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Sandra E. Greene. *Slave Owners of West Africa: Decision Making in the Age of Abolition*.

Publisher: Indiana University Press. 126 pp. Year: 2017. ISBN: 978-0-253-025999. Reviewed

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Sandra E. Greene, a professor of African History at Cornell University, provides a ground-breaking yet intensely focused book aptly titled *Slave Owners of West Africa: Decision Making in the Age of Abolition*. She painstakingly pieces together the biographical history of three West African slave holders who lived around the littoral region of what now is near the modern Ghana/Togo border. Amazingly, she was able to put together both primary sources (missionary and legal proceedings) along with oral family interviews to examine how three slaveholders reacted to the demise of the Atlantic Slave Trade system. Amegashie Afeku of Keta, Nyaho Tamakloe of Anlo, and Noah Yawo of Ho-Kpenoe share their accounts when missionaries from Germany and colonialists from Great Britain began calling for the end of the Atlantic Slave Trade in this region. Overall, Greene's book must be considered a trailblazer in the study of the transformation of slave systems in West Africa. The perspective of the slave owners is certainly insightful, as they had to accommodate the wishes of external influencers, such as colonists and missionaries who believed slavery in the late 19th century was no-longer sound in their interpretations of Christianity. However, Greene may want to explain why 300 years before Western Christendom mainly did not see slavery as a sin—and why the change—it's still not clear in her book as their biblical text arguable changed little over that time frame, but interpretations about slavery being a sin varied.

According to Greene, Amegashie Afeku of Keta who was a priest, political advisor, businessman, and slave owner was the most stubborn of the group in regards to his inflexible support of slavery. Greene attributes this mainly to both his upbringing and personality traits. Amegashie was once a slave himself but was able to work his way out of it, and he became a freeman and slave owner during the era when British abolition efforts were in full swing. Thus, Greene points out that Amegashie was not in favor of letting the system, which he overcame, be altered by British Colonial rule and missionaries. Instead, he sought to move his slaves out of the proximity of the political reach of Europeans. He refused to accept his slaves as anything other than property and even resorted to violence and intimidation tactics to keep his slaves and the slave system intact. (pp. 23-25).

Greene argues that Amegashie had what we can describe as an inferiority complex due to his slave origins and prided himself on showing others that he had risen the social hierarchy to become a successful slave owner. A dark side of Amegashie arises when he even goes so far to pay troublemakers to kill some slaves who were trying to escape after slavery became illegal.

Interestingly, Nyaho Tamakloe of Anlo was the complete opposite of Amegashie and chose instead to work with the newly changing conditions, and the inevitable end of slavery

under British Colonial rule. Tamakloe was a Chieftain and a respected military leader who conquered, fought, and ironically helped in producing enslaved people to sell both inside and outside of Africa. Although illiterate, Tamakloe used his respected position and wealth to instead invest into the new opportunities provided by both British Colonial officials for legitimate business and by Missionaries in modern education. Also, according to Greene, Tamakloe took a major step in converting to Christianity as well. Tamakloe unlike Amegashie had a change of heart regarding slavery and decided to free all of his slaves and to incorporate them as fully as possible as family members. As incentives for them to stay, Tamakloe also provided his slave family members with land along with the new modern education that was provided by missionary schools. According to Greene, a number of things may have made Tamakloe more sensitive toward his slaves, including his strong friendship with the Afro-European Paul Sands, his “Military Slaves” who fought hard for him during the age of warfare, and most importantly his wife who was of slave origin. In the end, Tamakloe future generations would prosper with no distinction of who was of slave ancestry, and it was his family that eventually would produce one of the most notable future Presidents of modern Ghana, Jerry Rawlings (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bgVfZ9VctX8> Sandra Greene Slave owners of West Africa).

Noah Yawo of Ho-Kpenoe differed from the other two slave holders because he was not as well-known or as wealthy. Yet he was able to acquire several slaves and marry and maintain three wives. It seemed that Noah depended more so on debt pawning to acquire his slaves. However, in 1875, Noah had a sudden change of heart about slavery and renounced the entire institution and freed all the enslaved adults and their children. Interestingly, he allowed the adult slaves to pay their way out with a minimal amount, and even proceeded to divorce two of his wives. Out of all the slave-owner’s biographies, Noah seemed to be the most influenced and moved by his Christian conversion due to the work of the German missionaries associated with the Norddeutschen Missionsgesellschaft (NDMG). The NDMG was steadfast with Noah during the ups and downs of the period including a terrible war against two powerful Akan groups Akwamu, Asante, and the Anlo-Ewe (See R. A. Kea *Akwamu-Anlo Relations, 1750-1813*, Historical Society of Ghana_Vol. 10 (1969), pp. 29-63). Financial hardship also hit Ho-Kpenoe but the Missionaries did not abandon the area and offered their Christian help and spiritual advice the best they could. According to Greene, this made the difference with Noah Yawo and in 1867 he began to stop offering prayers and sacrifices to the local gods, and began to put his faith instead in the “Christian God.” (p. 71). Also interesting, Yawo’s decision to emancipate his slaves came not from a threat from British Colonial officials, rather he was motivated by the fact that he could rely on his fellow Christians to help him during difficult times, who seemed according to Greene as sincere (p. 86). Moreover, Greene argues that Yawo came to believe that slavery itself was a sin that must be eradicated. (p. 83)

