

Research Africa Reviews Vol. 6, No. 1, April 2022

These reviews may be found on the *RA Reviews* website at:

<https://sites.duke.edu/researchafrica/ra-reviews/volume-6-issue-1-april-2022/>

Jori Lewis, *Slaves for Peanuts: A Story of Conquest, Liberation, and a Crop That Changed History*. Publisher: The New Press, New York, April 2022, 384 pages. ISBN # 978-1-62097-156-7.

Reviewed by: Wendy Wilson-Fall, Associate Professor and Chair of Africana Studies, Lafayette College.

Jori Lewis is an independent journalist who writes about the environment and agriculture. In 2018, she was awarded the prestigious Whiting Grant for Creative Non-Fiction for her recent book, *Slaves for Peanuts*. This author successfully draws the reader into a narrative that she has compiled from fieldwork, diverse archives, and her considerable attention to preceding scholarly work. The topics are Senegal, colonialism, slavery, and the peanut trade.

Lewis follows several seemingly disparate threads to create a story that describes, with a wide lens, the Senegambia during the last half of the nineteenth century and the role of peanuts in the regional economy between roughly 1850 to 1920. For those of us not in journalism, it is curious and a bit unsettling to see the success of journalists in translating the history of Africa into texts that are compelling and educational for the general public (think, for example, of *The Birth of Blackness* by Howard French.)¹

I want to explore this turn of affairs regarding who “tells the story of Africa” and will return to a discussion of this later in this review. First, I want to give some short descriptions from this book. The book is based on hours of archives in Senegal and France but does not depend on the academic etiquettes of footnotes and citations. In spite of this, or perhaps because of this, the book is an enjoyable and informative read for Africanists and non-Africanists alike. The narrative takes the reader from Freetown, Sierra Leone to Goree, and then on to St. Louis, Senegal, Richard Toll and Dagana on the Senegal River, and on to the Kajoor Kingdom of the 1860s through to the turn of the century.

The text is full of references to the outstanding figures of the time and has a few notable themes that call for discussion here. One main theme, perhaps the most important theme, is the situation of captives and enslaved people in the Senegambia

in the last fifty years of the nineteenth century. A facet of that theme is the attempts of various Protestant sects to exploit this population as prospective Christians who would offset the waning power and stubborn resistance of the Islamic kingdoms of the region. A second theme is the political disarray of the period as the French went about their business, establishing a colony and disempowering local political leaders of the old guard. Accordingly, various Sufi brotherhoods in Senegal are presented as strategically focusing on this floating, disinherited population.

A third important theme is the production of homelessness and statelessness that ensued after the destabilization of African leaders and states. Feeble attempts to counter this enforced peasant mobility were through the creation of Freedom Villages throughout the zone. The shift of labor from the reproduction of Senegambian polities to peanut production for the colonial cause is central to this text. This book is well-written and well-researched. The links between Freetown, Goree and St. Louis are sketched out with attention to the economic conditions of the time. This was a time when people still moved freely between the Anglophone spaces of Freetown and The Gambia and the Francophone territories of Senegal as they sought economic stability or opportunity with the occupying forces of colonialism. Using records of the Protestant Mission in St. Louis and correspondence between Lat Joor (the ruler of Kajoor) and various governors in St. Louis, the author lays bare the hubris and kleptomania of the colonizers and the declining Wolof leaders through details about their conflicts, negotiations, and capitulations. The text reveals how captives and enslaved people were used as pawns in the power struggles between Kajoor and the French colonial authorities.

The story that is told is not without acknowledgement of the terrible losses experienced by regional elites as they watched the encroachment of the French on all that they would normally have inherited. The construction of the Dakar-Thies road and then the Thies-Kayes railroad, so vividly described by Ousmane Sembene in his book *Gods Bits of Wood*² from a local, grassroots point of view, is situated here in the conflicts and struggles that bubbled between Lat Joor, officials of his court, and the French. The French hoped to “civilize” and “subdue” the peoples of the Senegambia and its interior, particularly what was to become the Republic of Mali. In fact, the repetitive appearance of Bambara as captives and religious dissenters brings the era into focus even though the particular political circumstances of Segou are not described in detail.

