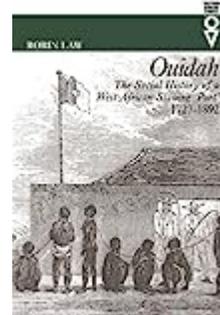


Robin Law. *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving Port, 1727-1892.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005. xii + 308 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1571-9; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-1572-6.



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The Evolution of Ouidah's Merchant Community

Ouidah and Dahomey, like Elmina and Asante, represent some of the most recognizable names of West African ports and states during the transatlantic slave trade. Robin Law's new work builds upon a historiographical tradition that explores Ouidah's role, especially after the Dahomean conquest, in that trade. While much of the literature on Dahomey and the Asante stresses the role of the state in controlling and profiting from exchange, Law successfully changes this perspective by focusing upon the "evolution of the merchant community" (p. 3). As Law convincingly shows, Ouidah's merchant community proved successful in gaining some degree of economic freedom from the Dahomean political structure. Over time, a system developed at Ouidah where both the Dahomean state and the local transatlantic merchant community could profit from the slave trade and, later, legitimate trade. In laying the foundations for a social history of Ouidah, Law places it within its larger Atlantic context by examining how internal and external factors influenced its development.

Ouidah, like other West African ports, was a part of the larger Atlantic economy which, as these ports inte-

grated themselves into Atlantic trade networks, maintained control over local cross-cultural trade. According to Law, Ouidah and other coastal ports served four major roles in that they organized "overseas commerce," developed relations with the hinterland, were affected by "Atlantic commerce" and experienced problems in the transition to legitimate trade (p. 5). For Ouidah, Law utilizes Ralph Austen and Jonathan Derrick's conception of a middleman community to understand its place in the Atlantic World. He argues that the Gold Coast "enclave-entrop' t" model created by Harvey Feinberg does not work, as European power was more limited at Ouidah, while Karl Polanyi's "port of trade" does not apply. This constitutes the first of numerous challenges to Polanyi found throughout the work.

Law utilizes eight chronological chapters to explore the history of the Ouidah merchant community which, from 1727 to 1892, embraced continuity while effectively dealing with change. He begins by exploring the development of Ouidah before the Dahomean conquest and how Ouidah's position, four kilometers from the coast with a lagoon in between, influenced its development.

Like many coastal ports, the people of Ouidah engaged in fishing, salt making and other forms of production that continued as its Atlantic trade increased. During this formative period, the European forts became segregated from the Ouidah community. As Ouidah developed an Atlantic role, the rise of Dahomey influenced Ouidah and its hinterland. Law focuses upon the consequences rather than the causes of the war and Dahomey's attempt to establish and maintain its authority in Ouidah against challenges from Hueda and Popo. It is in the next two chapters, on Dahomean Ouidah and the operation of the Atlantic slave trade, that Law presents the reader with important insights into Ouidah beyond its merchant community. In these chapters, he explores the heterogeneous nature of Ouidah's population; its relationship with various European representatives; the social, economic and political changes occurring because of Dahomean rule; and the arrival of new foreign merchants such as Francisco Felix de Souza. The second of the two chapters is especially interesting in its exploration of the mechanics of the slave trade at the "neutral" port of Ouidah (p. 123). This includes the introduction of the ounce, the utilization of Gold Coast canoe-men, the conduct of business in private residences, the marking of slaves, and the ways in which the local peoples viewed the slave trade. Law shows that at Ouidah only a minority of people profited from the slave trade, but a more important question that remains unanswered involves how the slave trade affected all of Ouidah's population. From there, Law explores the consequences of abolition, the merchants' attempt to circumvent abolition, and the rise of legitimate trade. Law clearly shows that the palm oil trade and slave trade were not independent of one another; rather, they were interrelated. This transitional period marked not only the destruction of de Souza's monopoly but also the introduction of Methodist missionaries. The final two chapters explore the continued attempts to revive the slave trade, Ouidah's challenge to Dahomean rule and the rise of imperialism as the French gained control of Ouidah.

Law's examination of Ouidah's developing merchant community and how it reacted to important moments of change provides important insight into the changing nature of Atlantic trade on the West African coast. One problem, for this reviewer, lies within the expectations of the title versus the content of the work. The title announces a social history, within which this reviewer hoped to learn how participation in the transatlantic slave trade affected the peoples of Ouidah, but found a history of its merchants. This, of course, critiques Law

for the book that he did not write rather than the one that he did, and Law does, at points, provide examples of the social history beyond this merchant community, yet these remain secondary. While he announces that he is changing his earlier, king-centric perspective, his examination of the merchant community focuses upon their interaction with two powerful groups. The first involved their internal relationship with the state and its political and economic authority at Ouidah, while the second involved their external relationship with slave traders and, later, legitimate traders.

Another issue that arises from Law's work, and which confronts most historians attempting to understand West Africa within the Atlantic World, involves the sources that exist. While Law utilizes Ouidah oral sources, most of his primary evidence stems from an impressive array of European sources. The problem is that European sources often make it hard to find African agency and identity because of their biased perspective. When writing African history, or even the transnational/racial/ethnic history of a West African port, the sources influence perspective. This is clear in Law's work when the Ouidah merchant community starts reacting to European decisions rather than the Europeans reacting to Ouidah/Dahomeian decisions. In this section, the perspective changes as Europe gains more influence over the merchant community. This shift, which Law explores in detail, marks a transitional period in West African history and in the history of the Atlantic World. The agency and independence that existed during the slave trade started to diminish, causing groups such as the Ouidah merchants to either adapt or disappear.

Law has produced a valuable history of one West African port and has pushed forward a small but important direction in increasing our understanding of West Africa's place in the Atlantic World. By narrowing our focus in West Africa beyond general coastal regions, we can not only better understand the diversity of peoples, states, societies, and cultures that existed, but also the diversity of continuity and change that occurred from participation in the Atlantic World.

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