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Archaeology of Atlantic Africa and the African Diaspora

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September 2009 Newsletter

Book Review

Akinwumi Ogundiran and Toyin Falola, editors. *Archaeology of Atlantic Africa and the African Diaspora*. Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2007, 509 pp., \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34919-4.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by Paula V. Saunders, BMCC, City University of New York

Archaeology of Atlantic Africa and the African Diaspora represents the first substantive volume to respond to Merrick Posnansky's call for engagement between African Diaspora historical archaeologists in the Americas and Africanist archaeologists. The two regions, he argued, were intimately tied because of the slave trade, and as a result, understanding the contemporaneous material culture of each region is mutually beneficial to scholars working in both regions. While other works have covered broader issues relating to Africa and its diaspora, (such as Jay Havisser and Kevin MacDonald's edited volume, *African Re-Genesis: Confronting Social Issues in the Diaspora*, University College London Press, 2006), this volume is the first to focus entirely on the effects of the Atlantic trade on the material culture of everyday life and institutions in Africa and the Americas, the two regions most affected by the trade. Following a transatlantic perspective, this volume is an important contribution to understanding the diverse and global extent of African experiences and cultural transformations, as well as demonstrates the important role of Africa in the creation of the modern world.

This 509-page edited volume presents archaeological findings from a wide variety of regions, time periods, and topics related to African peoples throughout the Atlantic world in the historic period. The editors argue that their main goal in this collection of essays is to demonstrate some of "the consequences of Atlantic slavery on the peoples, societies, and institutions in Africa and the world of the enslaved and free Africans in the Americas." The editors argue that the findings in one location affects the study of the history of the other, and as such, there should be an active awareness and engagement of the work being conducted on each side of the Atlantic

between the two groups. In addition, they advocate for the use of multiple sources of data, including material culture, written accounts, as well as oral traditions. In this collection of essays, the editors were successful in providing information on the material manifestations of the many exchanges and transformations which resulted from the Atlantic trade.

The work consists of twenty chapters, arranged in three parts: Part I is an introduction, Part II (Atlantic Africa) focuses on archaeological research on the African continent, while Part III (African Diaspora) examines sites related to African-descended people in the Americas. The chapters on Africa focus on the pre-existing economic and socio-political institutions, as well as how they were transformed as a result of the Atlantic trade. They emphasize African agencies and internal dynamics in Africa's entanglement in the Atlantic world. The chapters on the African Diaspora focus primarily on sites related to the material culture of slavery and identities formed from the enslavement of African-descended peoples in the Americas. What follows is a detailed description of the subjects covered in the twenty chapters.

Part I, the Introduction (Chapter 1) provides one of the strengths of the volume, a detailed discussion in which Ogundiran and Falola go above and beyond to contextualize and summarize the organization and themes of the succeeding chapters, as well as ground the book theoretically. They achieve this by expertly weaving the subject of each chapter within the broader intellectual discussion they engage, as part of a large Africana and global world. In this section, the editors emphasize two major themes: first, that of African agencies, and secondly, they argue for the centralizing of Africa – its history, culture, agencies, and material – in African Diaspora research. In addition, they present clear definitions for their use of terms like “Africa,” “African Diaspora,” and “Atlantic Africa,” suggesting that each has a multiplicity of definitions that are not always limited to one particular place. In addition, they argue that modern ethnolinguistic classifications of Africans not be imposed on the archaeological record of African peoples in the past, suggesting instead the use of the more general concept of “cultural zones.” They also warn against imposing spatial and temporal limitations on our definitions of cultural changes, such as limiting our understanding of syncretism and creolization as phenomena unique to the Americas. They argue that the processes of syncretism and creolization did not only occur in the Diaspora, by reminding us that Africans brought to the Americas had already been engaged in multiple cultural contact that had begun in Africa well before the formal Atlantic slave trade began.

Part II consists of seven chapters which focus on work conducted on the African continent, six of which are located in West Central Africa, while the seventh focuses on East Africa. All seven chapters describe the impacts of external trade on the material and sociopolitical world of African societies, as well as the complexity of the processes taking place in Africa as a result of the Atlantic trade.

The many entanglements resulting from various trade networks and the effects on the everyday material lives of people in societies most affected by external trade are the focus of Chapters 2 and 3. Covering a six hundred year period, Ann Stahl (Chapter 2) discusses how the lives of people from Ghana's Banda region were affected first by the Mediterranean trade and later by that Atlantic economy. In Chapter 3, Ogundiran describes how the Yoruba township of Okun in Nigeria's hinterland was created as a provisioning settlement for those carrying goods to and from the coast bound for exchange in the Atlantic trade. In addition, he discusses how the material lives of Africans were transformed as a result of the networks of trade with the coast by describing how the imported goods were adopted and adapted, as well as the new consumption patterns that resulted. Both chapters serve as case studies in how trade goods were incorporated into the daily lives of African peoples and are standout chapters in the volume.

