

BOOK REVIEW

Makhroufi Ousmane Traoré. *Slavery, Resistance, and Identity in Early Modern West Africa: The Ethnic-State of Gajaaga*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2024. 452 pp. Maps. Bibliography. Index. \$150. Hardback. ISBN: 9781009282345.

Makhroufi Ousmane Traoré's *Slavery, Resistance, and Identity in Early Modern West Africa: The Ethnic-State of Gajaaga* examines the story of the Soninke community of Gajaaga in relation to existing discourses on the history of merchant slavery in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Africa. He delineates Africa's experience of the trans-Saharan and transatlantic slave trades by exploring how one allied group, composed of Mandinka captives freed from slave caravans, Wolof and Fulbe migrants, Soninke farmers in the hinterlands (4), and others, weaponized an adopted ethnic identity to push back against the violent operations of Europeans and the Arab-Almoravids at the time. Traoré's book introduces readers to a fluid narrativization of the roles Africans played during this turbulent history. Far from pandering to popularized accounts of African victimhood, his well-researched exposition presents a nuanced perspective. The book, covering 420 pages of main content, makes three key arguments. First, it contends that the Gajaaga communities' deconstruction and reformation of ethnic identities served as a protective edge against the violence of the slave trades. Second, it avows the nonhuman consequences of the transnational slave trades, situating the role the slave traders, particularly the French, played in the decimation of Upper Senegal's ecosystem, which crumbled the existing socio-political and economic systems of the wider region. And, third, it rejects the postulation that some Africans willfully partook in the transatlantic slave trade, suggesting instead that their agency was significantly influenced and overshadowed by the "overarching European command and imperial power over the Atlantic world system" (18).

Traoré's exploration is divided into three parts, consisting of six chapters. Part I offers readers background information on the ethnic state of Gajaaga. The first chapter of the book examines the rise of the ethnic state following the collapse of the Soninke empire and the formation of the Soninke diaspora within the context of the trans-Saharan and transatlantic slave trades (43). The second chapter provides a clear distinction between indigenous forms of social hierarchy, highlighting the differences between African domestic slavery and the slave trades. It argues that the inequality within African societies that fostered the designation of slaves as one social class does not match the dehumanization that Arab and Euro-American slavery connotes. In Traoré's conception, African domestic slavery has been overstated and misconstrued as a foundation upon which the propagation of the Atlantic slave trade is hinged.

Part II builds on this introduction. The third chapter contextualizes the strategic location of the Gajaaga communities, emphasizing their critical role in the global encounters between the Sahara, the Mediterranean, and the Atlantic coast of West Africa long before the fifteenth century and contact with Europeans (49). The fourth chapter highlights the environmental and ecological devastation the Atlantic slave trade caused, particularly how the French expansion into the hinterland of West Africa, driven by greed, arrogance, and violence, along with Arab and Almoravid invasions from the Sahara Desert, significantly disrupted the ecosystem of the region through its imposition of capitalistic patriarchy over communities established on matriarchy and oneness with nature.

Traoré, in Part III, chronicles the Gajaagas' systematic resistance to these incursions. In the fifth chapter, he details their resistance strategies, explaining how the Bacili soldiers of the Gajaaga communities weakened French trading and imperial activities in the region through the effective use of high tariffs, slave-caravan taxes, assassination, guerrilla attacks, dispersion of captive caravans, and the interruption of information flow (289). Nevertheless, the sixth chapter may be Traoré's most compelling explication, as it narrates the story of the famous Ayuba Suleyman Diallo, also known as Job Ben Solomon, a noble from the kingdom of Bundu who was kidnapped, sold into slavery, and taken to America (368). This chapter underscores how Diallo's expert knowledge of the trade networks in Upper Senegal enabled the Gajaagas to develop an alternative to trading with the French, further restricting the latter's access to the region's resources and trading routes.

In general, Traoré's new book is a breath of fresh air. Not only does it help readers create a clear and specific picture of the dwellers of the Upper Senegal region during the trans-Saharan and transatlantic slave trades, but it also highlights the environmental devastation these trades caused across the broader West African region. The book excels in its ability to capture and retain readers' interest. It avoids extensive use of jargon, adopting a more accessible narrative style. Its generous use of maps, along with the careful subdivision of sections and chapters, benefits readers who might be consulting the book for their own research or for specific theme-based knowledge acquisition. Traoré's *Slavery, Resistance and Identity in Early Modern West Africa: The Ethnic-State of Gajaaga* is, thus, a landmark work that stands to benefit students, scholars, researchers, and individuals interested in early modern African history, the trans-Saharan and transatlantic trades, and Africans' resistance to precolonial European incursion.

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