POWER AND LANDSCAPE IN ATLANTIC WEST AFRICA

This volume examines the archaeology of precolonial West African societies in the era of the transatlantic slave trade. Using historical and archaeological perspectives on landscape, this collection of essays sheds light on how involvement in the commercial revolutions of the early modern period dramatically reshaped the regional contours of political organization across West Africa. The essays examine how social and political transformations occurred at the regional level by exploring regional economic networks, population shifts, cultural values, and ideologies. The book demonstrates the importance of anthropological insights not only to the broad political history of West Africa, but also to an understanding of political culture as a form of meaningful social practice.

J. Cameron Monroe is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and Director of the Abomey Plateau Archaeological Project in the Republic of Bénin, West Africa. He serves on the editorial board of *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa* and has published in various journals, among them *Historical Archaeology*, *Journal of African History*, *Journal of Social Archaeology*, and *Current Anthropology*.

Akinwumi Ogundiran is Professor of Africana Studies, Anthropology, and History at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, and Director of the Upper Osun Archaeological and Historical Project. He is the author or editor of several publications, including *Archaeology and History in Ilare District, Central Yorubaland*; *Precolonial Nigeria*; and *Archaeology of Atlantic Africa and the African Diaspora*.

Power and Landscape in Atlantic West Africa

ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Edited by

J. Cameron Monroe

University of California, Santa Cruz

Akinwumi Ogundiran

University of North Carolina, Charlotte

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107009394

First published 2012

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Power and landscape in Atlantic West Africa : archaeological perspectives /
[edited by] J. Cameron Monroe, Akinwumi Ogundiran.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-107-00939-4 (hardback)
1. Africa, West – History – To 1864. 2. Social structure – Africa, West – History.
3. Political culture – Africa, West – History. 4. Africa, West – Commerce – Social
aspects – History. 5. Africa, West – Commerce – Political aspects – History.
6. Landscape archaeology – Africa, West. I. Monroe, J. Cameron. II. Ogundiran,
Akinwumi.
DT476.P68 2011
966′.02–dc23 2011019257

ISBN 978-1-107-00939-4 Hardback

For Merrick Posnansky

Contents

Foreword

Merrick Posnansky

The development of West African archaeology has been much more rapid than most Africanist researchers once thought possible. *West Africa before the Europeans: Archaeology and Prehistory*, written by Oliver Davies (1967), was the first synthesis of archaeological scholarship on West Africa. Preceding it had been Raymond Mauny's *Tableau géographique de L'Ouest Africain au Moyen Âge d'apres les sources écrites, la tradition et l'archéologie* (1961), which combined both archaeological and historical sources to cover the more geographically restricted Sudanic and Sahelian belts from Senegal to Tchad. Although national archaeologies of Nigeria (Shaw 1978) and Ghana (Anquandah 1982) were subsequently published, regional syntheses were not attempted, and the next book-length work with a claim to some comprehensiveness was Christopher DeCorse, ed., *West Africa during the Atlantic Slave Trade: Archaeological Perspectives* (2001). Separated by thirty-four years, Davies and DeCorse clearly defined their chronological parameters.

Archaeology forty years ago was still divided between Stone Age studies and the Iron Age and historical archaeology, although the latter term was not employed for West African studies. Seventy-two percent of Davies' study dealt with environmental change and Stone Age studies. The emphasis was on the nature of sites and the classification and association of artifacts. The study of West Africa before the impact of the Europeans was considered purely as prehistoric archaeology. European terminologies were employed, and there were huge gaps on the map, for which there was no evidence, and research was largely restricted to fieldwork conducted from the principal centers where Europeans were based, such as Dakar, Conakry, Abidjan,

Bamako, Accra, Lagos, and Freetown, or where research institutes such as the Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire (IFAN) had been established. There were only five full universities and a little more than a dozen West African-based archaeologists by 1967. In contrast, there are now more than fifteen universities where some archaeology is or has recently been taught, and more than a hundred trained archaeologists working in museums, antiquities services, monument boards, and universities.

