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The Portuguese in West Africa, 1415-1670: A Documentary History

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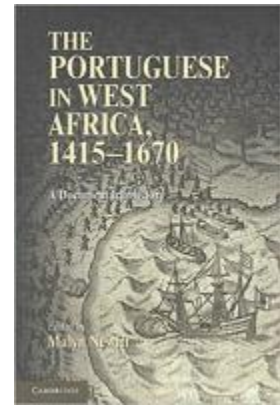
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H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Malyn Newitt, ed. *The Portuguese in West Africa, 1415-1670: A Documentary History*. New York Cambridge University Press, 2010. 264 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-76894-8; \$27.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-15914-2.



Reviewed for H-Africa by Liam M. Brockey, Michigan State University

Documents on the Portuguese in West Africa

Of all the fragments that comprise the field of global history, the past of the Portuguese-speaking world is one of the least well known. Indeed, knowledge of it among scholars in the Anglo-American or French traditions seems to exist in inverse proportion to the vast scale of the regions once held under the sway of Portuguese political or religious influence. Several reasons exist for this state of affairs, but the primary one is that there are few specialists with competence in the Portuguese language. A secondary, yet perhaps no less important, reason consists in the fact that the accretions of different European presences in Asia and a lengthy history of independence in Brazil have largely suppressed the memory of the Portuguese colonial legacy. Yet if there is one world region where Lusophone history cannot be relegated to a marginal status it is Africa, where the duration of the Portuguese presence from the fifteenth until the twentieth century has ensured that new scholarship must continually engage with the colonial legacy. Specialists who analyze the past in Mozambique, Angola, Guinea, Cape Verde, and elsewhere have recourse to a rich historiographical tradition. But there are few points of entry into this literature for those not trained in Portuguese, and even fewer for undergraduate students or scholars in other fields seeking terms for comparison. Malyn Newitt's new book therefore fills a considerable lacuna for those seeking to explore the documental legacy of the Portuguese presence in Western Africa.

The Portuguese in West Africa, 1415-1670 is the latest installment in a set of useful material rendered into English and accessibly priced by Cambridge University Press for the university teaching market. The book is a collection of

translated excerpts of primary source documents related to the major areas of Portuguese influence along the African Atlantic coast from Morocco to Angola. The chronological frame spans the first half of the history of the Portuguese Empire in Africa, and the documents touch on aspects of politics, diplomacy, trade, and missionization. The order of the texts is more thematic than chronological, surveying related subjects in a coherent order and following the progress of Portuguese colonial expansion southward along the Atlantic coast. Newitt offers a succinct overview of the Portuguese presence in West Africa as a preface, where he indicates unifying themes (with organizing references) and sketches a general framework for understanding the collection. What is most appealing about this volume, however, is its depth of coverage. Equal attention is given to the early fifteenth century in Morocco, the later fifteenth century in Guinea and El Mina, the sixteenth century in Kongo, and the seventeenth century in Angola. The amount of space devoted to the North African conquests is especially important, since it offers the reader a series of contrasts between late medieval and early modern patterns of conquest and expansion.

True to its title, this book is a documentary history. The documents range from one paragraph to several pages. A brief illuminating essay that gives the context and identifies the individuals mentioned precedes each selection. References are given to the original sources in Portuguese, Italian, and German, typically in modern printed editions, but at times in archival collections. All of the documents have been translated afresh by the author. Thankfully, they have been done in fluid, modern prose, instead of the archaizing forms often used by translators to make the tone of their text sound more authentically early modern. Newitt also deserves thanks for his decision to avoid using early modern English translations of the selected texts, thereby sparing the reader the ambiguities inherent in Elizabethan or Jacobean prose. The selections in *The Portuguese in West Africa* are further annotated, perhaps a bit too sparingly to the taste of this reviewer, but sufficient for the didactic purposes of this volume. There is a short bibliography of related works, as well as books containing other primary sources in translation or in the original, and a glossary of Portuguese or African terms which repeats the information found in the footnotes.

