

Foreword

The Kru occupy a special place in African history. Inhabitants of coastal West Africa from eastern Liberia to western Côte d'Ivoire, their men found employment on ships that crossed the Atlantic and in the ports that dotted its coast. They migrated as workers to the Caribbean and fought along British imperialists crafting an empire in Africa. Unusual in their labor history, the Kru weathered the period of trans-Atlantic slavery and the inception of colonial rule of Africa not by building a centralized state or becoming victims of enslavement but by filling a niche in the Atlantic economy that was unique in their participation and essential in the implementation of exploitative regimes that shaped the Americas and Africa. Despite this important role, they have largely gone unnoticed in the reconstruction of trans-Atlantic slavery and the European, especially British, domination of the emergent global world of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This study by Jeffrey Gunn highlights the history of migrant Kru labor in a detailed exploration of where the Kru worked, why they sought employment far beyond their coastal villages, and the willing role they performed in risky occupations that had little protection from abuse or exploitation.

Conceptually, Gunn builds on the work of Paul Gilroy on the Black Atlantic, John Thornton's study of trans-Atlantic impact, and my own work on transformations resulting from slavery in Africa. He offers a fresh perspective and analysis for uncovering meanings of race, ethnicity, enslavement, labor, and gender in the Black Atlantic and beyond in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The multi-disciplinary nature of Gunn's research on Kru labor intersects African history, African diaspora history, wage labor history, British history, Atlantic history, maritime history, Indian Ocean history, colonial history and more. His meticulous analysis of a plethora of sources as diverse as wage lists, oil paintings, gravestones, court cases, work songs, estate records, and postcards reveals the scope of the Kru labor experience is much larger than previously recognized within any single work.

The homeland of coastal West Africa from where the Kru men came and where they usually returned once they fulfilled their labor contracts is in itself an anomaly. It might be expected that the strip of coast where their fishing villages were located would have been identified as the Kru coast, but such has not been the case. Instead, Europeans referred to this part of the Guinea coast as the ivory or grain or pepper coast, made famous as a source of ivory tusks from the interior when elephants were still plentiful there and from which the modern country gets its name, or as a source of foodstuffs, most often rice rather than grain but nonetheless essential to feed the ships that passed along its shores.

Ironically, the settlement of former slaves and the descendants of slaves from the United States in what became an informal American colony in Africa that came to be known as Liberia would take precedent. The conquest that extended Liberia to encompass its present boundaries subjugated the Kru as well as many others in the interior who spoke the same or a related language. An indigenous name did not prevail.

Despite the importance of the Kru in manning slave ships and then British naval vessels charged with suppressing the slave trade, the Kru have been overlooked in yet another strange way. Atlantic shipping inevitably needed sailors and members of crews because until midway through the nineteenth century tropical disease laid waste the Europeans who manned the ships. For the slave trade, it was always necessary to have enough sailors on board to prevent or suppress any resistance among the imprisoned enslaved Africans on board, and the necessity of replacing sick and dying sailors continued during the period of suppression. Small gangs, often numbering no more than half dozen or so of Kru men, provided the necessary labor. They were recruited on a regular basis and enabled trade and military action that otherwise would have been impossible. But the recognition that seems obvious was not to be extended. Their homeland was designated the “Windward Coast” because from the perspective of European ships, the stretch of coast was to the windward of the Gold Coast and the Bights of Benin and Biafra. The people who actually lived there and found gainful employment in the occupation of the Atlantic were relegated to a namelessness that was not even assigned to the enslaved and those taken off slave ships whose ethnicity was recognized. In modern scholarship “Windward Coast” predominates in the analysis of the slave trade and its suppression, most notably in the website, database, and academic analysis that derive from “Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade” (www.voyages.org) that has transformed the study of trans-Atlantic slavery but has continued to silence the history of the Kru.

Gunn’s book addresses the fascinating question of how it was that Africans from coastal West Africa from where so many of the enslaved deportees came somehow virtually avoided their own enslavement. He raises the interesting question of how it was that an American colony of former slaves could migrate from the United States to found Liberia and subsequently confiscate the land and sovereignty of people who had successfully resisted being enslaved themselves but rather had become essential to the operation of the slave trade and then its suppression. These contradictions stand out even more starkly because their ethnic name and the language they spoke were coincidentally identical to the occupations that they performed: the Kru were members of ship crews. Yet the term Kru has nothing to do with the English term for sailors, crew. Gunn’s study helps to correct a number of misconceptions about the slave trade and

suppression and rescues the Kru from an obscurity that is certainly not warranted.

There is earlier scholarship on the Kru and their history, but Gunn has superseded that work through his careful search for where the Kru actually migrated, both temporarily and permanently. Within Kru Studies, Gunn's study provides a fresh examination of Kru labor and builds on works by George Brooks, Ronald Davis, Andreas Massing, Merran Fraenkel, Elizabeth Tonkin, Jane Martin, Monica Schuler, and Diane Frost. While previous studies tended to analyze Kru in their homeland or were limited to a single labor community such as Freetown, Gunn analyzes multiple facets of Kru labor on the West African coast, on estates in the Caribbean, in the Royal Navy, and on battlefields throughout the African continent. In short, his research illuminates the truly global scale of their labor experience. Thereby he provides historical perspective to their unusual role in a world that was dominated by the Atlantic slave trade and its suppression.

Paul E. Lovejoy

