BOOK REVIEW

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

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In this study, Sandra E. Greene, a professor of African History at Cornell University, undertakes the challenge of discerning how West African slave owners made decisions about what to do with their slaves in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was the age of abolition. For more than a century, British abolitionists had been attacking the institution of slavery and the slave trade. They sought to bring an end to the notion that human beings could be forcibly taken from their communities, turned into property, sold as commodities, and worked as chattel. For the abolitionists, their crusade against slavery was a transcendent human rights issue. In 1772, the British courts ruled in the Somerset Decision that slavery was unlawful within the United Kingdom. In 1807, the British parliament prohibited its subjects from participating in the slave trade. In 1833, the British abolished slavery in its colonies. In 1851, the British deposed the ruler of the island of Lagos for failing to halt the slave trade from the island. Then, in 1874, the British established the Gold Coast Colony (southern coastal region of modern Ghana), emancipating the colony's slaves.

For the slave owners in the Ewe-speaking region of the Gold Coast Colony, however, the abolitionist movement was an existential threat. The age of abolition was also the age of the "new" imperialism. The industrialized countries were imposing their colonial rule over agrarian societies. The "new" imperialism partitioned nationalities, secured sources of raw materials, opened markets for their manufactured goods, and introduced a new religion. How slave owners responded to this threat affected their business decisions, social status, and spiritual well-being. Many slave owners were businessmen or middlemen in the trade between African producers and European traders. For them, owning slaves was either a manifestation or function of their wealth. Some were politicians or chiefs in their patrilineal, kinship-based, agrarian communities. Slave ownership augmented their power. Others were priests. They were practitioners of the sacred ways of their ancestors and slaves were sometimes used in various

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religious rituals. The introduction of Christianity with its call for universal brotherhood stood in sharp contrast with the cultural particularism of indigenous religion.

Regardless of their responses, as Greene points out, slave owners made decisions. Those decisions were reflected in their material concerns and character. Deftly combining archival and oral history research methods, Greene captures the essence of those responses through biographical sketches of three Ewe-speaking slave owners. The first biographical sketch is of Amegachie Afeku of Ketu. He was a priest, political advisor, and businessman. He opposed and resisted the abolition of slavery. For him, the ownership of slaves reflected his achieved status; the outlawing of slavery represented a financial loss and a lessening of his social status. He resisted the abolition of slavery harshly and sometimes violently. When his slaves attempted to leave his control, he relentlessly pursued them. He resorted to both legal and illegal means to hold onto his slaves, even threatening to move them outside the Gold Coast Colony. His economic interests influenced his decision making.

In the second biographical sketch, Greene explores the life of Nyaho Tamakloe of Anlo. He was a celebrated military commander, successful businessman, and adroit politician. Although he was a major slave owner, he accepted the British abolition of slavery. He saw in the colonial situation an opportunity to augment his power, wealth, and prestige. He re-invented himself from slave owner into patron of his former slaves. He provided for their education at Christian missionary schools. He supported their appointments to political positions. He promoted social mobility among his slaves. In appreciation, his former slaves became part of his extended kinship network and political base. Many of his former slaves adopted his clan name. When Nyaho Tamakloe died in 1918, the Tamakloe name or lineage had both real and fictitious members. His political ambitions motivated his decision making.

Noah Yawo of Ho-Kpenoe is the subject of the third biographical sketch. Like Amegachie Afeku and Nyaho Tamakloe, he was a wealthy farmer and slave owner at the time of the British occupation. Unlike Afeku and Tamakloe, his response to the abolition of slavery was due to a spiritual transformation in his interior life. Yawo was a deeply religious and morally responsible man. He made regular sacrifices to the traditional religion and paid excessive fees to the traditional priests. His questioning of the traditional religion began after it failed to prevent the life altering effects of an earthquake, drought, famine, outbreak of smallpox, and war. The death of his much beloved but ailing brother probably convinced him that the traditional religion had failed him and his community. He converted to Christianity, divorcing two of wives and setting his many slaves free. His religious experiences inspired his decision making.

What emerges from these biographical sketches is a challenge to scholars of African History, Comparative Slavery, and Human Rights to re-think how West African slave owners made their decisions during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They played a critically important role in how West Africa was incorporated into global capitalist system. Greene keenly engages these biographical sketches as lens into the dynamics of social change in West Africa.