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The Rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Western Africa, 1300-1589

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Toby Green is an accomplished travel writer, journalist and historian. His travels in Guinea have inspired within him an avid professional interest in the history of Western Africa. Green was awarded a Leverhulme early career Fellowship at King's College, London, in 2010. He currently lectures on the history of Portuguese-speaking Africa at King's College. Green is the author of two history books: *Thomas More's Magician* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2004) and *Inquisition: The Reign of Fear* (Macmillan, 2007). His most recent offering, *The Rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Western Africa, 1300-1589* (hereafter *Rise of Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Western Africa*), questions traditional approaches to histories of the Atlantic Slave Trade in the 15th and 16th centuries from the perspective of culture.

“West Africa”, according to Green, is the area connecting the Cape Verde Islands to the African coast between the river Gambia and present-day Sierra Leone. Green examines the slave trade in Western Africa and the emergence of the “Pan-Atlantic”: a region involving the Americas, the Iberian regions of Europe and Western Africa. His cultural reading of travellers’ accounts, oral traditions, inquisitorial trials and cultural evidence from linguistics, religion and ritual is original. His interpretation marks a departure from the orthodox literary canon on the slave trade which is based on quantitative data, mercantile activity and one-sided European political involvement. Green’s contribution to knowledge is the argument that culture was a significant driving force behind the Atlantic Slave Trade and the various diasporas of Western Africa.

Green’s challenge to accepted understandings of the 15th and 16th century relations between Africans and Europeans and creolised groups is imparted by *Rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade*. His argument of cultural diversity in the emergent Pan African sphere is based on extensive fieldwork and almost a decade of research in archives in Africa, South America and Europe. Much of this research was done for his PhD thesis on New Christians in West Africa. Green contests that African culture and African participation in the slave trade have been portrayed in a stereotyped way by historians. Examples of this tendency are portrayals of “predatory African kings” selling their neighbours into slavery and European merchants engaging in unequal exchanges on the African littoral. Green articulates a complex development of culture based on encounter, cultural interaction, ritual, religion and commerce both before and after the entry of Europeans into Western Africa.

Green’s maps, glossary, footnoting and indexing are highly professional, although there are no illustrations. His approach eschews a numerical forensic audit of the slave trade, preferring an interpretive approach. Green draws heavily from the secondary literature for his historical background. He, nonetheless, adds fresh insights to the secondary literature in terms of culture and the political developments of the region. *Rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Western Africa* consists of two parts. Part one traces “The development of an Atlantic creole culture in Western Africa, circa 1300-1550” and part two focuses on slavery in relation to creolisation from 1492 to 1589. He defines “creole” as “language of mixed African and European roots developing as a vernacular in Western Africa during the sixteenth century” and “creolisation” as “the cultural and linguistic processes through which creole evolved” (glossary:p. xxii). Green follows a linear “decade-by-decade”

(p. 26) chronology of the history of the slave trade in Western Africa circa 1300 to 1589.

Rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Western Africa begins with a discussion of African agency in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade (p. 20), especially in terms of its “socio-cultural context.” Green’s account of movements of Jolof, Kassarke and Maringo people blends seamlessly with his description of cultural and political changes in a shifting geography. In Chapter 2, he establishes that the Atlantic Slave Trade spread via cultural transmission brought on by religion, ritual, and trade. Chapter 3 plots the settlement of Cabo Verde c.1460 and the development of the Creole world which emerged as a result of cultural “fusion” between Europeans and Western Africans (the Creole culture of Cabo Verde was still fairly new c.1500). He goes on to describe the history of the New Christians and their arrival in Western Africa in the early 16th century. The violent persecutions of the Spanish Inquisition influenced the New Christians’ dealings with West Africa and the later violence of the slave trade. Green’s in-depth cultural reading of Inquisitorial records adds substance to his argument for creolisation from the 1520s to the 1530s (Chapter 4). Green also explores cultural fusion and creolisation as a forerunner to the expansion of the Atlantic Slave Trade (Chapter 5). He corroborates this thesis with case studies of cultural interchange between the Kassarke and the New Christian peoples, demonstrating how: “as these New Christians plied back and forth between the islands and the coast, they took both mixed Caboverdean forms to Africa and African cultural forms to Cabo Verde, and the shared culture of the region emerged” (p. 165). Language was also vital to the development of “the Atlantic cultural and linguistic framework” (p. 103) and “the new language was used as a means of communication and adoption of mixed cultural and ritual forms became a means of social advancement.”

