and workers in countless urban occupations contributed to a vast commercial system that moved goods and people across oceans and continents. Her narrative centers on African people, mainly in African settings, and draws connective lines from there outward to the Middle East, Europe, Asia, and the Americas. While not diminishing the importance of slavery and slave trading to West Africa's economy, Kriger illuminates crucial lesser-known aspects of the commodities central to it and the multicultural milieu in which traders operated.

By focusing on the African economy more broadly, *Making Money* neatly explains what those teaching the history of Atlantic Africa are rarely able to convey and what students often fail to understand: Africans' reasons for participating in the slave trade. As she shows, West African commercial norms included slavery and slave trading—just as those of medieval Europe, Asia, and the Middle East did—long before European expansion into Atlantic maritime trade. In Europe's medieval period, she reveals, West African trade with people who crossed the Sahara to buy gold, slaves, and other commodities brought tremendous wealth and power to African leaders such as Mansa Musa (ruler of the Mali Empire and arguably the wealthiest person ever in world history). Kriger's framing of West African economic history also highlights Islamic civilization as the basis of trade between Africa and the rest of the Old World for centuries prior to Europe's maritime expansion. In short, she shows that slavery was already part of a sophisticated and complex West African commercial world long before English traders—and, before them, the Portuguese and Dutch—found ways to integrate themselves into it and adapt to its norms.

Kriger also resolves another question critical to understanding the African side of the transatlantic slave trade—what Africans received in exchange for the captives they sold and, more importantly, the value of those currencies and commodities. Kriger demystifies this topic by drawing on her expertise in the history of textile production and trade and by studiously mining the records of the Royal African Company. She highlights the variety of linen, wool, and cotton textiles produced (usually by semiservile

laborers) in India, northern and eastern Europe, and West Africa to meet the ever-changing demands of West African consumers who sought particular imported fabrics for both formal and common dress. She tackles the pervasive assumption that iron bars and beads constituted “trinkets” (47) within West Africa’s supposedly “primitive” economy (what Kriger refers to as the “gewgaw myth” [47]), showing how iron—which Africans had mined, smelted, and forged for themselves for centuries prior to their trade with England—was imported into West Africa from the Baltic region on English ships to supplement African iron sources. These imported iron bars were manufactured into tools and other implements by African ironworkers and traded widely as a form of currency. Similarly, beads made of stone (quartz, crystal), organic material (coral, amber), and glass were used both as money and as a consumer item in West Africa, as they were across the world. Much like cowry shells, beads circulated widely and were stored as a form of wealth, worn as jewelry, and buried as treasure. As with any other form of currency, beads, cowry shells, and iron bars were highly valued in West Africa because they could be exchanged for commodities, labor, and access to land. Africans were not tricked into exchanging people for useless trinkets, Kriger shows. On the contrary, African merchants’ insistence on receiving the currencies of their local economies forced English and other foreign merchants to travel far and wide to obtain them.

The last three chapters of Kriger’s book delve more deeply into the workings of Anglo-African trade in African ports and the intensely intercultural and interracial nature of the trade. She introduces us to African and Eurafican women and men who encountered representatives of England’s Royal African Company as traders, wives, food sellers, and providers of a range of services, from laundering to translating. Through the wills of Englishmen who died on the West African coast—and death was the norm rather than the exception, thanks to tropical diseases—she reveals the existence of a large community of urban Atlantic Africans who, by virtue of intimate relationships between English traders and African women, inherited the former’s wealth and sometimes their family names. Within these coastal enclaves, Kriger also reveals a variety of forms of dependency and unfreedom among all sorts of people. The company claimed African captives and rebels as their property and employed numerous African and Afro-European men and women in their operations on the coast, as did wealthy local merchant families.

Throughout the book, Kriger emphasizes that the trade taking place in West Africa’s early modern coastal markets was truly global. Africans produced and supplied goods to European markets, and they imported and reexported European and Asian manufactures. Africans also sold captive people who built and sustained commercial agriculture throughout the Americas, but this human trafficking was inextricably linked to the global commodities trade founded centuries before the rise of the transatlantic slave trade.

