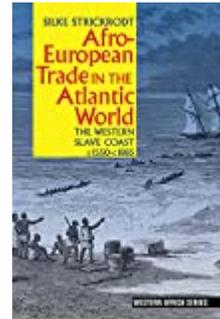


Silke Strickrodt. *Afro-European Trade in the Atlantic World: The Western Slave Coast, c. 1550- c.1885.* Western Africa Series. Suffolk: James Currey, 2015. 280 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84701-110-7.



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Published on H-War (May, 2016)

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Silke Strickrodt's study of the western Slave Coast from European contact in the 1550s to colonial partition in the 1880s examines the impact of transatlantic trade on the region's economy, politics, and society. A case study that focuses principally on developments within and around two port towns, Grand Popo and Little Popo, it follows in the footsteps of previous histories that also concentrate on a particular West African slave port, such as Robin Law's *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving Port* (2004), Kristin Mann's *Slavery and the Birth of an African City: Lagos, 1760-1900*, and Mariana P. Candido's *An African Slaving Port and the Atlantic World: Benguela and Its Hinterland* (2013). With this ambitious work, Strickrodt has a number of aims: to contribute to our growing knowledge of the transatlantic slave trade by examining its history within a relatively understudied context, to explore the connections between that trade and West African state formation, and to better situate the western Slave Coast in the historiography of globalization.

Chapter 1, "The Regional Setting," provides an overview of the western Slave Coast's natural environments; original settlers and settlement; and political, economic, and social development prior to European contact. The western Slave Coast is situated in the "Benin

Gap," an opening in the belt of the rainforest that ranges along the West African coast from Accra (in present-day Ghana) in the west to Porto Novo (in present-day Benin), characterized by shorter rainy and longer dry seasons than the neighboring tropical forest zones. The western Slave Coast possesses few natural harbors and openings to navigable rivers but an abundance of shifting sandbars and treacherous currents; these factors conspired to deter its inhabitants from engaging in maritime navigation, sea fishing, and oceanic trade. Residents instead came to rely on the area's extensive network of lagoons, which had been disconnected from the violent sea by a sandspit, to engage in local fishing and trade. Along the banks of these lagoons, at a place where they met the sea called the Bouche du Roi, appeared the coastal settlements that are the focus of the work, Grand Popo and Little Popo. Grand Popo was the seat of the region's first inhabitants, the Hula, a Gbe-speaking people who trace their origins to the city of Tado located sixty miles in the interior. From there the Hula spread along the lagoons to the west and east, founding additional settlements. In addition to the Hula, the western Slave Coast was later settled by other Gbe speakers, such as the Ewe and Ga, who together helped found Little Popo.

Chapter 2, "The Atlantic Connection: Little Popo and

the Rise of Afro-European Trade on the Western Slave Coast, c. 1600 to 1702,â examines the western Slave Coast in the seventeenth century, with particular attention given to the development of Atlantic trade networks and the immigration of Gold Coast people into the region. The argument here is that these were interrelated and profoundly transformative developments for the western Slave Coast. The Portuguese, searching for slaves following Beninâs trade embargo in 1553, were the first Europeans to arrive in the area and establish trade relations with Grand Popo. They were followed a half-century later by the Dutch, who quickly supplanted the Portuguese as the leading European power and purchaser of slaves in the region. The Dutch instituted new trade and administrative practices that reshaped economic activity in the western Slave Coast. Rather than organizing their trade into units with local headquarters as the Portuguese had done, Dutch trade on the Slave Coast was conducted at a distance, by the West India Company from Elmina on the Gold Coast. Later European arrivals adopted the Dutch model, establishing headquarters along the Gold Coast and trading with the Slave Coast under sail or through local lodges. The Dutch also initiated the practice of recruiting Akan-speaking people from the Gold Coast to immigrate to the region to serve as canoemen. The dangerous offshore conditions made landing impossible for Dutch ships, so merchants came to depend on Akan canoemen to shepherd their goods from ship to shore. In turn, Strickrodt contends, these two innovations âinspired the development of an African coasting trade between the Gold Coast and the Slave Coastâ (p. 71).

Chapter 3, âThe Era of the Warrior Kings: 1702 to 1772,â investigates the myriad consequences wrought by the invasions of the kingdoms of Akwamu and Dahomey into the Slave Coast. The argument is that despite the widespread bloodshed, banditry, and population dislocations precipitated by these invasions, Afro-European trade not only continued but also grew, thanks largely to the influx of available slaves captured through warfare. More slaves brought more European powers, such as the French, English, and Danish, to trade in the region. The limited extant documents from this period that shed light on the number of slaves procured from the western Slave Coast confirm that the region was a minor player in the Atlantic slave trade. Records for the English Royal African Company lodge at Little Popo from 1726 to 1728, for example, show that only twelve slaves were purchased during that time. The western Slave Coast also became an important market for ivory and slave ship

provisions. The chapter also investigates Afro-European relations, which were often strained because they were conducted in an atmosphere of distrust. Highlighted are the dealings between Europeans and Little Popoâs expansionist warrior king, Ashampo, who ruled from 1737 to 1767. Imperious and aggressive, Ashampo demanded exorbitant bribes from Europeans to conduct trade in his territory, and generally looked the other way when his subjects robbed them of their goods. Strickrodt suggests that the âinability for the two sides to establish trust may have been a contributory reason why Little Popo did not become, in a sustained way, a major supplier of slaves in this periodâ (p. 133).