Part two introduces us to Western Africa’s early involvement in early globalisation and the emergent Pan African space that linked Europe, the Americas and West Africa (Chapter 6). Green demonstrates how the “institutionalisation of violence” impacted on nascent Creole culture (p. 90). An account of the rapid expansion of the slave trade and the slave economy that emerged out of it follows from the 1550s to the 1580s (Chapter 7). He also pays attention to the development of caste consciousness in Cabo Verde c.1550-60 as a result of racial mixing brought on by the slave trade. Green’s argument on creolisation is summarized on page 259: “Thus the Atlantic Creole society which had originated in Cabo Verde and became solidified in

a Kriolu language and mixed cultural framework did come to influence West Africa itself, but the nature of this influence depended on other factors. Where worlds of cultural exchange and creolisation opened up, they were predicated on the expansion of trans-Atlantic slavery and dependent on the cultural and social frameworks of African societies, the labour demands of America and the consumer demands of Europe. Over the next two centuries, it was to be this world which would come to characterise the Atlantic as a whole.”

Green’s account of the history of the slave trade in West Africa is necessarily complex because of the complex cultural dynamics between the various groups, European and African, in “pre-Atlantic West Africa” – a geography that would later expand develop into what Green calls the Pan Atlantic. The dust-jacket of *Rise of Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade* proclaims that “Toby Green challenges current quantitative approaches to the history of the slave trade.” To his credit, Green does not harp on the “narrow focus” of numbers, but rather builds on his cultural interpretation of the historical events that predicated the later development of the slave economy of the Pan Atlantic region. Green’s arguments on cultural and political developments are persuasive and articulate.

Green criticises Philip Curtin’s “quantitative approach”, arguing that Curtin’s 1969 census of the slave trade presents a static view of culture.¹ Curtin’s pathfinding study was one of the first to highlight the demographic consequences of the slave trade and the significance of slave mortalities on the Middle Passage. Green makes the following disparaging observation on page 197: “An egregious problem with the quantitative approach to the early trans-Atlantic trade therefore is that it has made many historians obsessed with numbers and encouraged them to forget the social, cultural and political implications in Africa of the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade – it is also that, having encouraged them to focus on numbers, it has encouraged them to focus on the wrong ones.” This is re-emphasized 18 pages further on p. 215, “A touching faith in the reliability of surviving official documentation in forging quantitative data and the data themselves have blinded historians to the considerable evidence which show this data to be extremely incomplete”. He questions the accuracy of the constantly updated Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, Database: www.slavevoyages.org (1999; hereafter *Slave Voyages*). The *Slave Voyages*, begun in the late 1990s under the aegis of David Eltis and David Richardson, is a collaborative dataset of over 35,000 slave voyages based on

1 PD Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A census* (Madison and London, University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).

the research of distinguished scholars like Stephen Behrendt, Jose Capela, Herbert Klein and Manolo Florentino. All things considered, the omission of the *Slave Voyages* from Green's bibliography is irresponsible. Is the passage of millions of slaves from West Africa to the Americas not significant from a cultural point of view? Eltis, after all, wrote in *The Rise of Slavery in the Americas* (2000) that: "An inquiry into deep-seated cultural attitudes on the part of both Europeans and non-Europeans provides just as much insight into the creation of the new Atlantic world as a simple search for the quest of profits",² and that "economic impulses operated within a cultural framework." This cultural framework is explicated by Green. Eltis's focus is different. Why is Green so averse to quantitative approaches to the slave trade? He is of the opinion that quantification of the slave trade is prone to numerical inaccuracy, which he proves in his section on contraband slave traffic in the Cabo Verde. Green argues in favour of a cultural and political interpretation of history, saying "changes in social organization may be better indicators of the impact of the slave trade than the game of guestimating export figures" (p. 87).