By the time of the publication of DeCorse's *West Africa during the Atlantic Slave Trade*, the picture had changed considerably in terms of the increased number of archaeological personnel and institutions and the volume of archaeological research, but the time periods and geographical areas involved were limited. The focus was on the Atlantic seaboards of West Africa. Although there was effective regional coverage, as that for the Cameroons, there were still huge areas omitted because of the lack of solid field research. Themes other than the slave trade were minimized. During this period from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, major changes were happening – many the result of European contact. However, changes in the trans-Saharan trade, many aspects of state formation in the Sudanic zone, and increasing competition for resources also had their origins in regional developments that were considered in less detail. The volume by DeCorse, a model for new archaeology at all levels, set the stage for much more vigorous work in historical archaeology in previously less studied areas, such as Bénin.

Research in the past half century posts definite red flags about the dangers of approaches that are too discrete to West African history and archaeology. In the first generation of African historical scholarship in the 1960s, many African historians, proud of their own local histories, returned from Europe to write about the states from which they came. There was a flurry of doctorates that dealt with the politics and trade of their home areas. These had the result of emphasizing differences over relatively small distances. Access to European archives resulted in greater significance being given to Dutch, Danish, French, and British company histories, and less reliance was placed on West African state histories. Although the present study contains chapters by seven of the writers contained in DeCorse's volume, this emphasis has been avoided. Scholarship has matured and archaeology has more than kept up with research on documentary sources. The present volume provides a corrective balance by including

several penetrating studies of states that grew up away from the coast and discusses developments that took place in nonstate situations. This new volume represents a clear break with past research because it covers all of West Africa and brings the study of West Africa's past into the present in a continuous discussion of some of the dominant themes of human settlement.

Instead of dealing with distinct time periods as evidenced from changes in tool technology, from stone to copper and its alloys, from stone to iron, from locally smelted iron to imported iron bars, the authors emphasize the landscape. The authors thereby deal with West Africa in a seamless, fluid capacity. Recent research (Posnansky 2004) has demonstrated that hunting and gathering persisted through agricultural times, and many present-day communities still collect snails and oil palm grubs, trap small rodents like grasscutters, or *agouti*, and birds, and make use of an extensive natural pharmacopoeia. Humans are part of the landscape, and the landscape was a dynamically changing backdrop to cultural, humanly determined, developments that had pronounced impacts on the landscape. Such developments included the reduction of tree cover for agriculture and fuels, the creation of settlement sites by building mounds above water levels, and changes to the botanical and animal biospheres. But in this volume landscape goes beyond the purely environmental to embrace the spatial relations of the societies under discussion. The authors are dealing with a competitive and fluid world. One of the principal achievements of archaeology has been to deal in space in a much more dynamic way.

Geographic Positioning Systems (GPS) and spatial imaging accessible from virtually continuous global monitoring are enabling archaeologists to see the vicinity of their sites within completely new perspectives. Different categories of sites are seen, past waterways are revealed, and dynamic maps are produced combining traditional forms of archaeology, such as shovel sampling and questioning of local elders, with the results of the new satellite imagery. This is facilitating the coverage of areas away from excavations on the more obvious archaeological sites. A totality of cover is thus feasible. What is still lacking is the archaeologist's ability to walk the landscape in a total fashion. Even this restriction is becoming lessened as the number of archaeological surveys increases and the number of observers expands. In 2009 alone, more than a dozen foreign teams went to West

Africa to work with local institutions that also sponsored departmental groups, including archaeology students fulfilling the "long essay/dissertation" requirements for their degrees. The use of similar equipment by different international teams is leading to greater regional compatibility. Some of the dreams of the dedicated scholars who produced the *Atlas of African Prehistory* (Clark 1967) are at last beginning to be realized. Sites are parts of landscapes; individual finds help interpret those landscapes; and fitting the parts into a whole is leading to new conclusions based on the observed relationships. A very definite contribution of the editors is to stress that in West Africa we are dealing with a fragmented landscape that cautions us to beware of simplistic generalizations.

