

## **Africa and Slavery**

Stephanie Smallwood. Saltwater Slavery. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 2007

Rosalind Shaw. Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press. 2002

As the study of slavery has expanded from a nostalgic remembrance of a static South to encompass a broader, more dynamic Atlantic view, there still remains an auspicious absence: Africa. This relatively understudied continent plays such an obvious role in the history of slavery that its neglect can only be understood as a lingering attachment to the geographical biases of earlier authors. Ironically, it appears that Africa has been marginalized in the very field of study meant to illuminate the tragedies of African marginalization and exploitation through slavery.

*Saltwater Slavery*, by Stephanie Smallwood and *Memories of the Slave Trade*, by Rosalind Shaw are two excellent books that step into this void. Their recent publication indicates that African focused scholarship is a late-comer in the attempt to explore significant areas of research left untouched by past historians. It is this shift of focus toward Africa that is the greatest general contribution of these authors. Specifically, Smallwood provides an in-depth analysis on how the increasing market pressure of the slave trade transformed both the role of slavery in Africa and African coastal society as a whole. Shaw contributes a rebuttal of the idea that West Africans have forgotten the slave trade.

Rosalind Shaw has been doing research in Sierra Leone since 1977—including living there for nearly two years. Her original focus was on “women’s negotiations of marital relationships through divination (Shaw p.44).” During a fellowship at Harvard she came across sources on

Sierra Leone from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century that placed the divination rituals she had been studying in a larger historical context. These readings “transformed my project, enabling me to reconceptualize both divination and gender discourses in terms of social memory (Shaw p.45).” Her resulting thesis is that slavery in Sierra Leone is remembered mimetically in Temne ritual.

Stephanie Smallwood explores many facets of the Atlantic slave trade in *Saltwater Slavery*, but the central topic of the book is the effect of slavery on “Saltwater Slaves.” This term refers to slaves born in Africa and transported to the Western Hemisphere across the Atlantic Ocean. Smallwood differentiates these slaves from American born slaves because of the immense cultural divide that she perceives between them. Socially marginalized in their new “home”, the one-way nature of the slave trade creates a permanent disconnect with their lives back in Africa as well. Their situation is described as purgatory and the slaves themselves as the living dead. Smallwood argues that this ambiguity is the defining characteristic of saltwater slaves; the misnamed “middle” passage implies a beginning and an end to the story, but these men, women, and children were denied the ability to live and die as complete human beings.

Ms. Shaw is an anthropologist and Ms. Smallwood is an historian. Subsequently, they use a different set of sources to arrive at their conclusions. Shaw is primarily guided by previous academic scholarship—John and Jean Comaroff feature prominently—and her own extensive field work. Pa Fonah and Pa Koroma were Muslim diviners that she worked closely with.

Smallwood’s “principal source of evidence is the archive of the English Royal African Company, which received a royal charter in 1672 and, formally at least, monopolized the English slave trade through 1698 (AHR).” In addition to this formal account Shaw looks at private correspondence between people involved in the slave trade to gain an understanding of the feelings and thoughts behind the numbers in the ledgers. Through both of these types of sources

Shaw hopes to discern indirectly the story of the African slaves themselves. There does exist a peculiarity with regards to Smallwood's sources: for an author who expresses a desire to learn about the lives of the slaves there is hardly any use of contemporary slave narratives or testimonies. While there are legitimate concerns for the validity of supervised interviews, surely they merit consideration alongside indirect speculation from official slaveholders' documents.

The difference in fields of study precludes a direct comparison between the two works. This is not to say that the two books aren't complementary; they are. Later we will see how the memories of Africans described in Shaw's book were shaped by events in Smallwood's. However, any dialogue between the books on my part would be forced and inauthentic. Let us instead examine each work's message on its own merit.

A benefit of studying the African role in slavery relatively late in the historiography of the subject is that we are able to use the most up-to-date methods of scholarship. In this case that means that the recent emphasis on considerations of time and place allow for a more specific time/place analysis of African slavery. Smallwood starts by limiting her place of study to the Gold Coast. Although the Gold Coast didn't export nearly as many slaves as, say, the Bight of Benin, the historical importance of the Gold Coast in the origins of Atlantic slavery makes this an ideal choice for examining the evolution of slavery through time.

