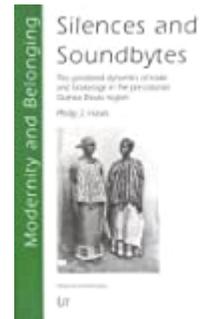


Philip Havik. *Silences and Soundbytes: The Gendered Dynamics of Trade and Brokerage in the Pre-colonial Guinea Bissau Region.* Munster: Lit Verlag, 2004. 402 pp. 29.90 EUR (cloth), ISBN 978-3-8258-7709-5.



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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 in-

ternational 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 com-

plexity 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 earlier African historiography was the intellectual contortions 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 belong to different oceanic zones—the North to the Mediterranean, 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 ethnicities. Havik shows how complex the ethnic kaleidoscope of upper Guinea became. Gone are the days when Africans could be represented as belonging to distinct ethnic 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 identities” (p. 18) as individuals sought to place themselves advantageously alongside the communities with which they did business. Intermarriage consolidated commercial relations, usufruct rights in land and political alliances.

European, Cape Verdian or Brazilian traders had to

adapt to these local practices and also used 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 religion, 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, paying 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 leading part. The term “matronage” is essential for understanding the working of this society. “With and without male Atlantic outsiders, these women exercised an unparalleled influence over economic and political domains, thereby extending notions of female agency” (p. 37). Papel 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 contracting 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 matriarchs 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 government in Portuguese Guinea. *Na Rosa* was venerated as a stalwart of Portuguese interests in the region. Her mediation 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 organizing 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 pervasive 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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