Although the new technologies facilitate the comprehension of larger geographical areas, allowing skilled regional interpretations from which aspects of the landscape can be quantified, the realization has to be accepted that the landscape is both eternal and ephemeral. The changing relationships between humans and the landscape have been appreciated for a long period, particularly after the brilliant synthesis of scholars such as Bovill (1958) working on the Sahara. Whereas the past scholarship on West African landscape has been focused on ecology, this collection of essays is about social transformations and how differing spatial relationships have produced different historical experiences at regional levels. For example, the location of the Hueda and Dahomey states – similar in ethnic origins and traditions of leadership – had very different histories, because one was located nearer to the coast where major changes were occurring. Both had to react, and their locations were affected differentially. Dahomey ultimately grew when faced by Oyo aggression, whereas Hueda was unable to adapt or expand when menaced by aggressive powers on both the land and sea frontiers.

The most dramatic conclusion of this volume is how meaningless old time ascriptions now appear. Except on the coast where new towns were created, there is no sharp distinction between the prehistoric and historic periods. What was significant were the changes that took place at a societal level. States formed, chieftaincies arose, and populations agglomerated. In writing about time, periods have been typecast. There is a tendency to speak of the "age of maritime expansion," of the era of the "slave trade," or of the "industrial age." All of these are accurate for some areas but not for all – West Africa was changing; there was a vigorous trade from the north, and religious

movements had social, political, technological, and cultural ramifications. Much of West Africa at different times was affected neither by the Atlantic trade nor by revolutionary movements in the Sudanic belt and Sahel. Dealing with discrete geographical areas that shared a universal timescale in this volume enables the editors to avoid overall generalizations. One of the major scholarly achievements of the past half century has been to secure a more acceptable chronological framework. Besides the obvious scientific methods, such as radiocarbon and thermoluminescence dating, oral history combined with more precise dating of imported ceramics, glassware, and pipe bowls and stems has provided a more precise chronology than was once thought possible. With better dating of mixed imported and local assemblages, we are closer to erecting more secure sequences of local and regional ceramic wares that will ultimately provide a stronger framework for our historical reconstructions.

Regardless of time, trade was an important variable. In the past, scholars fixated on long-distance trade as a major factor of change, but all the studies included in this volume emphasize the importance of both local and long-distance networks. Trade ultimately rests on the exchange of resources that are reflective of landscape variations. In this way, datable objects are transmitted outside of their areas of manufacture, and trade facilitates the transmission of knowledge, including technologies. Foreign objects became ritualized, as in the case of brass bowls of North African manufacture located in obscure West African contexts, such as Nsawkaw in Ghana (Wilks 1961). In such situations, the presence of new imports was far more important than the lack of contemporary written accounts.

Local accounts of interactions elaborated and embroidered over the years have also become valuable. In such situations, it is meaningless to attach the ascription of "historic" to one and not to the other. In West Africa, many different sources of information inform us about past behavior, technology, creativity, economy, and social organization. Some sources are less subjective than written observations; others, especially oral histories, are richer in personal detail; but all must be combined to provide a fabric of past experiences. In this sense, archaeological, oral, and documentary sources are relevant and of equal value in taking us further back into periods for which we have less information but for which we can anticipate new interpretations. They are complementary methodologies in cooperation rather than being in opposition. It is time for the horizontal lines

that once separated prehistoric from historic periods to be dispensed with when dealing with the past 1,000 years or so of West African history. Only by accepting this continuum can we truly appreciate the dynamic forces, both ecological and cultural, that have affected the various political landscapes examined in this volume.

Monroe and Ogundiran have provided remarkable coverage, not only in terms of geography but also in terms of field methodologies. The editors and their collaborators represent some of the up-and-coming scholars who will make their marks as surely as Shaw, Davies, and Mauny did in the past. The political landscape takes center stage, and in this sense this is a volume that points the way to the future for West African archaeology, providing a history of the region from multiple sources.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anquandah, J. (1982). *Rediscovering Ghana's Past*. Longman, London.

Bovill, E. W. (1958). *The Golden Trade of the Moors*. Oxford University Press, London.

Clark, J. D., ed. (1967). *Atlas of African Prehistory*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Davies, O. (1967). *West Africa before the Europeans: Archaeology and Prehistory*. Methuen, London.

