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CHRISTINA BRAUNER, *Kompanien, Könige und caboceers: Interkulturelle Diplomatie an Gold- und Sklavenküste im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert*, Externa. Geschichte der Außenbeziehungen in neuen Perspektiven, 8 (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2015), 670 pp. ISBN 978 3 412 22514 8. €89.90

This substantial volume is adapted from Christina Brauner's recent doctoral thesis on early modern West Africa. Its subtitle highlights the focus upon intercultural diplomacy along the Gold and Slave Coasts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Brauner depicts the slaving zone and shows how Europeans, Africans, and Euro-Africans created a new coastal culture. After a review of the historiography of the coast including the histories of the main European slaving companies, she discusses whether Europeans' views of concepts such as 'kingship' were appropriate to the African setting. She also examines elements of culture, such as rituals or taboos, to reconstruct coast culture without using a purely Eurocentric viewpoint.

Diplomatic interactions, as Brauner highlights, were not merely between Europeans and Africans, but between different groups in both camps. There was also a Euro-African culture at the coast with a 'lengua da costa' (coast language). The customs of the coast grew up out of the mixing of different cultures. In addition, there were Euro-Africans themselves who often held various posts as translators, traders, or other sorts of intermediary. Brauner reminds the reader that most of the primary source material used in studies of the coast comes from European archives. Hence the coast is seen through a European lens, even though African and Euro-African cultures were predominant. Brauner aims to reintroduce African views and also to show how developments in Europe and the wider Mediterranean affected the European frame of reference. Given the long time span of the study, covering the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there were numerous changes in power relations, personnel, and culture itself.

Brauner begins by providing an overview of the scholarship on pre-colonial West Africa. In this period, West Africa could be divided into various 'coasts' (for example, the Slave Coast and the Gold Coast) as well as different kingdoms (for example, the Kingdom of Allada or Dahomey). Brauner has set out to investigate how diplomacy functioned between different African and European powers. In

addition, European slaving companies were quasi-state entities. Aside from other independent European traders and the occasional missionary, slaving companies constituted the European presence in West Africa. They were the reason for European interest in the politics of the coast and sometimes proved to be a source of friction between Africans and Europeans. Crucially, the 'European' forts were built on land which was only rented from African leaders. To add to the complexity, a wide variety of European states were represented at the coast at one time or another. The Portuguese arrived first and their cultural influence lasted long after their actual power had faded. For instance the 'lengua da costa' was a type of pidgin Portuguese. After the Portuguese came the British, French, Danes, Dutch, and representatives of much smaller entities such as the Brandenburgers.

Brauner has done a thorough job of researching a variety of national archives in different languages. The sheer scale of the primary and secondary sources consulted is impressive. Many histories of the African coast centre upon one European country's history (and archives), which tends to create a skewed impression. Just as Atlantic history can focus upon one particular European nation (for example, French Atlantic history) the history of the coast often becomes a national story. This approach has its advantages, but the rich pattern of coastal culture was based on the interaction between many cultures. The African coast was dotted with European forts and settlements which often lay very close to each other. The town of Ouidah, for instance, housed three such forts. The proximity allowed African leaders to keep an eye on the Europeans but also to force them to compete with each other. Europeans may have been writing their documents whilst living right next door to each other, but their records have been dispersed across a variety of European archives. Brauner has tackled the distancing effect and tried to reintegrate some of the material to bring the coast back to life.

Brauner explains that Europeans tried to understand African culture with regard to their own social norms. She cautions that this does not necessarily mean that African social structures or cultural practices had a direct European equivalent. As Europeans had kings and kingdoms, they tended to see Africa in the same terms. Europeans also drew on their Orientalist ideas about 'the East' and particularly the Ottoman Empire. This was particularly apparent in