Kruger is explicit about her intention to write an accessible book that challenges myths and stereotypes about Africa and Africans. The volume is exemplary in this regard and indeed could be productively assigned at all levels from high school on up. Kruger uses clear, nonspecialist language and includes suggested further readings for each chapter, maps and images throughout, and a bibliography that includes online sources. Only Lisa A. Lindsay's *Captives as Commodities* rivals it as a resource for teaching the African dimensions of the slave trade.²

Scanlan's *Freedom's Debtors*, like Kruger's book, dives into a specific set of archival materials—in this case the records of British governmental bodies related to the settlement and colonization of Sierra Leone—to shed light on the realities of life on the ground for British traders and administrators in West Africa. The story Scanlan tells is not an African story, however, but a story about British imperialism. He examines British settlement and colonization in Sierra Leone from the 1780s to the 1820s in order to illuminate the broader issue of British antislavery as an evolving ideology, asking what “the larger histories of British slavery and emancipation” (18) looked like from the perspective of West Africa. He argues that British antislavery in Sierra Leone had three essential features: it was acquisitive, gradualist, and militarized. As he shows, the drive to make money from the Sierra Leone enterprise was never far behind the humanitarian rhetoric promoted by the British government. Furthermore, British officials on the ground repeatedly observed that slave labor (and practices that closely resembled slavery and slave trading) was fundamental to the economy of the British settlement, and few of them actively sought to change that, relying instead on the assumption that slavery would somehow die a natural death over time.

Perhaps the most compelling new research in this book is Scanlan's analysis of the militaristic nature of the British settlement in Sierra Leone. The British armed forces had an official presence in Sierra Leone from the beginning of the nineteenth century, and of course the military officers capturing slave ships and delivering the captives aboard to Freetown played a significant role in populating the colony. Moreover, many of these captives were conscripted as soldiers for a lifetime of service to the British military forces. And Sierra Leone's governors launched numerous campaigns against slaving forts along the West African coast, seizing goods and captives and creating the Royal African Corps (composed largely of previously enslaved people) in order to do so. Sierra Leone seemed to be a magnet for military officers prone to giving themselves arbitrary power—typified by Sir Charles MacCarthy—and they committed their acts of violence, Scanlan shows, under the auspices of abolishing the slave trade. By tracing the development of transcontinental military institutions in which African

² Lisa A. Lindsay, *Captives as Commodities: The Transatlantic Slave Trade* (Upper Saddle River, N.J., 2008).

and African-descended people played important roles—namely, the Royal African Corps and the West India Regiments—the book contributes significantly to the history of British imperialism in West Africa and the Caribbean.

Scanlan also exposes the undeniable hypocrisy of British claims that it was ending slavery in this part of Africa. British settlement, Scanlan shows, depended on food and supplies purchased from neighboring African societies, where the British knew large numbers of enslaved people engaged in agricultural and other forms of labor and where people were regularly bought and sold in slave markets. Thus, even as colonial officials purported to support the abolition of slavery, they significantly contributed to its continuing expansion.

Freedom's Debtors likewise reveals some of the less heroic aspects of the abolitionist movement, repeatedly exposing the unmistakable white supremacist ideas and attitudes driving British policies in Sierra Leone and detailing the ways in which Britain took advantage of opportunities to expand its military presence around the Atlantic. Nevertheless, Scanlan's approach in some ways echoes an outdated Eurocentric perspective. *Freedom's Debtors* focuses on British people and ideas in an African setting, an approach that to an Africanist recalls the much-maligned historiography of the early and mid-twentieth century that at the time passed for African history while only telling the story of what Europeans did in Africa. Since the 1960s, the field of African history has largely defined itself in opposition to and defiance of this type of work in which African people only appear as nondescript masses of so-called natives or only as slaves.³ But particularly when considered alongside Kriger's study, Scanlan's book seems to neglect African actors. Black people are everywhere in this study, but they lack voices and agency.

Freedom's Debtors, for example, does not engage with or significantly draw upon several important studies, such as those by Gibril R. Cole and Joseph J. Bangura, that demonstrate that from its outset the British settlement in Sierra Leone was profoundly influenced by the African societies that neighbored and in some ways hosted the fragile settler community. Many African-descended settlers brought by the British became Muslim or incorporated aspects of local Islamic systems of trade and culture. Moreover, the dominant Temne community in the hinterland essentially took over local governance throughout the colony from the mid-nineteenth century.⁴ Indigenous Africans were far more essential to shaping the British settlement in Sierra Leone than Scanlan's account allows.