DeCorse, C. R., ed. (2001). *West Africa during the Atlantic Slave Trade: Archaeological Perspectives*. Leicester University Press, New York.

Mauny, R. (1961). *Tableau géographique de l'Ouest Africain au Moyen Âge d'apres les sources écrites, la tradition et l'archéologie*. IFAN, Dakar.

Posnansky, M. (2004). Processes of Change – A Longitudinal Ethno-Archaeological Study of a Ghanaian Village: Hani 1970–98. *African Archaeological Review* **21** (1): 31–47.

Shaw, T. (1978). *Nigeria: Its Archaeology and Early History*. Thames and Hudson, London.

Wilks, I. (1961). The Northern Factor in Ashanti History: Begho and the Mande. *Journal of African History* **2** (1): 25–34.

Preface

Intellectual projects that tap into a diversity of perspectives to address a common theme generally emerge out of a sense of both frustration with, and the possibility to transcend, the prevailing status quo. For one of us (Monroe), such frustration emerged at the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) meetings held in Salt Lake City, Utah, in 2005. Having submitted an individual paper on Dahomean architecture, Monroe was charged with the responsibility of chairing a general session given the imaginative title "African Archaeology," to which it was assigned. As many readers of this volume are well aware, such sessions are compiled by the SAA Program Committee out of individual paper submissions. Although the papers were of high quality, they spanned historical periods and regions and drew from a host of unrelated themes and theoretical perspectives. Despite the fact that general sessions are a necessary component of large professional meetings, Monroe was immediately concerned that such a session provided the *primary* platform for the presentation of Africanist research at the SAAs that year. To the degree that it lacked any semblance of thematic coherence, Monroe took to heart a passing comment he heard a notable Mesoamericanist make upon exiting the session: "Is that all that African archaeology has to offer?"

Reflecting on that experience, Monroe approached Akinwumi Ogundiran about the idea of organizing a session on a coherent theme in African archaeology for the 2006 SAA meetings in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Noting a recent growth in the archaeological analysis of materiality and political process in Africa in the recent past, we saw the opportunity to focus on the theme of social complexity in the second millennium A.D., exploring the relationship between political

processes and the sorts of transcontinental cultural and economic entanglements that gripped the subcontinent in that period. Hence, initial frustration transformed into an opportunity to collaborate with colleagues who were just returning from the field with fresh data and insights into the issues of power and political processes in the recent past. The result was a well-attended session titled "African Complex Societies in Transition: Transformation, Continuity, and Process in the Second Millennium AD," which was composed of participants working principally in Eastern and Western Africa, and for which Adria LaViolette and Norman Yoffee graciously agreed to serve as discussants.[1] The majority of the papers, however, focused on West Africa, undoubtedly the product of the professional networks of the session organizers.

Participants were asked to think broadly about how their research spoke to issues of relevance to scholars working on social complexity around the world, and the result was a series of exciting and very high-quality papers. Rather unexpectedly, however, two unifying themes emerged in the West Africa papers during the session. On the one hand, these papers were all engaging long-standing historical debates regarding the nature of social and political transformation in West Africa during the Atlantic Era. These papers were not only engaging historical debates, however. Rather they also represented clear methodological advances in how archaeologists might productively integrate documentary, oral, and archaeological source material. The historical richness of these case studies yielded a particular interpretive strength, resulting in textured perspectives on the dynamics of political process in the past. On the other hand, West Africanist presenters were unified in engaging broader theoretical issues centering on the theme of "landscape." Whereas, and with notable exceptions, archaeological research in West Africa has been dominated by questions of technological change and long-distance trade for decades (see Posnansky, Foreword to this volume), each of these papers drew from various "landscape" perspectives to explore the nature of power and political economy across the region.

We decided this emerging thematic unity among West Africanist scholars was worth exploring further, and despite the high quality of the papers on East Africa, we resolved to focus on West African case studies from the Atlantic Era alone. Seeking broad geographic coverage, we solicited additional contributors who are creatively deploying a variety of landscape perspectives to explore the Atlantic Era in

contexts across West Africa (Christopher DeCorse, Scott MacEachern, Sam Spiers, and Ibrahima Thiaw). Although Adria LaViolette and Norman Yoffee were unable to continue with the project because of other commitments, we were fortunate that Ray Kea was willing to play ball with this group of historically attuned archaeologists.