Chapter 4, âThe Era of the Traders, 1772 to c. 1807,â explores the western Slave Coastâs increased involvement in transatlantic trade and its consequences for the region. When, in 1772, the king of Dahomey enacted price controls on slaves exported from Ouidah, both African and European slavers moved their operations to the western Slave Coast, where no such trade restrictions applied. Consequently, the region experienced a brief burst in the slave trade, with a peak coming in 1787, when 206 slaves were sold. The expansion of Afro-European trade brought economic prosperity, but also political instability. Western Slave Coast politics clashed with one another for access to slaves, while Europeans meddled in their internal affairs to further their economic ambitions. For the western Slave Coast, in short, the rise in Afro-European trade was a double-edged sword.

Chapter 5, âDisintegration and Reconstitution: Political Developments, 1820s to 1870s,â deals strictly with nineteenth-century political occurrences in the western Slave Coast, which are explored here in order to illuminate the discussion of commercial events in the following chapter. Among the topics discussed is the 1820s civil war in Little Popo that led to the founding of the port town of AgouÃ©; the reasons behind the establishment of another port town, Porto Seguro; political developments in Little Popo, AgouÃ©, and Grand Popo; and the relations between these major western Slave Coast settlements. Civil strife within and between them was a common feature during this period. The argument is that perhaps the âproblems of commercial transitionâ from illegal slaving to legitimate enterprises âmay have led to increased conflict over shares of trade, and maybe over taxes, and hence political officeâ (p. 194). Foremost among those competitors for power was George Lawson (Akuete Zankli), who came from an influential family in Little Popo and was the leader of one of the factions during its civil war. A fascinating Atlantic Creole, Lawson

spent a number of years in England where he received an education and developed contacts with European merchants and politicians who helped him become a principal trader and statesman in Little Popo after his return.

Chapter 6, "From Slaves to Palm Oil: Afro-European Trade, c. 1807 to 1870s," examines the western Slave Coast's relatively smooth transition from the delegitimized slave trade to the legal palm oil trade. By far the strongest of the work, this chapter offers for the first time a sustained, rather than sporadic, analysis of Afro-European trade and its impact on the western Slave Coast's society, economy, and politics. Here Strickrodt argues that the demise of the slave trade over the course of the nineteenth century did not seriously disrupt the western Slave Coast. The region had never been a significant provider of slaves; consequently, its economy did not suffer a tremendous blow from the lost traffic in humans. Further, as the slave trade declined in the western Slave Coast, its inhabitants pioneered the palm oil trade, and for many years the two markets "ran smoothly in combination and cooperation" largely because of Lawson, "who on the one hand cultivated good relations with the British, while on the other hand, continued to engage in the slave trade" (p. 217).

A closing epilogue, "The Colonial Partition and Its Consequences, 1870s to c. 1900," argues that the British incorporation of the Anlo region into its Gold Coast territory sparked a European scramble for territory in the western Slave Coast that resulted in a rise in the number of rival European traders in the region. Subsequently, their economic rivalry resulted in the western Slave Coast's partition among three European imperial powers.

Although featured in this review, the subject of Afro-European trade often fades from the foreground in this monograph. Aside from its final chapter, most sections

of this work are concerned more with delineating internal politics, civil conflicts, and interstate warfare than on analyzing the role, if any, Afro-European trade played in these developments. Further, when such connections are drawn the conclusions offered are often tentative rather than dispositive. The work does deliver revealing glimpses into just how transformative participation in transatlantic trade was for the communities involved when it notes, for instance, that in 1850 Little Popo had become divided into two independently governed sections, an "English Town" and a "Portuguese Town" (p. 173). But left unanswered is what circumstances brought about this division? Clearly, Afro-European trade played a fundamental part, but in what way exactly? Answering such questions would have given the analysis a little more depth and strengthened the associations between transatlantic trade and state building that Strickrodt wished to make in this study. In Strickrodt's defense, many of these critiques may be a consequence of the limited source base with which she had to work. Strickrodt has indeed consulted a wide array of primary materials from both Europe and Africa, such as missionary journals, explorer accounts, commercial records, and oral histories. However, most source material in the book comes from nineteenth-century English trade corporations, making sustained analyses of Afro-European trade and its consequences before that time tremendously difficult.

Nonetheless, there is still much to commend in this work. By providing the first extended analysis of Afro-European trade in the western Slave Coast, Strickrodt has helped to fill a much-needed void in our knowledge of the subject. The discussion of political developments in the western Slave Coast is also a welcome addition. Although neophytes in West African history will find the narrative overwhelming at times, experts in the area will no doubt appreciate its thoroughness and attention to detail.

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Citation: Matthew Reardon. Review of Strickrodt, Silke, *Afro-European Trade in the Atlantic World: The Western Slave Coast, c. 1550- c.1885.* H-War, H-Net Reviews. May, 2016.

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