Toby Green, ed.

Brokers of Change: Atlantic Commerce and Cultures in Pre-colonial Western Africa,

In a landmark study published two decades ago, George Brooks defined Western Africa as the region extending from Sierra Leone to Senegal and containing the Cape Verde Islands. He described it as being interconnected commercially and culturally since at least the fifteenth century thanks to its insular Atlantic coast and riverine topography facilitating extensive navigational travel to the African hinterland. In Brokers of Change, an interdisciplinary group of fifteen authors including Brooks, consider Western Africa and its historical links through the Atlantic, north and west, with other world systems. This volume grew out of a 2009 conference hosted by Birmingham University’s Centre of West African Studies.

An engaging introduction written by Philip Havik and Toby Green sketches the broad historical context of Western African history until the nineteenth century. It considers the shifting spatial dominance of the Portuguese in and around their two “pivotal platforms” of Cape Verde and São Tomé y Príncipe, and of private- versus state-sponsored European mercantilism. The concept of brokers is the collection’s leitmotif, inspired by Eric Wolf’s work and loosely defined “as people who link different worlds” (2). The authors extend the category to include not simply merchants and commercial brokers but also spiritual entrepreneurs. The activities of these intermediaries—African, European, merchant, agent, ruler, slave—actuated the synergies among Atlantic and Western African ports and markets.

The book is divided thematically into five parts containing three chapters each. The first part is about Euro-African exchanges in culture and language. Gerhard Seibert identifies differential levels of “creolization,” as measured by the development of distinct “pigeon” pidgin languages in Cape Verde and São Tomé y Príncipe as compared to the Guinean coast. He opines that a distinct “Atlantic Creole” language and culture did not emerge among mainland Luso-African or so-called “Portuguese” communities because of the preponderant influence of local African cultures. Only in the nineteenth century as a result of the migration of Cape Verdean Luso-Africans to what would become Portuguese Guinea did a Creole culture and the Kriol lingua franca truly take hold.

Like Seibert, Natalie Everts recognizes differing identities among Euro-African communities. She contends, however, that by the eighteenth century Luso-Africans of Upper Guinea developed a stronger identity as “Portuguese” relative to those residing on the Gold Coast’s Fort of Elmina. Based on a careful reading of Dutch sources, she argues that the cultural indigeneity of some
Euro-Africans traditionally has been overlooked. Legal practices such as oath swearing, not on the bible but on African ancestors, and the reliance on matri-lineal customary law for drawing marriage contracts between Akan women and men of European origin as well as for determining property rights and the rights of descendants, are among some of the ways that African kinship patterns, and institutional and cultural frameworks structured Luso-African behavior. To illustrate her argument, Everts uncovers a number of interesting eighteenth-century legal disputes involving men and women. For these reasons, Evert concludes, Euro-African communities in Elmina were fragmented and did not develop a cohesive cultural identity. In his chapter entitled “Challenges of the African Voice,” José Lingna Nafafé also disaggregates the category of Luso-Africans. He identifies the nonhomogeneous nature of their cultural hybridity as revealed in three 1640s Portuguese royal trade agreements found in the Lisbon archives. These treaties reveal how Luso-Africans exercised commercial autonomy in defiance of European, namely Portuguese, merchants. They also reveal their alignment with local communities, especially Africans of noble or regal descent.

Part two consists of three essays that place African-European relations in the broader context of international exchanges. Heather Dalton examines the convergence of sixteenth-century English, Spanish, and Genoese merchant networks based on a deep reading of Roger Barlow’s English translation of a Castilian geography, annotated in part with excerpts from the travelogue of an Italian visitor to the coast of Guinea. She argues that English merchants were concerned with the trade in gold and agricultural products, and only tangentially involved in the slave trade prior to 1550. Filipa Ribeiro Da Silva studies the organization of European trade in Senegambia, Guinea, and the Cape Verde Islands before and after the foundation of the Dutch West India Company (WIC) in 1621. She traces the names and identities of the various European, including Sephardic, investors, insurers, and merchants involved, as well as their local commercial agents. Her data suggests that despite the implementation of WIC restrictions, brokerage relations prevailed while private merchants developed strategies to evade the Dutch commercial monopoly.

The last chapter in this section by Ibrahima Seck deals not with commercial exchange but rather French assimilation in Senegalese history. Seck seeks to determine whether the concept of francité, or the “manner of being and thinking of oneself as French,” shaped Senegalese identity in the long run (150). He outlines a broad context for understanding the history of Senegalese-European relations that begins with the writings of eleventh-century Muslim geographers and covers the early Portuguese settlements. Here the author misses an opportunity to engage with Brooks’ scholarship, notably in his lengthy discussion of