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BOOK REVIEWS


In recent years a trend has been developing whereby West African governments are actively encouraging tourism to their historical sites associated with the Atlantic slave trade. Some examples of this are the Roots Festival in The Gambia, where tourists meet the “descendants” of Kunta Kinte, the protagonist of Alex Haley’s Roots, and the promotion of the “slave coast”, with its ancient forts and historical sites, by Ghana’s tourism ministry. These and other efforts at focussing the tourist market on one of humanity’s darkest chapters presents an array of complex problems, and situating the story of Ouidah within this context is germane, for the town’s prominence in the Atlantic slave trade was perhaps second only to Luanda in Angola. Yet outside of Africa Ouidah remains largely unknown – off the tourist trail and with no government funding initiatives. Robin Law’s account of the social history of the town will no doubt go a long way towards changing that aspect, and shed light on what was otherwise a forgotten tale.

The town of Ouidah is situated on Benin’s coast, some 30km west of the commercial capital, Cotonou. For over 200 years Ouidah was one of the primary ports through which African slaves were exported to the “new world”. The Bight of Benin, it is generally agreed, accounted for approximately 20% of the 10,000,00plus slaves exported from Africa, with Ouidah witnessing the passage of more than 1,000,000 souls through its harbour. Law provides a thorough account of the history of this “slave port”, covering the period of the pre-Dahomian conquest to the colonial era.

What marks this text above others is the author’s passion for his subject: the level of detail is not so much meticulous as encyclopaedic, and the text would undoubtedly be of great importance to a range of research specialists in fields such as economics, history, and anthropology. The author makes full use of his wide variety of sources, which include documents cited from the European presence, oral histories, and texts by African historians. Presented in a chronological manner, Law devotes the early chapters to life in Ouidah before and after its inclusion in the Kingdom of Benin. “The operation of the Atlantic slave trade” is a chapter unto itself, and here Law unravels the complexities of the trade and its effects on both the international and domestic economies. The human tragedy of the trade is also examined, through a description of the experiences of the slaves both through their own words and through that of the author’s.
In summary, this is a major work on the topic of the Atlantic slave trade, covering the genesis of the trade through to its zenith and into prohibition. Law brings to the topic a consummate research approach, providing not only the facts and figures, but the social history to this tragic period.

Graeme Counsel
University of Melbourne


*African Cultural Education and the African Youth in Western Australia* is a timely and most recent contribution to the ongoing discourses on competing identities in multicultural Australia. This is a generalist book written in accessible language, which is suitable for a wider audience, including specialists such as educators, youth workers, artists and counselors, and the casual reader. The book calls for identity negotiations within African migrant communities in Australia as well as negotiations with other non-African contact cultures. Drawing on Akinyela’s Ujamaa Circle, also known as the Afrikan Centred Pedagogy, and Homi K. Bhabha’s theory of borderline existence, Peter Wakholi sheds new insights into our understanding of marginal identities in contexts of global population movements. The book brings to major spotlight some of the challenges confronting African migrants to Australia, and provides both conceptual and research-based strategies for coping with problems of transmigration and contacts between cultures. One of the major innovative contributions of the book is that it is premised on the author’s personal experience as an African Australian as well as the experiences of other migrants of African origin. From the outset, the author explains that “the more I examined the African diaspora, the more I found evidence to suggest that the anxieties I held about the cultural well-being of my children were also true of the experiences of many other black migrant families” (p. 6).

The book is organized into seven chapters. The first chapter is exploratory, mapping out the nature of the problem discussed in the book. Chapter two provides an overview of the conceptual issues that inform the overall argument of the book. The second chapter further discusses African cultures, trans-ethnic cultural communities and also provides a critique of existing scholarship on African diaspora identities. The third chapter is a detailed description of the methodology consisting of rigorous six sessions of dialogue
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Counsel, G

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