The sources selected by Newitt present a range of historical voices from official court chronicles (Gomes Eanes de Zurara's works loom large in the early sections) to diplomatic correspondence (both to and from Lisbon and Rome), to missionary reports (primarily by Jesuits), and finally to colonial histories (Antonio de Oliveira de Cadornega's *Historia Geral das Guerras Angolanas* [1680] and Filippo Pigafetta's *Relatione del Reame di Congo* [1591] hold pride of place). While there is a lack of female voices, there is no want for

women in the sources. The book contains ample discussions of different regional societies, and the sources offer many vivid details of the African cultures and polities with which the Portuguese came into contact. Of all of the regions discussed, the core of this volume is devoted to the relations between Portugal and the Kingdom of Kongo, and the sources touch on matters religious, diplomatic, economic, and military over the period from the late fifteenth until the late seventeenth century. From the perspective of undergraduate teaching, this volume is most appealing for its insistence on European knowledge about the variety of cultures in West Africa; its depiction of the different modes of interaction between Europeans and Africans, whether peaceful, violent, or neutral; and its underscoring of the crucial role played by diplomacy throughout West Africa.

Newitt is a senior scholar of the Portuguese Empire and, in particular, Portuguese East Africa. His new collection of excerpts from primary sources represents yet another example of his long commitment to the historical profession. Not only has he written major histories of Mozambique, Portugal, and the Portuguese Empire, but he also has produced or collaborated in a number of sourcebooks which are ideal for teaching undergraduates and useful for scholars not trained in Portuguese. *The Portuguese in West Africa* is the companion volume to an earlier work entitled *East Africa*, published by Ashgate (2002), which was originally intended as part of the discontinued series, *Portuguese Encounters with the World in the Age of the Discoveries*, edited by John Villiers. That he pursued the publication of his new volume with Cambridge University Press is a testament to Newitt's commitment to his field.

The appearance of *The Portuguese in West Africa* provides an opportunity to consider this book in the context of other recent projects aimed at publishing Portuguese documents in English. Ashgate's was perhaps the most ambitious series, and it is a shame that the publisher did not follow through with plans for all of its projected volumes. The three that were printed are useful, if uneven in quality. The volume called *China and Macau* (2002), edited by Clive Willis, relies heavily on sources that have long been available in the Hakluyt Society's publications, and Newitt's collection on East Africa uses many documents previously translated by other scholars, notably, G. M. Theal's *Records of South-East Africa* (9 vols., 1898-1903), but also including sources rendered into English by E. G. Ravenstein and C. R. Boxer. A third volume, *Portuguese Encounters with Sri Lanka and the Maldives* (2009), was edited by Chandra da Silva, and primarily contains polished versions of translated sources from other edited collections. For this reviewer, the greatest flaw of the Ashgate volumes is their

price: While they can be found in most research libraries, they are far too expensive to be considered for course adoption at the university level.

Thankfully, Cambridge University Press has realized that the expansion of "World History" as a component of university teaching has created a market for such teaching tools as primary source collections. There is an evident demand for the type of material presented in *The Portuguese in West Africa*, and Cambridge University Press does well to offer the book in paperback and at a reasonable price. Newitt's book pairs nicely with another refugee from the collapse of the Ashgate project, Stuart Schwartz's *Early Brazil: A Documentary Collection to 1700* (2010), but that volume also relies on documents translated by others and regrouped without a concerted effort at standardizing names. One other volume worth mentioning in this context is the recent collection of primary sources edited by Peter Mancall, *Travel Narratives from the Age of Discovery: An Anthology* (2006). This last volume suffers from the fact that early modern English translations were used instead of new renderings of the sources, putting the burden on the reader to make sense not only of the English prose but also of the confusing terms used by early moderns to describe unfamiliar lands and customs. In sum, there remains a great need for collections of primary sources, in fresh translation, on the early modern Portuguese Empire. The most glaring need is a collection of documents focused on the core regions of the *Estado da India* during the five centuries of the Portuguese presence in South Asia.

Newitt's *Portuguese in West Africa* is clearly the best of the recent collections of documents in English about the Portuguese presence in the early modern world. Instructors seeking to include materials about Europe's encounter with Africa before the eighteenth century will find coherent sets of readings here, as well as just enough context to frame effective discussions. And specialists in the history of Anglophone or Francophone Africa should also benefit from the readings on the Portuguese presence in Northwest and West Africa, along with useful bibliographic references. It is hoped that *The Portuguese in West Africa* will serve as an inspiration for other authors in the field of Portuguese history, and a further impetus for publishers to commission new volumes of accessible primary source collections in English for wide audiences.

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