

Research Africa Reviews Vol. 8 No. 3, December 2024

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Ana Lucia Araujo, *The Gift: How Objects of Prestige Shaped the Atlantic Slave Trade and Colonialism*. Publisher: Cambridge University Press, 2024, 307 pages. ISBN # 1108839297.

Reviewed by: Bukola Oyeniyi, Missouri State University.

Ana Lucia Araujo's book investigates the crucial role of luxury and prestigious items in cross-cultural interactions between African and European peoples during the Atlantic slave trade era. The book, divided into six chapters including an introduction and conclusion, utilizes a wide range of resources in French, English, and Portuguese to examine artifacts preserved in various European and American museums. It explores the impact of different luxury items on European-African relations.

The various chapters, although focusing on different gift items, primarily center on an eighteenth-century ceremonial sword made of silver, crafted in La Rochelle, France. This sword, gifted to an African trade representative in Cabinda, now part of Angola, serves as a compelling example of the intricate interplay fostered by such items. The narrative follows the sword's journey from Cabinda to Abomey, the then-capital of the Dahomey Kingdom (modern-day Republic of Benin), culminating in its acquisition by French officers in the late nineteenth century.

The introductory section uses an eighteenth-century French silver sword as a focal point to study the history of French trade in enslaved Africans along the Loango coast in West Central Africa and the Kingdom of Dahomey in West Africa. As a piece of cultural material, the sword allows exploration of the impact of the Atlantic slave trade on the societies involved, emphasizing the role of prestige objects in these exchanges. The narrative intertwines historical events, material culture, and the role of gifts in shaping the Atlantic slave trade and colonialism. It examines the dynamics of French slave merchants within global networks and the complex interplay between European and African societies.

The work attempts to provide a nuanced understanding of how material culture influenced the slave trade and colonialism, and how these, in turn, shaped cultural artifacts. The introduction outlines the book's layout, offering a comprehensive and multifaceted examination of the Atlantic slave trade,

highlighting the significance of material culture and gifts in the historical context of colonialism and trade relationships between Africa and Europe.

Chapter One provides a detailed historical account that delves into the intricacies of early European-African interactions along the Loango Coast, focusing on the role this region played in the Atlantic Slave Trade. It begins by outlining the arrival of the Portuguese in the 15th century, setting the stage for later French and other European nations' involvement in the region.

The text navigates through the complex interplay of power, commerce, and diplomacy, shedding light on the dynamics of the trade in human beings and other commodities such as ivory and copper. The chapter is commendable for its meticulous research and comprehensive coverage of the Loango Coast's history, especially in the context of the Atlantic Slave Trade. It adeptly combines sources from European travelers, officers, and merchants, providing a multifaceted perspective. However, its heavy reliance on European sources, offering a skewed view of the African perspective, is a limitation. Additionally, while the detailed exploration of trade dynamics is enlightening, the narrative sometimes becomes dense, potentially challenging for readers less familiar with the subject matter.

Chapter Two provides an in-depth historical examination of La Rochelle's involvement in the Atlantic Slave Trade. The chapter meticulously explores the city's transformation into a central hub for the trade in enslaved Africans, highlighting the intricate networks of trade, social, and cultural exchanges that took place. It offers insights into the commodities and luxury items involved in the trade and their significant impact on the economies and societies of La Rochelle and West Central African regions. The strength of this chapter lies in its detailed narrative and the use of diverse sources, including artifacts, artworks, and historical records, to paint a vivid picture of the period. The discussion on the trade dynamics, cultural exchanges, and the material culture of the time is both enlightening and comprehensive. The focus is, however, predominantly on the French perspective, with less emphasis on the African viewpoint. This limitation, especially in this age of the decolonial turn, means the history is not as fully rounded as one would expect.

Chapter Three provides an intricate exploration of the complex dynamics of the Atlantic Slave Trade, with a particular focus on the Loango Coast. It delves into the aggressive competition among European traders, especially the French, highlighting incidents of piracy and violence in their quest to monopolize the slave trade. The chapter effectively integrates historical accounts and sources, presenting a vivid narrative of the ruthless

strategies employed by traders, such as the seizure of cargoes and enslaved individuals, and the intense rivalries that shaped the trade environment.