³ See for example A. Adu Boahen, *African Perspectives on Colonialism* (Baltimore, 1987).

⁴ For Islamic systems of trade and culture, see Gibril R. Cole, *The Krio of West Africa: Islam, Culture, Creolization, and Colonialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens, Ohio, 2013). For the Temne, see Joseph J. Bangura, *The Temne of Sierra Leone: African Agency in the Making of a British Colony* (Cambridge, 2017).

Scanlan tends to describe Britain's colonial project in Sierra Leone in teleological terms—as though large-scale colonial projects in Africa were already inevitable by the 1810s, though they certainly were not—that minimize the vitality of contemporary African communities. For instance, he claims, “The [Sierra Leone] colony allowed a generation of antislavery campaigners to write and rehearse the scripts for later colonial experiments in ‘civilization’” (4). This suggestion that Sierra Leone was a stepping-stone to Britain's colonization of huge swathes of African territory in the 1880s belies the British government's staunch opposition to acquiring territories in tropical Africa until the 1860s, as well as the different political climate of intra-European politics in the late nineteenth century that spurred the so-called scramble for Africa. On occasion Scanlan's attention to British hypocrisy wavers, as when he writes of one of the most inhumane institutions in the Sierra Leone colony: “the Liberated African Department came into its own as the central mechanism of a sophisticated program of ‘civilizing’ colonial rule and territorial expansion” (209). Yet this characterization deflects from his own argument; Scanlan himself reveals (as have other scholars) that the department's operations entailed placing African people who had been brought on captured slave ships into artificial villages in Sierra Leone as so-called apprentices who were exploited, abused, and treated as property just like slaves.⁵ And as Scanlan argues elsewhere in the book, no one on the ground in Sierra Leone believed the rhetoric formulated by British officers and repeated by him here. Similarly, as the above use of “civilizing” demonstrates, Scanlan relies on the wholly inadequate strategy of using what are now widely regarded as racist terms—*tribal*, *natives*, *Negroes*—but asserting his critical distance by putting them in scare quotes. Failing to replace these terms with more accurate and respectful ones—such as ethnic group, Indigenous people, and Africans—instead re-invokes the colonial mentality and does a disservice to the sensitive elements of his analysis.

Likewise, Scanlan falls victim to the false (colonial) notion that precolonial African economies were unsophisticated, an assumption Kriger condemns and eradicates in her book. Scanlan tells us that the land for Sierra Leone's first British settlement was paid for in part with “trinkets” (36) and that, thanks to British visions of what they considered a more stable kind of economy, “the pidgin transactions of the era of the slave trade would be replaced by ‘regular habits of Industry & Traffic’ as soon as dollars and pounds became the principal means of exchange on the coast” (37). In these ways, even while exposing the underlying lust for power and racist control

⁵ See for example Suzanne Schwarz, “‘A Just and Honourable Commerce’: Abolitionist Experimentation in Sierra Leone in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries,” *African Economic History* 45, no. 1 (2017): 1–45; Maeve Ryan, “A ‘Very Extensive System of Peculation and Jobbing’: The Liberated African Department of Sierra Leone, Humanitarian Governance and the Fraud Inquiry of 1848,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 17, no. 3 (Winter 2016).

that drove the British enterprise in Sierra Leone, Scanlan presents a flattened and insufficiently complex view of African ways of life.

The long history of encounters between Europeans and West Africans cannot be reduced to essentialist notions pairing European predation and African victimization or to narratives of primitivism giving way to modernization. Nor is it particularly useful, as so often happens in conversations about the transatlantic slave trade, either to blame or celebrate one side or the other for the results of the long relationship between these two world regions, which included widespread violence and slavery in both Africa and the Americas. Kriger and Scanlan have given us two different perspectives from which to consider aspects of the commercial relationship that kept Britons and West Africans engaged in complex networks of exchange and interaction from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth century, both of which will prompt new and fruitful discussions about Africa's long commercial relationship with Great Britain and its profound legacies. Indeed, as statues of proslavery advocates and colonizers fall across the United States, Africa, and Europe in a resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, the history of British–West African relations can provide useful insights. Kriger and Scanlan have illuminated some of the ways in which the systems of exploiting and denigrating Black lives were created not only by slave traders but by abolitionists as well and have shown that they were always fueled by the desire for profit.