Book Reviews

Silke Strickrodt
Afro-European Trade in the Atlantic World: The Western Slave Coast c1550–c1885,
Suffolk and Rochester, Boydell & Brewster (James Currey), 2015, 280 pp., US$ 80.00

The literature on the economic engagement of West Africa with the Atlantic world has centered upon exported goods, raw materials, and the slave trade in broad macroeconomic terms. Importantly, Silke Strickrodt’s Afro-European Trade in the Atlantic World: The Western Slave Coast c1550–c1885 diverges from this narrative and analyzes the export economy in a localized space, thereby re-centering West Africa in a globalized Atlantic world. By using the Western Slave Coast as her example, Strickrodt places ports, specifically Little Popo, as “feeders of trade” (p. 6) indicating an engagement with European traders in ship repairs, provisioning, sites of negotiated contracts, and entrepreneurial activity (pp. 3–4). By defining ports in this manner, and not just as purveyors of cargo from inland areas, she uncovers a maritime culture in West Africa, which has always been contested or marginalized in the previous historiography. For Strickrodt, West Africa’s place in global history is shown as an engaged actor and not a supply conduit for the Atlantic world.

Strickrodt makes her very concise case on the economic and political history of the Western Slave Coast in chapter one by engaging the geography of the Western Slave Coast with its economic development. Because the area is defined by its lagoons, Strickrodt convincingly argues that the lagoons themselves could not create large ports, but could serve as an intermediate space between the interior and the coast. Since trade started down inland rivers, across the lagoons and then to the sea, African mariners had to be skilled in both riverine and oceanic navigation. As the local population, the Hula, only had localized knowledge of lagoons, mariners from the Gold Coast immigrated to the Western Slave Coast, creating trade links. Subsequently interregional maritime traffic linked the smaller ports, such as Little Popo, of the West-
ern Slave Coast to the larger ports of the Gold Coast. Chapter two relates the Dutch presence on the Western Slave Coast, specifically regarding the increasing slave trade in the mid seventeenth century. Gold Coast canoemen were used by the Dutch and English to transport slaves from the Western Slave Coast to Ouidah and Elmina, thereby increasing the logistical importance of Little Popo. However, these slaves were acquired through warfare and not through inland trade. Consequently, by the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, Little Popo served as a “substitute” slave market for the Dutch and the English, as they relied upon the Western Slave Coast as a replacement market for slaves (p. 101).

Chapter three examines the lack of trust between the English and French slave traders and Ashampo, the ruling warrior king of Little Popo. Ashampo’s war with Dahomey in the early eighteenth century was seen as an opportunity by the British and the French to expand into the Western Slave Coast, as in the Gold Coast the slave trade was limited by conflicts. The continuing European presence in Little Popo, as detailed in Chapter four, illustrates not only the area increasingly being viewed as a gateway to the interior slave trade, but as a commercial center for ship provisioning, repair, and canoemen.

In these chapters, Strickrodt utilizes English, French and Dutch sources and lesser known German documents. In chapters five and six, Strickrodt weaves into her analysis the accounts of Hugo Zöller, a journalist who visited the Western Slave Coast in late 1884 as a representative of the German government (p. 23), and of C.H. van Züpthen, a Bahian trader visiting the area in 1831 (p. 167). Building upon van Züpthen’s sources, Strickrodt focuses on the Lawson family during the early nineteenth century to illustrate the interrelationship between economic and political interests. George Lawson, speculatively named from an English ship captain who was a friend and business partner of his father, is shown both as an entrepreneur and a political operative. By establishing a trading “castle” (later Little Popo) along the coast, Lawson became a business associate with Francisco Felix de Sousa, a Brazilian who was the leading slave dealer on the Slave Coast (p. 162). Their family’s intermarriages perhaps established both families as political allies against the ruler of Agoué, John Ansa. Ansa also had family connections with de Sousa (p. 167). These common family connections, however, did little to ease economic and political tensions between Little Popo and Agoué, eventually leading to conflict between them from 1860 to 1866 (pp. 160–193). The end of the conflict coincided with the establishment of the palm oil trade on the Western Slave Coast. Little Popo, as an established port protected by the British, flourished in the trade. Agoué, according to Zöller’s narrative, prospered as the principle purveyor for the palm oil ships docking in Little Popo (pp. 223–224).