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Brokers of Change: Atlantic Commerce and Cultures

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**Brokers of Change:
Atlantic Commerce and Cultures
in Pre-Colonial "Guinea of Cape Verde"
June 11-13, 2009, Birmingham, United Kingdom**



The region known in the early modern period as the "Guinea of Cape Verde" stretches between the river Gambia and Sierra Leone. This was one of the first locales in which strategies of brokerage and exchange were employed by both Africans and Europeans in the construction of Atlantic trading systems. It was in this region that Europeans settled for the first time in Africa, adopting African customs and also sharing their own customs with African peoples. This was, moreover, the centre of the trans-Atlantic slave trade during the first century of that trade's operation.

Yet in spite of the historical significance of the region, the historiography of the region is notably sparse. In spite of notable works by Brooks, Havik, Hawthorne, Lopes, Mark, Nafafé and Rodney, an overarching synthesis of the place of the region in the wider Atlantic world and of its significance in the construction of that world remains lacking. This is particularly unfortunate given the rising importance of Atlantic studies in the wider historiography, which makes a proper delineation of the trajectory of the pre-colonial history of the region of the "Guinea of Cape Verde" all the more important and timely. This conference seeks to redress this balance, bringing into focus the region's connection to the wider Atlantic world and also in its inter-regional connections to the Cape Verde Islands.

The conference will take place between June 11-13, 2009 at the Centre of West African Studies at the University of Birmingham -- the only university department in Europe to concentrate on West Africa, and home to the Danford Museum of African artefacts. The conference is organised by two scholars specialising in the field, both based at the University of Birmingham. Suggested accommodation lists will be provided.

The conference is part-sponsored by the British Academy and will be placed on the Academy's Schedule of Events; the British Academy has also expressed firm interest in publishing a volume of essays arising from the conference in its Proceedings Series. Confirmed participants include George Brooks, Zelinda

Cohen, Antonio Correia e Silva, Philip Havik, Walter Hawthorne, Jose da Silva Horta, Richard Lobban, Peter Mark, Gerhard Seibert, Francisco Bethencourt, and P. F. de Moraes Farias.

The conference organisers, Dr. Jose Lingna Nafafe (Sociology, University of Birmingham) and Dr. Toby Green (Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham) welcome proposals for papers from scholars and graduate students. Abstracts, of no more than 200 words, should be sent by email to both Drs Nafafe and Green before the deadline of November 20th 2008: emails: j.lingnanafafe@bham.ac.uk and T.O.Green@bham.ac.uk.

We are particularly interested in addressing the following themes:

- (1) Creolization or Africanization?** The early settlement of Portuguese traders in the rivers of Guinea gave rise to some of the first emergent Creole communities in the Luso-Hispanic empires. But how "Creole" were they? Was the pre-existence of cultural fusion in the Rivers region decisive, or rather was it the adaptiveness of the lancados that counted for more? Can studying these communities assist in the wider study of the interactions of peoples in the early modern Atlantic world, and with the construction of theoretical paradigms of brokerage?
- (2) Slavery in the Rivers of Guinea.** Historians of slavery have traditionally downplayed the numbers of slaves extracted from the rivers' region in the first century of the trans-Atlantic trade. But new research by Mendes and Green might suggest that these views need to be revised. What was the effect of the trans-Atlantic slave trade on the cultures of the region? Did it materially affect them, or are Fage and Thornton correct in stating that this trade merely tapped a pre-existing market? And how might the new slave trade have affected existing concepts of slavery in the region?
- (3) Gender and Power.** The rivers region is notable for its history of female leadership and involvement in commerce from the early modern period right through to the 20th century war of independence. But what was it about the cultures of the rivers' region which gave rise to these tropes? Are their theoretical implications for wider feminist theory which can be derived from studying the agency of women in the rivers' region?
- (4) The Rivers of Guinea, Cape Verde, and the Atlantic World.** Historians of the Atlantic have often downplayed the role of the rivers of Guinea in the Atlantic world. We want to interrogate this question and ask whether a new view of the

rivers' region is required. In particular, can the study of the Rivers of Guinea help to redress the Americanist bias of Atlantic studies? How would studying the role of the Rivers in the Atlantic help in the construction of a picture of an African Atlantic? How does such a picture fit with the role of the Cape Verde Islands? Is such a picture useful?

(5) Hegemony and Brokerage. Study of the rivers region confirms the thesis of Thornton as to the power and agency of Africans in the development of the Atlantic world. How should we use this study to reshape the wider picture of the interactions of Africans and Europeans in the African Atlantic? How important were the factors of economic demand in effecting change in the cultures of the region as opposed to internal factors? Particularly, we are interested in observing how the hegemonic picture of the region may have changed throughout the pre-colonial era, paving the way for colonial subjugation.

(6) Culture and Religion. The rivers region was notable for its religious and cultural pluralism. This was true not only of African peoples but also of European incomers, who included Christians and crypto-Jews in their numbers. But what was the impact of this fusion of religion and culture on the subsequent culture and history of the region? Can the legacy of this hybridity be seen in any contemporary residues in the culture of the "Guinea of Cape Verde."