

Book Reviews

The United States and West Africa: Interactions and Relations. Edited by Alusine Jalloh and Toyin Falola. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press. 2008. Pp. xii, 477. \$80.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

In the scholarship on West Africa, the United States has largely been relegated to the period of the Atlantic slave trade, the founding of Liberia, and occasionally, discussions of the Cold War. However, scholars have recently begun to illuminate the depth and complexity of U.S.-West African interactions, particularly through the experiences of African Americans and their political and emotional connections to the continent. Alusine Jalloh and Toyin Falola have provided a major push forward for this scholarship with their volume of well-researched and accessible essays on the myriad ties that bind the United States and West Africa. The authors in the volume collectively make a convincing case that U.S.-West African relations are historic and far from insignificant.

Twenty-two short chapters are divided into five parts, with topics that include the effects of Virginia manumission practices on emigration to Liberia; U.S. economic activities in West Africa during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries; West African immigrants in the United States; oil and radical Islam; and the U.S. foreign policy agenda. Although all but three of the chapters discuss the twentieth century, the book's stated aim is the "larger narrative of modern U.S.-West African relationships; the social, cultural, political, and economic bonds that date back for centuries and that have, in recent years, drawn these two world regions into increasingly closer contact" (p. 1). The authors reach beyond the usual discussions of African-American slavery, memory, and migration—although the editors have valuably added to that discussion here—to bring forth West African and American perspectives on U.S.-West African relations and its many consequences.

Two issues in particular make this volume a significant contribution to the literature on the relationship between West Africa and the United States—the fresh perspective it brings to discussions of relations between Liberia and the United States, and the analyses that pin West African economic and political development to U.S. aid.

A wonderful essay by John Wess Grant aptly illustrates the direct consequences of racial politics in the American South on the scale and viability of emigration to Liberia. "As long as members of their families remained enslaved," Wess explains, "free coloreds continued to reject emigration as a practical liberation solution" (p. 61). The Liberian case opens the door to a particular moment in history in which U.S. social practices had lasting consequences for the ways in which a West African community and, ultimately, a nation evolved. White slave holders unintentionally stifled emigration to Liberia; but Liberian settlers also purposefully restricted it to preserve their positions of power and privilege. In a second essay on Liberia, tied to an insightful analysis of Marcus Garvey's relationship with Liberia, Ibrahim Sundiata argues that "far from being the vanguard of the forces of African liberation, the settlers were initially the grateful servitors of whites in the United States. The Americo-Liberian elite were closed, conservative, and imbued with many of the values of Old Dixie" (p. 81).

In the second half of the twentieth century, U.S. aid became a defining aspect of U.S.-West African relations. Similar to the former European colonial powers in Africa, U.S. policy toward Africa evolved around its economic interests and was built on political assumptions that had little grounding in the realities of West African politics. As Karen Bell argues, “The national ideals and values of America, which emphasized democracy, free enterprise, and freedom, were an integral part of the Cold War strategy designed to persuade, influence, and exert a measure of control over non-aligned countries” (p. 126).

An implicit argument in the second half of the volume is that increased U.S. military and economic aid to West Africa remains essential for the region’s development. Olawale Ismail suggests that the “need for American cooperative intervention” (p. 374) is underscored by the security challenges that West African states face. He calls for U.S. involvement to be built around “cooperative intervention,” which differs from neocolonialism in its emphasis on humanitarianism, peace, and security (p. 375). Interestingly, these are similar to the ideals that colonial powers espoused to mask their intentions during their reign over West Africa.

Similarly, Andrew Ewoh points to the benevolence of existing and past U.S. involvement, such as Bill Clinton’s humanitarian agenda (p. 258) and George W. Bush’s commitment to peace and security (p. 259). Ewoh makes the rather interesting argument that “progress toward the spread of democracy in West African states under the Bush administration includes peaceful transitions from one party to another in Senegal, Mali, and Ghana.” Yet he provides no real examples of U.S. assistance bringing these into fruition. In addition, a deeper discussion of the U.S. legacy of limiting freedoms for West Africans, such as economic and political support of the colonial powers, involvement in the ousting of Kwame Nkrumah, and the U.S. occupation of Dakar that began in 1942, would be instructive and lend itself to a fuller analysis.

There is much that will make this text indispensable; yet it has its limits as a comprehensive study of U.S.-West African interactions and relations. The volume’s heavy emphasis on English-speaking West Africa is a weakness that leaves room for broader considerations of the factors shaping U.S.-West African relations. This volume also points to the need for discussions of politics and popular culture to be intertwined in discussions of U.S.-West African relations. For example, African-American popular culture, particularly hip hop, has transformed youth culture throughout West Africa, francophone and anglophone alike. How has this African-American/Western influence shaped perceptions of the United States among West African youth and, for that matter, politicians?

Overall, however, this volume flows with highly relevant and sophisticated analyses. It has laid a strong foundation for future studies of U.S.-West African relations and helped to redefine West Africa as significant rather than tangential to the histories of the United States and the Atlantic World.

BENJAMIN TALTON

Temple University