Chapters 4 through 6 discuss the various ways in which sociopolitical structures have been transformed as a result of external trade. In Chapter 4, Cameron Monroe addresses the impact of the Atlantic trade on the socio-political institutions in Dahomey by first describing the political institutions that existed prior to the Atlantic trade, then examining how these institutions were transformed as a result of the trade. Similarly, Alioune Dème and Ndèye Sokhna Guèye (Chapter 5) argue that the engagement with Europeans changed the character of the social hierarchy and state structure in the Senegambian valley, as well as how the natural environment was used as defense against kidnappings to supply human cargo for trade. He concludes that the increasing demand for slaves by Europeans transformed the warrior class to exploitative warrior-rulers, which led to numerous intragroup conflicts. Aribidesi Usman's (Chapter 6) focus on the transformation of warfare and enslavement as a result of an increase in demand for human laborers for both the Atlantic trade and as workers within the changing social structure in Northern Yorubaland. The continued need for labor led to dramatic increase in wars and kidnappings, as well as led to new solutions for protection, such as the use of protective barriers around settlements.

Chapurukha Kusimba (Chapter 7) discusses the effect of East African trade, first in the Indian Ocean commerce and later in the Atlantic trade, on the East African societies. He examines the changes which occurred with the arrival of the Portuguese and other Europeans. Specifically, he discusses the shift in settlement patterns from the prosperous coastal towns to the reduced living standards in the interior. In addition, there were changes in traditional economic industries which saw a shift from locally-produced, finished goods to a heavy reliance on imported goods for consumption, as well as an emphasis on the exportation of raw materials. In addition to the disruption of traditional African industries, this massive exodus to the hinterland also weakened existing trade networks, which were important commercial links in intercontinental trade. Kusimba's discussion of changes in the landscape on the East Coast foreshadows the changes that were to come on the African West Coast. One such change is manifested in European settlements along the coast, is seen in the example of "slave castles" in Ghana, once used to house captured Africans bound for enslavement in the Americas, the subject of Brempong Osei-Tutu's discussion (Chapter 8) on the preservation of these settlements. Osei-Tutu's takes a contemporary look at how the restoration and commodification of these castles are viewed today by those whose ancestors were directly affected by the castles' existence. His examination focuses on the tensions between Ghanaians and African Americans, as well as sheds light on the controversies, compromises, and power involved in the process.

Part III includes twelve chapters on research conducted at sites throughout the Americas, in locations as far north as Massachusetts and extending to Argentina in the south. They also cover a wide range of topics that emphasize links to African cultural heritage, reflecting some of the general themes in African Diaspora archaeology. Four themes that emerge are: 1) change and continuity in African cultural identity; 2) technology, material and daily lives of enslaved Africans; 3) resistance to slavery; and 4) African interactions with other groups in the Diaspora.

In Chapter 9, Christopher Fennell addresses the presence of African religious symbols in various geographical regions throughout the Americas. He argues that these materials include expressions of BaKongo core symbols that were transmitted to the Americas, representing varying degrees of continuity and cultural transformation in African ideological expressions in different locations in the Diaspora. Whitney Battle-Baptiste (Chapter 10) discusses the relationship between the enslaved family and household to the plantation landscape by examining the domestic space of enslaved peoples at the President Jackson's Hermitage plantation in Tennessee. Alexandra Chan

(Chapter 11) continues the theme of landscape by examining how one slaveholding family, the Royalls, in Massachusetts intentionally created elements in the landscape to reflect inequality in social relationships, that of white superiority and black inferiority. Chan argues that despite their intention to convey white superiority, their enslaved Africans may have viewed and used the landscape quite differently than the Royalls intended.

Chapters 12 and 13 deal with the transmission of technological skills from Africa to the Caribbean. In Chapter 12, Candice Goucher examines the transformation of African metallurgy in the post-Atlantic period, emphasizing the impact of Europe on Africa's technology, as well as how that technology manifested both on the continent and its Diaspora. Similarly, Mark Hauser (Chapter 13) discusses the organization of pottery making and its distribution in Jamaica. This pottery, called yabbas, were manufactured in one location for three centuries and linked people from various classes and regions in a complex set of trade relationships.