Historical figures are presented in this context of social and political transformation. In addition to Lat Joor, personalities such as Demba Waar, Alboury Njaay, Samba Laobe, the last queen of Waalo Ndate Yalla, and Amary Ngone Faal, emerge in their social and political contexts. The intrigue and dissonance that the author reveals from her archival research make the narrative compelling and sophisticated without minimizing the tragic consequences of colonialism’s

entrenchment. The text also successfully introduces the reader to the environmental costs of monoculture and single-commodity trade that came with colonialism, in this case, the peanut as a cash crop. As the story unfolds, we are made aware of the nefarious role that credit and debt played in the further disempowerment of the farmers of Kajoor, Jambur, and Bawol and the movements of seasonal laborers, the *navetanes*, in response to the changing labor regime.

As can be imagined, this is not a short book, but the author manages to keep it engaging and suspenseful. It is another kind of historical writing, one that introduces non-specialists to an example of the big picture of colonialism on the ground. In addition to being attractive to non-academic audiences, the book might be considered for undergraduate courses in African Studies. In this sense, it is not unlike *Daughters of the Trade*, by scholar Penille Ipsen,³ in the way that it brings significant historical forces into relation with each other in ways that are comprehensible and accessible for general audiences and non-specialists.

The fact that new books are emerging that are focused on African history and written by non-academics (such as Lewis or French) is both heartening and bittersweet for those of us in academia. On the one hand, especially in terms of the American public, the ignorance about Africa is so stunning and seemingly intractable that one is always pleased and gratified to see well-researched writings and other media that reach the general reader. On the other hand, the current state of Higher Education can be characterized by an overall punitive response to scholars who do not produce books on a regular, even frequent basis, with academic presses that can no longer afford to advertise or place new volumes widely.

At the same time, other changes in the publishing industry have consolidated small presses under large ones; it is almost impossible to publish with the big trade companies without an agent. They do not accept manuscripts directly as they did in the recent past. The small independent presses that were once attractive to progressive scholars hardly exist in our time. Academics, especially in the humanities and to some extent the social sciences, are thus caught in the untenable position of directing their knowledge to an increasingly small audience. Journalists, on the other hand, are more likely to belong to networks that include literary agents and news editors.

There is another dynamic worth noting, and that is the deplorable position of adjunct faculty and the declining attractiveness of teaching in higher education. We all know that in the recent past academe has fallen out of favor with the elite class in ways that did not exist before, at least in the United States. In this context, we can hardly blame professionals in the journalism industry who feel compelled to address topics that they might have addressed in the role of scholar had that role been more accessible or less policed by our own colleagues. One might deduce that these

writers felt compelled to draw attention to the history of Africa. It is also interesting that both writers in question, Howard French and Jori Lewis, are African American.

Perhaps, in some way, they feel like stakeholders in the grand arc of African history. If there is a concern about public understanding of Africa and its role in global history, surely these books have a contribution to make. *Peanuts and Slaves* is an excellent narrative about a critical moment in African history.

Research Africa

Copyright © 2022 by Research Africa, (research_africa-editor@duke.edu), all rights reserved. RA allows for copy and redistribution of the material in any medium or format, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the RA website. You may not distribute the modified material. RA reserves the right to withdraw permission for republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. For any other proposed uses, contact RA's Editor-in-Chief. The opinions represented in the reviews and published on the RA Reviews website are not necessarily those held by RA and its Review editorial team.

ISSN 2575-6990

¹ Howard W. French, *Born in Blackness: Africa, Africans and the Making of the Modern World, 1471 to the Second World War*, New York: Liveright Publishing, 2021.

² Ousmane Sembene, *God's Bits of Wood*, Pearson Publishing, 1995 (1960).

³ Pernille Ipsen, *Daughters of the Trade: Atlantic Slavers and Interracial Marriage on the Gold Coast*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015.