Critically, while the chapter is comprehensive in detailing the competitive and often violent nature of the trade, it could benefit from a deeper analysis of the implications of these actions on African societies. The predominantly Eurocentric perspective adopted by the author on the subject is a reminder for historians to broaden their sources, rethink their methodologies, and include 'other voices,' especially the marginalized and voiceless, in their works. Bringing in African experiences and responses to these events would have provided a more balanced view of the subject. In addition, the dense historical detail, while informative, could potentially overshadow broader thematic understandings of the Atlantic Slave Trade's impact.

Chapter Four presents a comprehensive analysis of the role of gifts, particularly a ceremonial silver sword, in the context of the Atlantic Slave Trade. The chapter meticulously explores the symbolic and practical significance of this sword, unraveling its cross-cultural dimensions and the intricate politics of gift-giving between French slave traders and African leaders. The narrative is enriched by a detailed examination of the sword's crafting and its historical and cultural relevance. Although the chapter's depth of research and ability to illuminate the nuanced interplay of power, diplomacy, and material culture are commendable, it predominantly focuses on a Eurocentric view, underrepresenting African perspectives and experiences. Additionally, while the narrative's detail is commendable, it sometimes overshadows the broader thematic insights into the complexities of the slave trade and intercultural relations.

Chapter Five delves into the intricate journey of the ceremonial silver sword, skillfully connecting its history to that of the Loango Coast and the Bight of Benin, illustrating the complex interrelations and movements of goods and cultural artifacts during the 18th and 19th centuries. The chapter's strength lies in its detailed exploration of the multifaceted nature of gifts in the slave trade, particularly focusing on the silver sword's symbolic power and its displacement over time. The narrative is rich in historical detail, providing a vivid account of the rituals and cultural practices associated with royal funerals in African societies and the transformation of European gifts into African regalia.

The extensive focus on the journey of a single artifact sometimes overshadows the broader historical and cultural impacts of the slave trade. While the chapter is a compelling and informative read, offering a unique lens

through which to view the complexities of cultural exchange and power dynamics during the Atlantic Slave Trade, the narrative could benefit from a more explicit connection between the historical events and their contemporary implications.

Chapter Six, "Ngoyo Meets Dahomey," offers a comprehensive examination of the multifaceted interactions between the kingdoms of Ngoyo and Dahomey within the context of the Atlantic Slave Trade. The chapter adeptly navigates the complexities of these interactions, emphasizing the transfer and transformation of cultural artifacts, the dynamics of power, diplomacy, and the shifting nature of relationships between African societies and European traders. The strength of this chapter lies in its in-depth analysis and the weaving together of various historical threads to present a coherent narrative.

The focus on specific artifacts, while providing valuable insights, narrows the broader understanding of the socio-political impacts of the slave trade on the African societies involved. A more balanced approach, integrating the African perspective more explicitly, could have enhanced the overall narrative. Despite this criticism, the chapter stands as a significant academic contribution, offering deep insights into the historical complexities of the Atlantic Slave Trade and its impact on African societies, especially Ngoyo and Dahomey.

The concluding section effectively synthesizes the overarching themes of the preceding chapters, focusing on the role of material culture, particularly the ceremonial silver sword, in the context of the Atlantic Slave Trade. It examines the post-colonial implications of these objects, discussing their displacement and the complex questions of ownership and restitution they raise in contemporary times. The narrative is enriched by historical accounts and insights into the changing dynamics of cultural heritage and its significance in the dialogue on restitution. This conclusion ties together the various strands of history and culture explored in the book, offering a thought-provoking perspective on the enduring legacy of colonialism and the slave trade.

Ana Lucia Araujo's "The Gift" and Marcus Rediker's "The Slave Ship" provide distinct yet complementary perspectives on the Atlantic slave trade, each focusing on different elements of this complex historical phenomenon. Araujo's work delves into the world of luxury items, particularly an eighteenth-century ceremonial sword, to explore the intricate dynamics of the Atlantic slave trade. Rediker, on the other hand, offers a detailed account of the slave ships themselves, capturing the human horror and mechanics of slavery.