Our goal in this volume is to build on the rapid pace of research over the last decade on the nature of social complexity in sub-Saharan Africa broadly, and in the Atlantic Era particularly. Edited volumes by Susan McIntosh (1999), Christopher DeCorse (2001), Andrew Reid and Paul Lane (2003), and, most recently, Akin Ogundiran and Toyin Falola (2007) have called for new ways of conceptualizing the political processes through which societies in the region responded to the emergence of the Atlantic economic system. We believe the following chapters have answered that call, revealing the wide spectrum of political landscapes through which West African expressions of political authority were materialized in response to both the opportunities and constraints presented by Atlantic commercial entanglement. The result is a series of theoretically robust and historically nuanced contributions to our understanding of political dynamics. We expect these studies will be of interest to both West Africanist historians and archaeologists concerned with the dynamics of social complexity more broadly.

The volume that has resulted from this productive dialogue would not have been possible without the valuable contributions of many people. First and foremost, we would like to express our sincere thanks to each of the volume's contributors, who demonstrated unparalleled patience and flexibility as this project has come to fruition since 2006. We are also indebted to Beatrice Rehl and the editorial staff of Cambridge University Press for their support and professionalism during the review and editing stages. Two anonymous reviewers provided invaluable comments on each chapter and on our introduction, and we thank both of them for their willingness to contribute their perspective on the volume. The chapters in this book have been unquestionably improved as a result. Our wives, Stephanie Monroe and Lea Koonce Ogundiran, provided the emotional and editorial support that have kept us coming back to the project since 2006, and we cannot thank them enough for their support, patience, and encouragement.

Last, this volume would not have been possible without the professional contributions of Merrick Posnansky, who was gracious

enough to write its foreword. Directly or indirectly, each contributor to this volume has been influenced heavily by his work. Indeed, it was Merrick who began to wrestle with the complex relationship between long-distance trade and political complexity in West Africa during his Begho research in the 1970s, and it was Merrick who led the charge for an archaeology of the transatlantic slave trade in West Africa. In one way or another, we have all had the good fortune to have him as our guide and mentor at some point in our careers, and we are better scholars for it. It is in light of his undeniable influence on each of us that we dedicate this book to him.

J. Cameron Monroe and Akinwumi Ogundiran
March 11, 2011

NOTE

1. Participants in this session included Philip de Barros, Jeffrey Fleisher, Chapurukha M. Kusimba, Sibel B. Kusimba, Kevin MacDonald, J. Cameron Monroe, Neil Norman, Akinwumi Ogundiran, Francois Richard, and Melanie A. Zacher.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

DeCorse, C. (2001). *West Africa During the Atlantic Slave Trade: Archaeological Perspectives.* Leicester University Press, New York.

McIntosh, S. K. (1999). *Beyond Chiefdoms: Pathways to Complexity in Africa.* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Ogundiran, A. and T. Falola (2007). *Archaeology of Atlantic Africa and the African Diaspora*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

Reid, A. and P. Lane (2004). *African Historical Archaeologies.* Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, New York.

Contributors

Philip de Barros
Department of Anthropology, Palomar College

Seydou Camara
Institut des Sciences Humaines, Bamako, Mali

Christopher R. DeCorse
Department of Anthropology, Syracuse University

Ray A. Kea
Department of History, University of California, Riverside

Kevin C. MacDonald
The Institute of Archaeology, University College London

Scott MacEachern
Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Bowdoin College

J. Cameron Monroe
Department of Anthropology, University of California, Santa Cruz

Neil L. Norman
Department of Anthropology, College of William and Mary

Akinwumi Ogundiran
Department of Africana Studies, University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Merrick Posnanksy
Departments of History and Anthropology, University of California, Los Angeles

François G. Richard
Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago

Sam Spiers
Archaeology Program, La Trobe University

Ibrahima Thiaw
Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire (IFAN), Université Cheikh Anta Diop