Greene in her biographical work on West African slaveholders, however, does seem to promote a type of “religious exceptionalism” against the slave trade or “slave-like exploitative systems.” The Western Christendom support of slavery and religious zeal among themselves along the African coast seemed contradictory to their religious texts. Greene at the end states: “But they also emphasized the notion that slavery was not merely illegal, but it was and always had been unethical, inhuman, and for Christians a sin” (p. 83). This does not match the historiography as many European Christians did not see slavery as sinful. For example, the “Puritan lead” New England Colony of Massachusetts legalized slavery first in 1641, and the infighting even among the Quakers “Society of Friends” ended with members being

excommunicated for their unwillingness to give up their African American Christian slaves. Zephaniah Kingsley Jr., a famous slaver and a Quaker, was a great example of the contradictory nature of Western Christendom in regards to slavery. Not to mention the terror group, namely the Klu Klux Klan who perversely utilizes Western Christendom symbols of the cross going into modern times against their black and Jewish victims.

Greene could do better in being more concise in naming what type of slavery was practiced in the part of Africa near the Atlantic Ocean Coast and Volta River mouth. This area was already inhabited by European traders, explorers, conquistadors and their off spring before the time frame covered in the book. Thus, is this really traditional or indigenous West African slavery or should it be called Euro-African slavery? As in many of the places with Western influence, it's hard to deny the power dynamic even in academia with the tendency to deem virtually every form of African exploitative labor and social hierarchy as slavery, and to conveniently ignore or semantically not call it slavery outside of Africa. Many examples of "slave like" conditions outside of Africa get a pass, but maybe all of it should be called slavery to remove the semantics.

In Greene's biographic study, her first slave owner Amegashie slavery ties are clearly part of the European slave systems acceptable to Christian's generations before on the Littoral. Thus his type of "mixed social situation" had to affect him and thus slavery has to be a hybrid of both European and African forms. (p. 22, & p. 91 footnote 9) Even Greene's use of Larry Koger's *Black Slaveholders: Free Black Slave Masters in South Carolina, 1790-1860*, the slave system would be an European-American version that the Black slave holder's practiced. These "slave like" systems in our past due to power dynamics outside Africa are usually not called slavery, but in Africa these certainly would be deemed slavery for sure. Semantically speaking, these above systems should be referred to with greater nuance.

Even Greene's example of Northern Mali, West African slavery as being similar is fraught with complications as the slavery practiced was more of an Arab-African hybrid type. In addition, Greene's book has a constant theme of warfare in the Littoral where "military slaves" are used to fight on both sides. This is fraught with difficulties as in many cases so-called "military slaves" have more influence and power than free people in Africa. Semantically in European warfare, they might not be deemed as slaves, but instead would be considered as kidnapped male children from defeated groups who are then trained to be mercenaries (See John Keegan *A History of Warfare* N.Y.: Alfred Knopf, 1993) pp. 345-346). This terminology merits revision.

In no way does the above diminish the fact that Sandra E. Greene has published a ground-breaking book on former slave-owners in West Africa and is bound to create areas of scholarship on African History. Greene's knowledge of the complex interactions over generations between various African groups in the Ghana/Togo region is unparalleled. Greene has demonstrated clearly that the slave owners all sought what was best in their own personal business interests when dealing with the abolition of slavery on the West Coast.

Overall, Greene has produced a book that is unique, biographical, and groundbreaking on how three West African slave owners and their families adapted to the changes that came from outside colonial powers and dedicated Christian missionary groups to end the slave trade in the age of abolition. Greene is an academic who is top-notch in dealing with complex subject matter as slavery and hierarchy in Africa. Additionally, Greene's professionalism and how she handled such a delicate subject as slavery with the West African slaveholder decedents is a model that must be emulated in order to enrich African history on slavery.

Greene deserves high praise for such a strong effort and ground-breaking book.

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