Any historian would admit that it is impossible to give an *exact* numerical count of the forced human exodus of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade on the basis of the *Slave Voyages* and official shipping data. The data of the forced migrations of the *Slave Voyages*, however, is an invaluable historical resource. The gathering of quantitative data about specific slave voyages, from whatever sources are available, is a painstaking task. The *Slave Voyages* provides detailed information on slaves, specific voyages, crews, ships, contractors, slave merchants, companies, slave mortalities, duration of voyages, ports of arrival and departure and dates, etc. David Eltis and Herbert S. Klein are two scholars, amongst others, who have demonstrated the usefulness of the database. Green's arguments hold weight because they prove, beyond doubt, the importance of culture in the history of the slave trade. They analyse the pre-European social dynamics which gave rise to creolisation and influenced the development of Western Africa's slave economy. Green provides evidence of a considerable slave trade in western Africa before 1700 (standard histories begin after 1680). The prolific contraband slave trade in 16th century West Africa cannot be traced by the *Slave Voyages* database because contraband slave traffic was not recorded in official port registries. I am certain that a fusion of Green's ideas with data from the *Slave Voyages* would reveal that both historical methodologies are complementary and not mutually exclusive. Green makes

2 D Eltis, *The rise of slavery in the Americas* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 2.

us aware of the necessity of a cultural discourse in the study of the slave trade and the societies involved in the slave economy. He is not only concerned with the buying and selling of human beings, based on numerical data; he is interested in subtler developments of culture and cross-cultural exchange in relation to the business of slavery.

Rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade is intellectual and theoretical. The language Green uses is complex. We come across many historico-anthropological words and concepts such as: “diaspora”, “creolization”, “accommodation”, “flexibility”, “transnational”, “complex patterns”, “conceptual confusions”, “cycles”, “new cycles of violence” and “cultural exchange”, to name a few. The arguments of *Rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade* are speculative and Green often uses the word “may” before presenting an argument. He then makes certain “factual” statements on the basis of these inferential arguments which, although persuasive, is a form of false logic. Here are two examples: “Although as Brooks argues, climatic stresses were key, a part of the success of the Pullo migrations *must have* stemmed from divisions among the Jolof triggered by the Atlantic trade” (p. 83) and “‘the fact’ that this evidence derives from the Kassanke trading port at Bugendo and the denunciation of Garcia as living with the Kassanke King offer strong support for ‘the idea’ that the Kassanke lineage heads had welcomed these traders to Casamance and that the influence and exchange was reciprocal” (p. 157, emphasis added). In conjuring up one specific scenario – De Las Casas’s arrival in Hispaniola in 1499, where the sailors rejoiced at the news that local wars had yielded a good number of slaves – Green writes, “It is not too ahistorical to imagine that exchanges similar to this one observed by Las Casas may have taken place [in West Africa]” (p. 94). This places us in the realm of conjecture (and anachronism) again. Quantitative historians will find it hard to take some of these specious arguments seriously.

Herbert Klein’s *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (2010) is a practical demonstration of how the *Slave Voyages* database can be used as a resource in the study of the Atlantic Slave Trade.³ He even refers to specific voyages in his general survey – while giving a broader picture of the Atlantic Slave Trade from the voluminous data he draws from the *Slave Voyages*. Klein challenges some of the prevailing stereotypes in the historiography of the slave trade. Furthermore, his arguments for the origins, perpetuation and abolition of the slave trade – with specific reference to the data of the *Slave Voyages* – are cogent. Klein

³ H Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge University Press, 2010). 2nd ed.

demythologises some of the stereotypes that have arisen as an emotional response to the atrocities of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. One of these is African agency (Africans were major participants in the slave trade) and the other is the perceived idea that Africans were privy to unequal exchange with Europeans (sophisticated trade networks and markets were in existence before Afro-European trade took shape). Green looks at the cultural implications of slavery and the slave trade in his analysis of the inquisitorial trials and creolisation (Chapter 4) and the relatively large-scale contraband slave traffic between the African mainland and Cabo Verde and other Atlantic islands (Chapter 6). Green, unlike Klein, makes little mention of the culture of slavery and enslavement that prevailed on the Iberian peninsula before European contact with Africa.

Green has a point to prove and, despite a narrative loaded with rhetoric and conjecture, proves it well. His readers should agree that the “activities of individuals were structured through the formation of local and transnational patterns of diaspora trade which did not necessarily fit with the stated philosophies of the new European empires” (p. 283). He demonstrates how the development of these patterns – in conjunction with the cultural and political worlds of African societies – has been grossly underestimated in their relation to the slave trade (pp. 283-284). Histories such as *The Rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Western Africa* are important. They indicate a move away from the technicalities of demographics, commerce and political hegemony to individual human experience and collective culture. Toby Green, therefore, brings us closer to the heart of the West African experience in its relation to the Atlantic Slave Trade.

Image 1: ‘Chafariz del Rei on the Lisbon Waterfront’



Source: The Berardo Collection, Oil on panel, 93x163cm, Unknown Dutch artist, c.1570-80.