

BOOK REVIEW

Ana Lucia Araujo. *The Gift: How Objects of Prestige Shaped the Atlantic Slave Trade and Colonialism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. 224 pp. Maps. Figures. Bibliography. Index. \$39.99. Hardback. ISBN: 978-1-108-83929-7.

An eighteenth-century silver sword seized during a French attack on the West African Kingdom of Dahomey is now on display in the Musée du Nouveau Monde in La Rochelle, France. The sword (*kimpaba*) was produced in France and given as a gift to Andris Macaye on the Loango Coast during the era of the slave trade. As the Mfuka (Mafouque) of Cabinda, Macaye played an important role for the king of Ngoyo as middleman in the trade with Europeans on the coast.

Ana Lucia Araujo's new book *The Gift: How Objects of Prestige Shaped the Atlantic Slave Trade and Colonialism* endeavors to understand how this sword, produced in France and gifted to an African middleman on the Loango Coast, made it thousands of miles away to the West African Kingdom of Dahomey (modern Benin). In doing so, Araujo reveals how objects of prestige can help us to "complicate and nuance the study of the Atlantic slave trade and the ascent of European colonialism in Africa" (10).


Araujo adds to a developing literature on the patterns of consumption and taste in Africa during the Atlantic slave trade. She persuasively argues for the importance of studying gifts. Araujo contributes to scholarship on gift exchanges, showing how during the Atlantic slave trade, "the role of gifts and commodities was not opposed but rather closely related and often intertwined" (8). Araujo maintains that "gifts of prestige were neither ordinary goods nor currencies" (5). She contends that rather gifts of prestige were "repositories of the tragic cross-cultural exchanges intended to provide an enslaved workforce" (5). Araujo frames the book as a "global history in small scale" (2). She studies a single object—the eighteenth-century silver sword (*kimpaba*)—to show that "despite having been historically studied as two independent regions, the Loango Coast and the Bight of Benin were linked by close and complex ties during the era of the Atlantic slave trade" (5).

The book includes six chapters that uncover different aspects of the history of the silver *kimpaba*. The first chapter charts the history of the Loango Coast and its involvement in the Atlantic slave trade. Araujo studies three precolonial kingdoms, Ngoyo, Kakong, and Loango and their commercial interactions with Europeans on the coast, including the French, but also Portuguese, Dutch, and English traders. She also analyzes the role of the Mfuka in the kingdom of Ngoyo and suggests "the individual holding the Mfuka's office was in charge of collecting tributes" (24). Araujo shows how African commercial agents required "special favors in the form of gifts as the Atlantic slave trade intensified" (28).

In the second chapter, Araujo moves to France and uncovers the history of the French port city of La Rochelle. She examines the city's connection to Africa and the slave trade and the role of ship captains. By focusing on material evidence, she reveals "the links of La Rochelle's eighteenth-century elite with the Atlantic slave trade" (31). The next chapter follows the slave traders from La Rochelle and other French ports to the Loango coast. She focuses on the competition between different European powers to obtain the best conditions for the trade. According to Araujo, this conflict turned slave traders into pirates. She focuses on one particular event during which ship captains from Bordeaux and le Havre attacked slave ships from La Rochelle. Despite the European competition for control of the slave trade in the Loango coast, Araujo highlights that, unlike other parts of Africa, the Loango coast never had a permanent European trading structure.

The first three chapters of the book allow the reader to understand the context of the gift of the silver *kimpaba*. In Chapter Four, Araujo focuses on the gift. She shows how after extended rivalry between European powers for control of the slave trade on the Loango coast, French traders returned to the coast to offer a gift to the Mfuka of Cabinda, the silver *kimpaba*. In the chapter she explores the creation, production, migration, and reception of the sword. The *kimpaba* produced in La Rochelle had different meanings for the givers and receivers. The *kimpaba* "embodied the growing power acquired by the Mfuka to the detriment of the ruler of Ngoyo." Chapter Five considers the different explanations for how this sword arrived in Dahomean capital of Abomey. Araujo suggests that is it "likely that the silver *kimpaba* made its way to Abomey in the context of the French slave trade and through the same circle of French slave traders who brought the sword to Cabinda in 1777" (120). In the final chapter, she studies the reception of the sword and its use by royalty in Abomey. In Abomey, Woyo silver artisans modified the sword. In doing so they adhered to a "long-standing Dahomean tradition of dialogue with alien arts and crafts" (142).

Ultimately, Araujo's book is a superb study of a material object that shows how disparate places in Africa were linked through the slave trade and the vital role of objects of prestige in commercial exchanges. Araujo reminds us of the importance of histories of material culture and studying the provenance of African objects housed in museums. The book should be read widely by historians and museologists.

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