Ray A. Kea


This welcome capstone to the career of Ray Kea, now emeritus, reads as an ambitious extension of his prior work on the “Gold Coast” of West Africa that later became incorporated into the twentieth-century nation-state of Ghana (as indicated through renaming in the book’s title and subtitle). Those who will appreciate this new offering most are those who know Kea’s oeuvre best because they will recognize how much here is new, and how it challenges them to think differently about otherwise familiar scholarly terrain.

This is a big book—so big in fact that its approximately 700 pages are produced in two separate volumes. There is much to behold. Its chronological and geographical reaches are similarly expansive, extending from a fifteenth-century “Golden Age” of state building, to later encounters between locals and overseas strangers in West Africa, through local slavers and then the export of captives in the eighteenth century especially, and finally to the rebellions that brought about the eventual abolition of bondage in Danish colonies in the Atlantic world in the nineteenth century.

To organize all of this, Kea establishes three parts, each of which could have been developed as a self-standing book. Instead, he stitches the parts together to make his overarching point that the historical engagement of Africans and Europeans, on the Gold Coast and in the Caribbean, should now be explored by scholars primarily in terms of the experiences and understandings of the Africans involved, including both continental residents and forced expatriates. This means not only appreciating the motivations arising from non-European knowledge systems of the Atlantic era but also accounting for the extreme limitations of the archival records of colonizing powers to give voice to Africans’ explanations of themselves in their own terms.

Much of the work then involves reading across the grain of the prejudices—racial, religious, ethnocentric—that literate commentators unwittingly committed to perpetuity by ink and parchment. Readers will welcome the glossary of foreign-language terms (in the second volume, pp. 481–494) in German, French, Danish, Akan-Twi and Gã that appear frequently as Kea brings to bear his erudition in European philosophies of history and cultural studies alongside his knowledge of the anthropology of local, African outlooks.

While not explicitly invoked, this book partakes in the “biographical turn” in the humanities and social sciences ascendant since Kea’s last monograph in 1982. Where the previous book analyzed changes in the structures of produc-
tion of political and economic power in the early Atlantic era, the current work plumbs the felt realness of these historical structures by describing personal experiences first seen through fragments in the documentary record. It finds esteemed company in recent works that show how people creatively mapped the Atlantic world through cognition, creativity, and imagination.¹

Kea’s prowess in deploying fine-grained biographical analysis to teach readers history is awesome but underplays its most potent asset—his own extraordinary pan-Africanist experiences. He graduated from Howard University (1957, the same year honorary doctorates were awarded to both Martin Luther King Jr. and Jackie Robinson); undertook postgraduate study in Copenhagen; taught for eight years in secondary schools in Ghana (1960–68); completed an M.A. degree at the University of Ghana in 1967 (with a thesis, “Ashanti-Danish Relations, 1780–1831”); and then earned a Ph.D. in History from the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London (1974) during its heyday in what was then called “pre-colonial” African history. He started his professorial career at Johns Hopkins during the creative era of its interdisciplinary program, Atlantic History, Culture, and Society, and moved eventually to the University of California and its active (2002–11) multi-campus research unit in World History. What authors bring to their topics matters. In Kea’s own words, when addressing the archives, “The texts ... were not insulated from the history that generated them” (p. 124).

The high level of Kea’s intellectual sophistication is not well served by the physical attributes of the book, which interfere with the immediacy of his ideas. The printing is small and of uneven quality, with endnotes in even smaller font. These endnotes, relegated to the second volume (pp. 495–624), often contain not just citation information but also Kea’s analysis, which is critical to understanding the main body of text; it is unwieldy to hold both books at the same time.

Even after so many pages, some readers would wish for more in the way of a conclusion to help them make sense of all that Kea has challenged them to encounter. One of the strengths of his Settlements, Trade, and Polities (1982) was its decisive and concise conclusion. Here the end of the narrative-analytical arc is perhaps best provided in the introduction. Kea asks, “Who and what made this world and its histories?” (p. 5). The multiplicities revealed in the biographies indicate the answer to be that people create pasts.