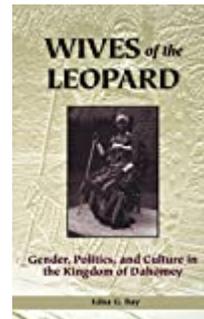




Edna G. Bay. *Wives of the Leopard: Gender, Politics and Culture in the Kingdom of Dahomey.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998. xi + 376pp. \$24.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8139-1792-4; \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-1791-7.



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Gendered Politics, Power and Culture in West Africa

Edna Bay's study of Dahomey between c.1790 and 1984 is a most welcome addition to the literature about a kingdom whose history is of great interest to many scholars, but which has received surprisingly little attention in comparison with other state systems in pre-colonial Africa. She challenges the stereotypes that continue to inform popular images of the Dahomey state; she demonstrates quite effectively the fact that the changes that were occurring in the status of royal women in Dahomey had origins in local politics that were exacerbated only later by colonial policies; she provides compelling portraits of a number of royal women, how they functioned within the state, and she presents this material in a way that is accessible to those who are not specialists in the field. The result is an important contribution to the study of gender, precolonial African politics and culture that has many strengths, but is also not without its problems.

Bay begins her study by defining the term monarchy. She uses the term to delineate "a small and fluid political and economic elite [where] one of its members was the man who reigned as king and in whose name

the country was governed, [but which also] could act in face of the king's opposition" (p. 7). This is obviously a rather broad definition with which many could argue, given the lack of parameters defining who, under what circumstances and by what means individuals were included and excluded from the monarchy. Nevertheless, it becomes clear who many of these individuals were, how they operated and for what purpose. She emphasizes the extent to which material wealth, marital ties and religious affiliation could all become the basis for wielding power and influence and that it was often through combining these attributes that individuals became a part of the power elite in eighteenth and nineteenth century Dahomey.

One of the most compelling aspects of Bay's reconstruction of Dahomean history, society and culture is her analysis of how women figured in the political history of the state. She documents the fact that the vast majority of the palace personnel who stood at the heart of the monarchy were women. This group included female bodyguards, the *kpojito* ("queen-mother") and those women whose responsibility it was to maintain palace contacts

with male counterparts who played various political, economic and diplomatic roles outside the palace. These women were central to the functioning of the palace and had tremendous influence over the running of the state. Bay also documents the origins of the system that involved the pairing of males and females in every bureaucratic office and how and why this system was increasingly challenged. She illustrates the extent to which gender became the basis for integrating royals and non-royals within the state. She discusses the use of the idiom of marriage to mark hierarchical relations between women and men, women and women, and men and men. She deftly documents the role that religious belief played in the political system of Dahomey and the connections that existed between particular religious systems, their incorporation into the Dahomean political system and the impact of this incorporation had on gender relations within the political culture of the state. Her discussion of state-sponsored prostitution is especially intriguing. She also does an excellent job of documenting many of the political intrigues that marked the reigns of particular Dahomean kings, the impact of the changing character of the slave trade on the state and how all these events led to the gradual decline in the power that women exercised within the palace.

In other words, Bay does an admirable job of weaving together politics, gender, culture and religious belief as these operated in eighteenth and nineteenth century Dahomey. But as is always the case, certain aspects of the book work better than others. Bay writes that her goal is to speak to both African studies non-specialists and specialists by balancing accuracy with accessibility. And the book, is indeed, written in an accessible way. I was rather surprised, however, that Bay did not speak more directly to much of the specialist literature that focuses on the same topics and themes that are of concern in her book. Both Musisi[1] and McCaskie[2], for example, speak very directly to the issue of the sexuality of princesses in nineteenth century Buganda and Asante, respectively. Matory[3] has written specifically on sexuality in precolonial Oyo, a society which Bay acknowledges had a great influence on Dahomean political culture. I too have written on changes that occurred in gender relations during the era of the slave trade and its abolition[4]. Addressing these studies more directly, pointing out similarities and differences, would have made this book speak to and perhaps even challenge scholars to rethink the ways they analyze the gender relations in precolonial African societies.

Equally problematic is the way Bay fails to lead the

reader through the thicket of names used in the text. Individuals are often unconnected to readily identifiable events or dates. This often leaves the reader, whether non-specialist or specialist, confused about the chronological development of certain events. This lack of a sense of linear progression is especially problematic in the first chapter and in the middle chapters. The first chapter, for example, moves back and forth through time, giving one an ahistorical sense about the character of the monarchy. The middle chapters are organized by kingly reigns, but within each chapter unexpected references are made to both previous and later periods. This leaves the reader wondering exactly what period is being discussed. Women are given much more attention than gender relations per se. Sometimes the two are conflated; other times they do not figure into the discussion of politics at all, thus giving at times a rather disjointed character to the narrative. I also found it unfortunate that Bay did not make more use of oral sources (which are admittedly associated with a myriad of difficulties) and archival sources, especially trade documents which on the surface may not contain much information about Dahomey but which can be used to document economic changes which in turn can be combined with other sources to reconstruct both the micro- and macro-pressures experienced by the state.

Edna Bay's book is nevertheless a most welcome addition to the literature on gender, politics and culture in precolonial Africa. Her book should become a standard reference to specialists and non-specialists alike who are interested in the culture, politics and gender dynamics of the kingdom of Dahomey.

Notes:

[1]. Nakanyike B. Musisi, "Women, 'Elite Polygyny' and Buganda State Formation, *Signs*, 4, 16 (1991) 757-786.

[2]. T. C. McCaskie, "State and Society, Marriage and Adultery: Some Considerations towards a Social History of Precolonial Asante," *Journal of African History*, 22, 4 (1981) 477-94.

[3]. J. Lorand Matory, *Sex And The Empire That Is No More: Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Oyo Yoruba Religion*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1994.

[4]. Sandra E. Greene, *Gender, Ethnicity and Social Change on the Upper Slave Coast: A History of the Anlo-Ewe*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996.

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