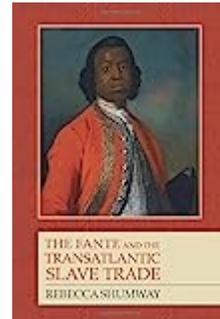




Rebecca Shumway. *The Fante and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.* Rochester Studies in African History and the Diaspora Series. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2014. 244 pp. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-58046-478-9.



Reviewed by Ty Reese (Department of History, University of North Dakota)

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Commissioned by W. Douglas Catterall (Cameron University of Oklahoma)

A Gulf of Guinea Thread in the African Diaspora

During the past decade plus, we have experienced an increase in historical interest in the Gold Coast during the period of Atlantic trade, yet within this resurgent research effort, few have attempted to deal with long periods or whole regions. Rebecca Shumway addresses this problem in her study of the Fante, who were the dominant Gold Coast traders of the eighteenth century. In her revision of the rather Asante-centric history of the eighteenth-century Gold Coast, Shumway seeks to understand both how the Fante became the dominant Gold Coast traders and how they maintained this position throughout the 1700s. Her argument focuses on two developments, one political and the other cultural, within Fante. The first concerns the creation of the Fante confederacy, which Shumway terms the “Coastal Coalition,” and the second involves the development of a unified Fante culture that held the coalition together (p. 11).

Shumway explores the eighteenth-century history of Fante through four focused chapters. From the start, she correctly portrays the Fante as a group who did not play second fiddle to either the better-known Asante or the

British, but who rather intelligently, nay cunningly, took advantage of the changes being wrought upon the Gold Coast through internal and external stimuli. Internally, the traditional catalyst of the eighteenth-century Gold Coast, according to the received historiography, was Asante, and while Shumway explores Fante’s relationship with Asante, she makes it clear that Asante did not control Fante. This is an important aspect of Shumway’s work in that she effectively addresses and revises the traditional Asante-focused history of the Gold Coast. Complementing the rise of Fante and Asante was the external factor of developing Atlantic trade, especially the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century transition from gold to slaves as the main export commodity. Throughout the work, it becomes clear not only that the Fante were reacting to these changes, but that they also played an important role in the changes themselves as they established their intermediary position between European and Asante traders while developing a political, economic, social, cultural, and religious system that brought some unity and focus to a rather decentralized

and independent group. These developments allowed Fante to avoid Asante conquest for over a century and to dominate the coastal trade.

Shumway's opening chapter introduces the reader to the Gold Coast, the Borbor Fante, and the arrival of Europeans. It explores the rise of the gold trade and the transition to the slave trade, brings up the issue of Atlantic creoles, and explores the adaptations that occurred because of these internal and external changes. From there, Shumway transitions to exploring the opportunities that developed as the Gold Coast became increasingly involved in Atlantic trade, especially through trafficking in human "commodities." An important aspect of this involved how the coastal ports, such as Anomabu, Cape Coast, Elmina, and others, became Atlantic, and thus somewhat creolized, as they connected the interior, both near and far, to the Atlantic economy. This chapter thoroughly explores the economic consequences of these activities; the ramifications of the slave trade's development; the growing European competition that Atlantic trade caused along the Gold Coast, especially between the Dutch and English; and the importance of coastal enclaves, most especially Anomabu, within all of this. Shumway's focus on Anomabu is important in that while Elmina and Cape Coast are better known, Anomabu provides important insight into Fante-European relations and the development of Fante's intermediary position. Throughout, Shumway works to develop an understanding of the relationship between these ports and the interior despite the nature of the surviving records, the majority of which are from European companies and place more stress on the coastal enclaves, as they were inhabited and known to Europeans, rather than the interior which was unknown to them. This, in itself, is a clear example of coastal relations and of Fante control over their European trading partners in that European knowledge of the interior was almost nonexistent.

The next two chapters are the center of Shumway's reinterpretation of the eighteenth-century Gold Coast as she works to bring a new understanding to the political changes that were occurring, through the use of sources written by observers who did not always understand what was happening, and the development of a Fante identity. The chapter on politics explores the rise of the Coastal Coalition that allowed Fante to unite politically, thereby not only protecting but also expanding its coastal positions. Of importance here are the connections that Shumway makes between the rise of the well-documented new coastal elite, who either shared power with the traditional elite or often replaced them,

especially in coastal enclaves, and their relationship with the development of coastal Asafo companies. These new big men, who gained power and prestige through trade, thereby allowing them to develop as a new class of patrons with access to a global assortment of goods, became a new political force whose goal was to protect and expand their economic and political position. The Coastal Coalition clearly served this purpose. An important tool within the coalition involved the rise of the Asafo companies that provided Fante with a military force without its having to maintain a standing army. These militias were local organizations that also played roles beyond war as they organized towns and ports that experienced a continued migration of outsiders to them. The success of the coalition related first to Fante's ability to protect its intermediary position and effectively court European trading partners and also to its ability to convince Asante that attacking them was not wise, which it was able to do until 1807.

The final, short, chapter deals with the creation of a Fante culture over the course of the eighteenth century with a focus on religion, language, and the Asafo companies. Religion along the Gold Coast was a complex affair of individual, local, and regional deities, and within the European records of the time was usually labeled under the title of "fetishes." What Shumway argues is that as the Coastal Coalition was constructed, and as Fante power became centralized at Mankessim to some extent, the main shrine at Mankessim, that of Nananom Mpow, grew in importance. Nananom Mpow was the original sacred grove of the first Borbor Fante settlers at Mankessim, and Shumway explores how, starting in mid-century, the shrine became ever more connected to Fante and was oftentimes referred to as the God of Fante. The political centralization of Fante also caused a religious centralization that brought order and identity to Fante. Coupled with religion's emerging role was the development of the Fante language, which also served to unite Fante. Both of these factors were important as Fante was part of the Akan cultural group, which possessed a long tradition of incorporating outsiders into it. Thus, with the rise of Atlantic trade, more outsiders moved into Fante territory, attracted by the opportunities that Atlantic trade and Fante's economic clout provided. The development of a national deity and national language became a way to incorporate outsiders while downplaying the differences that existed within Fante, such as those between the people of Anomabu and Cape Coast. Important within this process, as Shumway shows, was the role of the Asafo companies in integrating people into Fante's burgeoning

coastal communities and providing them with defined roles. Beyond their military roles, Asafo companies were associated with particular parts of towns as well and thus with the people who lived within them; there could be an Asafo for the original inhabitants for the town, for laborers, for outsiders, for company slaves, for Eurafricans, and still others. Since the Fante utilized matrilineal relations in their own networks that presented obstacles for outsiders wanting to integrate, the agnatic organization of the Asafo provided an easier way for them to do so. The points that Shumway makes in this chapter are good ones, even if the evidence is limited although not from lack of effort on the part of Shumway. Nananom Mpow does appear more in the records during the second half of the eighteenth century and British officials do connect it to the Fante state, yet these officials do not have

first-hand knowledge of the shrine nor of Mankessim or even any information regarding Fante beyond the coast. The same can be said of the Asafo companies, which are never really directly named within the records, although the records do make clear that coastal towns had various wards and organizations within them.

Shumway's work is important in that it expands our understanding of Fante's evolution over the eighteenth century and thereby develops a more thorough understanding of the causes and consequences of the rise of Atlantic trade along the Gold Coast. The chapter on the Coastal Coalition expands the political history of the Fante confederacy, especially through addition of the Asafo companies, while that on Fante culture provides insight into how the Fante adapted to the internal and external changes occurring.

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