Smallwood depicts the origins of the slave trade in Africa as largely inter-African. Until 1540 the Portuguese traders were only interested in gold and it was the African leadership that was buying slaves to support their kingdoms and transport the heavy European goods. This all changed with the discovery of the "New World." By 1640 over 700,000 enslaved Africans had made their way to Spanish-American ports. The effect of this forced exodus of Africans on the

Gold Coast was, amazingly, that trade virtually stopped. As a slave-importer the Gold Coast was economically hurt by the opening of the new markets. With the development of Brazil as a major sugar producer, eventually the demand grew large enough to transform the merchants of the Gold Coast into slave exporters.

Initially, the slaves that were exported were prisoners of war. The custom in West African warfare at that time was to kill the male captives as a means to prevent retaliation. The prospect of gaining a profit on your captives while preventing them from future acts of revenge must have seemed like a great deal to the kings. This incidental slave trading eventually succumbed to the pressure of the slave trade market. The seemingly endless appetite of the New World combined with increasingly powerful and militaristic African nations to establish an Atlantic slave trade capable of sending millions of prisoners overseas.

Smallwood prepares this context of Atlantic slavery to better demonstrate how this system affected its victims. And victims they were. From the onset we witness a similarity among those enslaved: they were society's powerless. The lower class, the criminals and the war prisoners comprised the majority of the cargo. And, in addition to the trauma of becoming enslaved, there was a qualitative difference between African slavery and European slavery. In Africa slaves were marginalized but still belonged to the community. There wasn't as distinct a psychological categorization of the slave as the "other" as found in the New World. According to Smallwood, that is one of the great tragedies of Atlantic slavery. She argues that saltwater slaves were completely alienated from any kinship or community. Unlike the deceased, they were not venerated and they were not able to participate in their proper ancestral roles after death. In this conclusion I think Smallwood may have gone too far. Her sense of horror for the Atlantic slave trade is justified, but I don't agree that the middle passage necessarily stripped all the captives of

the capacity to “exist meaningfully” and to “social annihilation (Smallwood p.60,61).” Human beings are remarkable adaptable creatures and I have faith many of the saltwater slaves were able to find meaning and community in their new surroundings, no matter how deplorable the situation.

It is at this point—the formation and memory of culture—that *Saltwater Slavery* becomes relevant to *Memories of the Slave Trade*. The historical memory of slavery in America has been well documented and is recognized as a major contributor to modern culture. Our remembrance of that legacy is both discursive and practical. The discursive, or verbal, memory can be seen in our countless books and documents. In Shaw’s words, practical memory is history that is forgotten because it is “embedded in habits, social practices, ritual processes, and embodied experiences (Shaw p.7).” The prominence of black Americans in the South and continuing racial tensions could be seen as examples of a practical consciousness of slavery in the United States. It was from this background of rich and detailed slavery documentation that Edward Ball went to Africa. Incredibly Ball found that the Sierra Leoneans had apparently forgotten about the slave trade. Could this be true?

Professor Shaw concedes that many Sierra Leoneans are unfamiliar with the slave trade as a historical fact. However, she claims that Ball fell into the classic anthropological trap of mistaking cultural confusion for ignorance. First, for West Africans memory is not a simple act of recall. Memory for them “means defining their place and position in the world, asserting links with particular people and places,” and it is clear that the slave trade is not something you would want to attach yourself to. Second, Ball brought a Western prejudice towards the superiority of discursive versus practical memory. Shaw is adamant in her work that practical memory is *at least* as important. Far from being forgotten, the slave trade and consequent episodes of violence

in Sierra Leone have been incorporated in such a way as to help the people navigate their way successfully through the world.

The bulk of *Memories of the Slave Trade* is concerned with providing examples of specific rituals that embody elements of the slave trade. Shaw believes that four examples are particularly illuminating. I will demonstrate two of those here. First, the “shrine of the rice granary” was used by families that had kidnapped and sold a child from within their own community. It was hidden in the household’s granary to avoid suspicion. To this day these shrines exist and sacrifices are made to protect the family from the spirit of the victim. Second, the *bocio* are wooden carvings of men and women in shackles and chains that are used as ritual objects that provide protection and strength to their owners. These examples are joined by human leopards that ate children, witches, and sorcerer politicians. Each of these seemingly preposterous archetypes has a correlation with historical fact. Atlantic slavery was associated with cannibalism, witches were suspected of stealing souls and forcing them to work in America, and the increasing power of politicians and their close relationship with slave trading were seen as the result of sorcery.

In the end, Shaw convinced me that the echoes of slavery continue to resonate in West African memory. Her exhaustive research and intimacy with the people of Sierra Leone have set a high bar in African studies. And as high of praise as I have for Shaw’s work, I was equally impressed with Smallwood. Writing on very different topics and with a somewhat different style—Shaw is more technical—I left each book thinking basically the same thing: Wow.