Sidney Mintz's "Sweetness and Power" also contributes to this discourse by examining the role of sugar, a commodity deeply intertwined with the slave trade, and its impact on shaping modern history and capitalism. These three seminal works collectively adopt an interdisciplinary approach, integrating history with cultural, economic, and social analysis to provide a comprehensive view of their subjects. Araujo and Mintz, in particular, delve into the impact of trade in luxury items and sugar, respectively, on both African and European societies, highlighting the mutual influence and cultural interplay that ensued.

Araujo's "The Gift" stands out for its specificity, using a ceremonial sword as a lens to view broader historical themes within the context of the Atlantic slave trade and European-African relations. This approach not only underscores the symbolic and practical significance of material culture but also emphasizes the role of such objects in diplomatic and cultural exchanges. In contrast, Mintz's broader approach in "Sweetness and Power" examines sugar's role in socio-economic transformations, while Rediker provides a visceral account of slave ships, emphasizing the human experience of the slave trade.

Araujo's narrative revolves around a singular object, unfolding a broader historical story, whereas Mintz uses sugar as a key player in socio-economic changes. Rediker, through his vivid depiction of slave ships, brings a grim insight into the human cost of the slave trade. Araujo's work thus complements the broader narratives provided by Mintz and Rediker, offering a multifaceted understanding of a tragic period in history, distinguished by its unique focus on material culture and its role in shaping historical events and relationships.

Furthermore, Araujo's work finds a parallel in Arjun Appadurai's "The Social Life of Things," as both delve into the study of objects within historical and cultural contexts. However, their approaches diverge significantly. Araujo uses the ceremonial silver sword as a focal point to unravel the broader themes of the Atlantic slave trade, colonialism, and European-African relations. Her narrative is deeply rooted in specific historical contexts, providing a detailed exploration of how prestige objects like the sword played symbolic and practical roles in diplomatic and cultural exchanges.

Appadurai, in contrast, adopts a theoretical stance, viewing objects not in their static meanings but as entities whose values and significances evolve through their social lives—the paths they navigate through various societies and the interactions they engage in. His approach challenges traditional analyses focused on individuals, advocating for a broader view of the collective social life of objects.

Both Araujo and Appadurai center their analyses on objects, yet Araujo's narrative is more historically grounded, focusing on specific episodes and their symbolic implications. Appadurai's framework, however, provides a general theoretical backdrop, applicable across various contexts, to understand how objects acquire and change meanings. This divergence highlights Araujo's historical and narrative focus compared to Appadurai's broader, more theoretical approach, encompassing anthropology, sociology, and economics.

"The Gift" thus contributes uniquely to the historiography of the Atlantic slave trade and colonialism. Araujo's emphasis on material culture and the agency of African leaders in transatlantic interactions adds depth to the existing narratives, often dominated by themes of economic and political exploitation. It also provides a nuanced counterbalance to Walter Rodney's thesis in "How Europe Underdeveloped Africa," adding a dimension of cultural exchange to the predominantly economic analysis of European impact on African development.

In the educational context, Araujo's work is a valuable resource for courses on African history, the Atlantic slave trade, and colonialism. It encourages critical engagement with history, urging students to consider the often-overlooked aspects like material culture. By integrating diverse perspectives and emphasizing the complexities of cultural and symbolic exchanges alongside economic and political impacts, "The Gift" enhances students' understanding of these historical phenomena and their interconnected global contexts.

In summary, "The Gift" stands out in scholarly discourse for its focus on material culture and its role in shaping historical events and relationships, offering a unique perspective on the Atlantic slave trade and adding a distinctive dimension to our understanding of this period. Overall, this book scrutinizes the economic, cultural, and social dimensions of interactions between European enslavers and West Central Africa, highlighting their contributions to the foundations of European colonization and domination in West and West Central Africa.

"The Gift" is a thoroughly researched and insightful exploration, illuminating a relatively unexplored facet of the Atlantic slave trade. It offers valuable insights into the complex cultural and economic exchanges of this critical historical period. Despite its failure to bring African voices and perspectives into the discourse, the book's thorough research and engaging storytelling make it a valuable addition to the academic discourse on this period.

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ISSN 2575-6990.