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Dreams of Africa in Alabama: The Story of the Clotilda and the Last Enslaved Africans Brought to America

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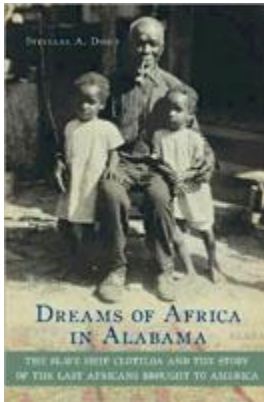
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Book Review



H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Sylviane A. Diouf. *Dreams of Africa in Alabama: The Story of the Clotilda and the Last Enslaved Africans Brought to America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. 416 pp., \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-531104-4.

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ADAN Editor's Note: This book was awarded the 2007 Wesley-Logan Prize of the American Historical Association.

All Good Men and Women Try to Forget: They Have Forgotten!

In the summer of 2007, I paid a visit to an old haunt of mine: Ghana's Cape Coast castle. Standing on a battlement with neatly arranged canons and cannonballs, the waves came crashing incessantly and showered me with fine spray. In addition to the sound of seagulls, the waves carried other voices to me: the soul-wrenching melancholic cries of fear, despair, and uncertainty. The Cape Coast castle was a major European fortress that held slaves before their departure to the New World. Readers will hear these voices as they read Sylviane A. Diouf's *Dreams of Africa in Alabama*. This book is a fine addition to existing narratives of the saga of the transatlantic slave trade and its effects on people and cultures on both sides of the Atlantic. It is a reconstruction of the lives of the last documented group of enslaved Africans shipped to the United States, their courage and resilience, and their hopes of returning to their ancestral homes one day. To them, the New World was just a transient experience.

Dreams of Africa in Alabama has a dual purpose: to draw attention to a historical inaccuracy and to emphasize the primacy of Old World cultures in explaining the nature of societies in the New World. To Diouf, studies in the transatlantic slave trade have either dismissed as a hoax or ignored the arrival of the slave ship *Clotilda* and its enslaved passengers to the United States in the summer of 1860. Instead, the *Wanderer* has been touted by historians and writers as the last slave ship to the United States, although the *Wanderer's* arrival antedates the arrival of the *Clotilda*. On the grander scale of historical interpretation, Diouf points out the unique experience of the survivors of the *Clotilda* as a case study of Old World cultural persistence and of resistance to New World acculturation. By drawing on their cultural experiences in Africa, Cudjo Lewis -- the leader of the nascent community -- and his shipmates on the *Clotilda* built a close-knit African community that survived the Civil War, Reconstruction, World War I, and the Great Depression. The shipmates of the *Clotilda* "viewed and called themselves Africans and willfully maintained this identity with all the attendant manners, languages, behaviors, and practices that

sustained it" (p. 232). They were Africans because they went through the cycles of life (birth, naming, puberty, marriage, and death) as if they were still in Africa.

The book builds its themes in a logical and sequential manner. Diouf uses the first two chapters to lay out the historical context of her narrative, analysis, and interpretation. The reader is thus given a summary of the political economy of plantocracy in the United States and West Africa during the period of enforcement of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. In the United States, various attempts were made by southern states to revive the international trade in slaves because it was costly to acquire labor through the domestic trade. The southern press was rife with propaganda about the civilizing and Christianizing mission, and putting the worthless Africans to work. Across the Atlantic on the coast of West Africa, the era of "legitimate" commerce was in full swing, and so was the domestic slave trade. Diouf writes of marauding communities and martial kingdoms whose preoccupation was enslaving fellow Africans for sale, not only to West African palm oil plantations but also to the Americas. Diouf then moves on to the nitty-gritty of slave acquisition in West Africa, the exchange of hands, and preparations for the Middle Passage. The third chapter eases the reader into the Middle Passage while chapters 4, 5, and 6 deal with the realities of life in the southern United States as a slave through the period of the Civil War and emancipation. After emancipation, chapter 7 narrates how the shipmates of the *Clotilda* decided to found Africa Town and become citizens of the United States after "valiant attempts at leaving" proved futile (p. 171). Chapters 8 and 9 explore the social issues arising from building this new community, such as racism, segregation, crime and violence, black disenfranchisement, and legal battles for compensation. The last two chapters detail the particularly devastating events surrounding Lewis who got hit by a train; had a protracted legal battle with Louisville & Nashville Railroad Company; and lost his children and Abile, his wife and companion. The book concludes with contemporary attempts at reviving and keeping the African roots of Africa Town alive. These include trying to establish relations with Benin.