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European critiques of African 'tyranny' or 'immorality'. At other times, Europeans also likened certain African regimes to republics. However, a chief or head of an African group might not be a king or even the leader of a republic in the European sense. They had religious functions which meant that they were really 'Priest-Kings'. For instance, they were also closely connected with a system of 'taboos'. One taboo forbade anyone to see the 'king' drink. A child who broke this taboo was killed. This action, whilst correct within the local culture, clearly broke European taboos about the sanctity of human life. Such incidents could lead to a king being conceptualized by Europeans as a tyrant or a barbarian. Some European observers queried whether local chiefs should even be 'dignified' with the name 'king'. Kingship to Europeans was necessarily accompanied by splendour in the form of great buildings, thrones, crowns, and other accoutrements. African leaders lived in a style very different from Versailles. However, their power was expressed to their people and to their European visitors in other ways. They obliged Europeans at the coast to attend rituals and 'palavers' or discussions. They controlled access to the hinterland from which slaves were brought to the coast. Europeans did not make forays far inland. Insulting remarks about Africans hid the real dependency which Europeans had on their hosts' continued favour.

European sources tend to be particularly good at pointing out differences rather than similarities. For example, the African rules of succession were different from European norms. Often kingship descended down the female line. The king's sister's son succeeded the king. This provoked much comment amongst Europeans, but was founded upon the idea that early modern societies could not prove paternity but only maternity. Other high status roles were also allocated differently. Europeans were surprised to find that the 'headman' or executioner was also 'prime minister' in European terminology (p. 144). One European observer explained this by stating that the two roles had co-existed in earlier times in Europe. He believed that this was evidence of African backwardness, presuming that the Africans were on the same developmental path as the Europeans, if a little further behind them.

This idea is a forerunner of the 'civilizing project' view which Europeans undertook to change African societies 'for the better'. The project was only possible when European power started to outweigh

African power, which was not the case in the early modern period. Rather, the Africans trained the Europeans to their customs to a certain extent. There was a complex gift economy which Europeans had to learn in order to trade successfully. The distinction between 'gifts' and 'tolls', however, always remained a little vague. Gift-giving by Africans was a sign of friendship but also underlined the African ruler's own status. Gift-taking might be seen as a tax, whether fair or unfair, by Europeans. Sometimes the Europeans were presented with a gift in return which was worth more than their gift. This was a ceremonial statement of a patron-client relationship.

The written sources give only glimpses of how Africans viewed Europeans. They tend to focus on instances where Africans reacted strongly to something. For instance, an African 'king' took exception to a Dane's powdered wig. The pigtail of the wig was interpreted as the white man's 'tail', which in other animals would not be on the neck (p. 175). This vignette highlights how strange early modern Europeans might seem to Africans and, arguably, also to modern Europeans. 'Civilized' customs such as wig-wearing were continued with, even though wigs were presumably unsuitable for the African climate. European sources tend to focus on descriptions of 'the other': African housing, clothing, customs, and rituals receive great attention. In doing so, the sources rarely mention those things which Europeans took for granted, such as the wearing of pig-tailed wigs.

African leaders, such as the 'King' of Dahomey, were able to tolerate European customs. The king allowed each European visitor to salute in the manner of his own country rather than following Dahomian tradition. Africans also altered European practices to suit local customs, such as the use of European national flags in parades. Clearly the original meaning of the flags had changed. The blending of cultures is perhaps more difficult to divine than when cultures clashed. The use of pawns (human hostages as a guarantee for good faith) meant that Africans were sometimes housed and educated in European forts for long stretches of time. The European sources discuss how to profit by educating a high status person in European ways, but say little about how that person might affect the Europeans themselves. African influence on Europeans seems harder to uncover, and yet it must have happened.

Brauner has set herself a very difficult task: investigating intercultural exchanges by using archival evidence from only one side.

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The Africans and Euro-Africans seem to have left little written evidence of their own. Their words and actions are recorded by the pens of European writers. Brauner fully acknowledges this problem but has done a fine job of critically assessing these primary sources and noting their biases. It might have been useful to try to include some evidence which was not European in origin. Archaeological excavations, for instance at the abandoned town of Savi, might have shed some more light on African ideas. This is a minor quibble however. Another small quibble is the lack of an index by subject. There are indices by person and place and a helpful glossary. These are small points to take into account if a translation is ever published. All in all, this is a detailed and well-produced volume which stresses the mixing of cultures at the coast and makes important points about the biases in the European primary source material.

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