Chapters 14 to 16 focus on sites relating to the archaeology of resistance to slavery through maroonage. In Chapter 14, Terrance Weik discusses the archaeology and the formation of ethnic identity of an African Seminole Maroon settlement in central Florida. Through their material remains, he examines the various ways in which people of African descent interacted with Native Americans; the tensions involved in an African-Native American relationship in uncertain frontier situations; as well as how this relationship of alliance between the two groups was perceived over time. Demonstrating the complexity and wide geographical coverage of maroon sites throughout the Americas, Kofi Agorsah (Chapter 15) examines the archaeological findings from Jamaican Maroon sites. He focuses on the importance of analyzing the location of these sites and their use of space, their social networks, as well as the effects of living in guerilla-style settlements as seen in the material remains they left behind. In Chapter 16, Pedro Funari discusses archaeological research in Palmares, a Maroon site in Brazil. Like Weik and Agorsah, he also discusses how the material culture reflects the interaction and exchange between Maroons and other groups in the regions in which they settled, arguing that "the material world of the maroon people was not native, European, or African; it was specific, forced in their fight for freedom."

Daniel Schávelzon's (Chapter 17) discussion of the African presence in the city of Buenos Aires in the nineteenth century and their subsequent "disappearance" from the historical record reminds us of the black presence in urban settings. Archaeology, he argues, represents an excellent tool by which to rewrite the African presence back into the history of the city. In Chapter 18, Fred

McGhee examines the maritime component of African Diaspora archaeology through his discussion of various underwater sites in the Americas. Though limited in its theoretical offerings to black identity, he argues that maritime archaeology has the potential to shed light on the diverse experiences of African descended peoples because it is in water-related environments that a significant portion of religious practices were lived. Mary Beaudry and Ellen Berkland (Chapter 19) trace the evolution of the African Meeting House on Nantucket and the many functions it served as a meeting house, church, community center, and school. The house and its surrounding “African-informed” landscape, they argue, served as a site for the black community to form a collective identity and express solidarity in their quest for equality and full citizenship.

The last chapter (20) by Anna Agbe-Davies assesses themes and approaches in African American archaeology, as well as the complex power dynamics involved in the inherently political process of history making. Archaeology, she argues, serves a multitude of functions, including as corrective history, but also serves as a means of empowerment in the present. Her essay serves as a great anchor to the introduction through her examination of the state of African-American archaeology, and by extension African Diaspora archaeology, remains theory poor, relying instead on theories generated from other disciplines.

This volume is a vast undertaking, representing a collection of essays which combines some known sites, as well as some fresh perspectives on research in the Africana world during the historic period. The essays which focus on African sites present great examples of how the material world of African peoples were impacted as a result of changes in their economic, social, and political structures. Their focus on these transformations gives clear insights into the complex world of African peoples during a time of dramatic change and uncertainty. They vividly paint a picture of a time when African peoples participated in a global market economy by using imported goods in their own localized ways, while at the same time guarding themselves from the intrusion and threats these new trade networks represented. Thus, even as they smoked tobacco from imported tobacco pipes, used cowries as a popular means of currency exchange, and set up settlements with the sole purpose to service trade routes, they were simultaneously retreating to safe zones and creating protective barriers within the landscape as means of protection.

The essays focused on the African Diaspora emphasize the complex and diverse experiences and interactions that African-descended peoples. Many of the general themes in African Diaspora archaeology are well represented here, one or another related to the period of

race-based enslavement throughout the Americas. We see that even as African peoples were marginalized and exploited, they maintain a perpetual need to seek freedom and equality, even as they maintained many of their cultural ties to practices in their African homelands.

While this collection of essays is by no means meant to be a catalogue of all archaeological work conducted on African-related sites, the chapters presented here provide a representative range of the general themes and geographic regions of archaeological sites in “Atlantic Africa.” As a result, all archaeologists and historians working in the Africana world should, not only read this book, but engage the findings presented here in their own work, even if only to provide constructive critique. This collection of essays is a good start to encourage engagement between Africanist and African Diaspora archaeologists, as hoped for by the editors. Fortunately, this book is written with very little archaeological jargon that it should also be of great interest to non-archaeologists across a range of disciplines, thereby encouraging continued collaboration from a wide range of scholars in Africana Studies. While *Archaeology of Atlantic Africa and the African Diaspora* is the first volume that presents on the work of both Africanist and Diasporan archaeologists, I view it as the beginning of a newly revived interest to truly have archaeologists from both sides of the Atlantic collaborate on projects and engage the research findings of each other’s work, as Posnansky first suggested twenty five years ago.

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