Diouf is at pains to consult a vast array of sources, including government documents, newspaper prints, oral histories, missionary accounts, ship documents, and linguistic data to put her themes across. In assigning agency to African cultural experiences, Diouf takes great care to explain African cultural markers, such as group affiliation, naming and its significance, and the institutions of marriage and religion, among others. Throughout the chapters, Diouf goes to lengths to point out the African origins of life and events in Africa Town. She pays particular attention to the names and origin of the enslaved shipmates of the *Clotilda*, asserting that their names were a crucial part of their African identity. When Lewis's son died, he conjured his son's African personality by calling him by his Yoruba name, Feichitan. Indeed, "in the midst of misery, Africa was the refuge" (p. 214). Again, the surviving shipmates of the *Clotilda* asked that their original names be used in their biographies because of "their attachment to their peoples and their homes, and of their unwavering identity as small-town West Africans" (p. 220). What I find more profound is how Diouf explains that to the enslaved Africans, the Middle Passage was tragic not because of the dreadful experiences that captives had to endure but because of the racial nature that slavery assumed, and their failure to grasp it. To the enslaved Africans on the *Clotilda*, "they were free men held against their will," not slaves. "The abject degradation

... and the vile bashing of their honor did not seem to have altered their sense of identity as freeborn men and women who found themselves prisoners" (p. 70).

Diouf also explores issues around ideas of and requests for compensation after emancipation. To the Africans, the thought of community went hand in glove with the acquisition of land. They therefore decided to ask for land from their ex-masters: in the case of the survivors of the *Clotilda*, the Meahers, the family that acquired them. According to Diouf, the Africans "had based their claim on two grounds: compensation was due not only because of the free labor they had provided when enslaved, but also because they had been uprooted from family and land" (pp. 152-153). In a comparative study of the claims of slaves and ex-slaves to family and property in southern Gold Coast and the southern states of the United States in the nineteenth century, Dylan Penningroth sheds more light on the idea of compensation. Penningroth asserts that the "histories of both regions were shaped by debates about the claims that slaves and their descendants made to kinship and to the products of their labor." [1] Thus, when the shipmates elected Lewis to speak to Timothy Meaher about compensation in land, they thought they had a moral right to their claims. Meaher did not see it that way, claiming that he treated his slaves well compared to other plantations in the area, somehow voiding any such claims.

Dreams of Africa in Alabama is an excellent attempt to explain the founding of a New World society via Old World cultural inheritance. Diouf's model of interpretation is in contrast to other scholars who argue for the primacy of the New World environment in determining social formations. However, there are some fluid situations that make such wholesale models of interpretation problematic. The Old World had its cultural baggage and the New World had its realities and challenges, forcing continuity, adaptation, and sometimes changes. David Eltis, Philip Morgan, and David Richardson argue that Atlantic history needs to "break out of" this "straitjacket" imposition because "community and cultural formation in the early Americas was a product of many forces." [2] *Dreams of Africa in Alabama* has instances of adaptation -- such as slaves taking on American names - - though Diouf does not present these as markers of acculturation but rather as survival strategies. In their "inner African circle," they still kept their African names. My own sense is that the first and second generations of *Clotilda* shipmates were able to resist acculturation because of the extant memories of Africa. However, by the fourth generation, dreams of Africa were fading, and they died with Lewis in 1935.

Diouf's book is a welcome addition to texts on Atlantic history as well as African American history. University instructors may find it appropriate as an assigned text in an undergraduate seminar or graduate colloquium on Atlantic history. The heartrending empathy aroused by Diouf's book is echoed in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* (1980). In *Anowa*, Anowa's grandma (Nana) tells Anowa of her adventures to the sea that was bigger than any river and the forts on the coast that rose up to the sky and contained many rooms. These "big houses" were built by the "pale men" for keeping slaves. Asked what a slave is, Nana replies that a slave is "one who is bought and sold," and that the "pale men" got the slaves from the land. Then Anowa asks Nana, "'What happened to those who were taken away? Do people hear from them? How are they?'" Nana told Anowa to shut up and that it was time to go to bed: 'No one talks of these things anymore! All good men and women try

to forget; they have forgotten!" [3] For Lewis and the others from the *Clotilda*, they never forgot. Bonded together by slavery, this group attempted to repatriate to Africa after emancipation. When the possibility of repatriation became bleak, they decided to "recreate Africa where they were. They shared all they had, saved money, built each other's houses, and solved problems collectively" (p. 3). They held on to the dream of reuniting with their ancestral land by replicating Africa in Alabama.

Notes

[1]. Dylan Penningroth, "The Claims of Slaves and Ex-Slaves to Family and Property: A Transatlantic Comparison." *American Historical Review* 112, no. 4 (October 2007): 1040.

[2]. David Eltis, Philip Morgan, and David Richardson, "Agency and Diaspora in Atlantic History: Reassessing the African Contribution to Rice Cultivation in the Americas." *American Historical Review* 112, no. 5 (December 2007): 1332.

[3]. Ama Ata Aidoo, *Anowa* (Harlow and Essex: Longman Drumbeat, 1980), 44-46.

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