Power and Landscape in Atlantic West Africa: Archaeological Perspectives
J. Cameron Monroe and Akinwumi Ogundiran (Editors)

The Atlantic World is increasingly a topic of investigation for historical archaeologists who have followed the lead of historians in designating a number of “Atlantics” as analytical units defined by region, ethnic, or national affiliations. One of the many Atlantics is the “African Atlantic,” which has been proposed as a distinct area of study with its own research agenda by one of the editors of Power and Landscape in Atlantic West Africa: Archaeological Perspectives (Ogundiran, Akinwumi, African Atlantic Archaeology and Africana Studies: A Programmatic Agenda, African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter 2, 2008, <http://www.diaspora.illinois.edu/news0608/news0608.html>). This research program aims to understand the impact and nature of the Atlantic experience for those of African origin living throughout the Atlantic basin by fostering a dialogue between archaeologists on both sides of the Atlantic. Studies of the African diaspora form an overwhelming majority of these studies. Power and Landscape in Atlantic West Africa is a welcome addition to this growing body of literature that enhances understanding of this period on the African side of the Atlantic. However, this is only a secondary contribution of the text. The primary goal of the editors is to raise awareness of the work by Africanists in understanding complexity and long-term historical processes in African history.

In their volume Monroe and Ogundiran compile a well-rounded collection of papers that pursues their central argument “that the commercial revolutions of the 17th and 18th centuries dramatically reshaped the regional contours of political organization across West Africa” (p. 2). Individual contributors are asked to examine this idea through the lens of landscape by examining various forms of landscapes in West Africa during the Atlantic period that are tied to shifting commerce, political allegiance, and exhibition of authority. The case studies in the book answer these questions by offering examples of the assertion and maintenance of power.

The text is comprised of 12 chapters including an introduction, conclusion, and 10 case studies developed from original research. Three forms of landscape within Atlantic West Africa serve as the organizational foundation of the text: fragmented landscapes (Thiaw, Richard, Spiers, and Norman); state-generated landscapes (MacDonald and Camara, Monroe, and Ogundiran); and internal-frontier landscapes (de Barros, DeCorse, and MacEachern). Monroe and Ogundiran define each type broadly, but this is where the editors’ direction regarding a specific definition of landscape ends. The individual authors define landscape locally by “examining a plethora of ways in which social and political transformation in West Africa are observable in reference to regionally defined archaeological remains” (p. 5). The editors urge their contributors to move beyond traditional archaeological approaches to landscape as a simple unit of analysis. Some authors directly engage with the editors’ challenges, including the assertion that a landscape is socially constructed (p. 14). This active engagement is seen in Richard’s examination of the historical construction of the Siin (Senegal) as a colonial backwater; he challenges the long-held belief that the Atlantic era in this region translated into little material change under state control. Archaeological survey findings demonstrate that pockets of densely populated areas that existed in the Siin constitute a fragmented landscape with regional manifestations balking the intentions of the state. Similar processes are investigated by Thiaw (chap. 2) in the upper Senegal.
drainage polities of Gajaaga and Bundu. His analysis does not explicitly define a perspective, yet it is clear that he views landscape as settlement patterning. The differential presence of trading sites and *tatas*, or defensive sites, reveals a fragmented landscape developed around commerce and political authority. Norman (chap. 5) applies similar methods to investigate urban/rural relations in Hueda (in modern-day Benin). Drawing on settlement patterns and artifact distributions, he reveals that the centralized nature of commerce and political authority in Savi the capital left the countryside less willing to rise to its defense against Dahomey. Here too, landscape is not explicitly defined, but the construction of the urban/rural dichotomy through state-level authority is clear.

Spiers (chap. 4) also engages with the definition of the fragmented landscape within a single settlement, examining how the transformation of the town of Eguafa, capital of the Eguafa polity, reflects political realignment in precolonial times (p. 116). In doing so, Spiers draws on Lefebvre’s work to define landscape as an approach which “tries to encompass the spaces in between, which situates Eguafa in a broader network of social, political, and economic relations” (p. 118). Spiers convincingly argues that, despite Eguafa’s position in the hinterland, it was entangled in Atlantic commerce, thereby creating a fragmented society in which expensive trade goods are restricted to elite spaces.

Monroe and Ogundiran define “state-generated landscapes” as those created by the state to overcome challenges of the fragmented landscape (p. 25). Three case studies in this section examine the variable impact on different regions of direct involvement in Atlantic commerce. MacDonald and Camara (chap. 6) engage with the eternal landscape of *marka* towns (Islamic holy cities tied to Mande civilization) vs. the state-generated patterns associated with the slave trade. More so than other studies in the text, they engage with the oral rather than the documentary record to tease out the social creation of the Segou landscape. The most dramatic example of state building is presented by Monroe (chap. 7). The use of palace construction throughout the Abomey Plateau by various rulers of Dahomey created a symbolic landscape of power. This is contrasted with Ogundiran’s (chap. 8) investigation of Oyo with a focus on the settlement of Ede-Ile. Similar to Spiers’s chapter, Ogundiran analyzes a single site and its landscape by examining the settlement’s relationship to the core. Like Thiaw and Norman, Ogundiran does not explicitly define landscape, leaving the reader to infer a definition based on his discussion.

The final case studies engage with Kopytoff’s (1987) original formulation of internal frontiers within sub-Saharan polities. De Barros (chap. 8) provides the most detailed examination of internal-frontier creation within the state in his study of the Bassar Chiefdom of northern Togo. This chapter, as well as DeCorse’s analysis of the Koinadugu Plateau of Sierra Leone in chapter 10, problematizes how archaeologists use the chiefdom concept as a form of sociopolitical organization. MacEachern (chap. 11) presents the most introspective piece, questioning his own past assumptions regarding settlement and change in the Mandara (Cameroon) landscape.

As with any edited volume, some chapters are inevitably stronger than others; however, this compilation is both rich in the depth of analysis provided in each chapter as well as the geographical range covered within West Africa. Each chapter can stand on its own as a separate paper, while simultaneously adhering to the editors’ goals, as the chapters each examine aspects of the impact of Atlantic entanglement on the landscape at multiple scales and degrees. The contributors present a rich set of examples of how power is exhibited in the landscape through settlement strategies, town layout, architecture, and material culture distribution. The concluding remarks include the perspective of historian Kea, who states that the researchers demonstrate that “a landscape is a site of agency” (p. 342). This closing argument accurately points to the richness of landscape studies in understanding the complex nature of power, resistance, authority, and political realignment driven by shifting commercial spheres. *Power and Landscape in Atlantic West Africa* is an overdue addition to African Atlantic and Atlantic World studies more broadly. The emphasis on transformation in West Africa during the Atlantic era provides a counterbalance to the domi-
nant Americanist perspective and focus on the African diaspora within historical archaeology of the African Atlantic world. The further appeal to historians of Africa’s recent past regarding lines of inquiry and the role of archaeology in historiography expands the potential influence of this text beyond historical archaeological circles. The editors should be commended for developing a tightly focused yet broadly relevant collection of essays.

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