

***Cloth in West African History*. Colleen E. Kriger. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006. 240 pp.¹**

Reviewed by Beth A. Buggenhagen

As Annette Weiner and Jane Schneider argued so powerfully in their 1989 volume *Cloth and Human Experience* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), Western scholarship had, up to that point, under-analyzed the centrality of cloth and clothing to politics and to processes of social production. Weiner and Schneider recognized that cloth had been largely disregarded by scholars in part because unlike other forms of value—hard objects such as metals, coins, and stones—soft objects like cloth, feathers, and fibers had been considered ephemeral and fragile, poor conveyers of social histories and individual and collective identities. Yet it was cloth’s potential for decay and loss that made it such an ideal object through which to express the continuities and discontinuities of human life. Likewise, Colleen E. Kriger, an historian as well as a fiber artist, places cloth and cloth producers at the center of a global history into which West Africans were drawn, in part through textiles. Eschewing analysis of fibers based on a single linguistic community, locale, or artisan, Kriger argues that attention to the spinning, weaving, dyeing, sewing, and embellishing of cloth reveals a social and spatial complexity of production that spanned geographical regions. Moreover, Kriger emphasizes that it was the visual and tactile acumen of African artisans and consumers that shaped the market for fabrics, yarns, and trimmings into which European and Muslim traders endeavored to enter over the pre-colonial and colonial period.

Kriger shows a deep appreciation for the place of crafts persons in West African history, noting that their labors have not been fully recognized by historians. An important reason is that textiles and the tools to produce them are difficult to trace historically because they are often composed of less durable materials. Moreover, there is a paucity of written archival evidence prior to the 20th century concerning cloth, especially from the perspective of local producers and consumers. Consequently, this volume is unusual in the author’s construction of a wide range of “archives” from which to acquire visual and material evidence. Kriger draws on technical analysis of textiles, archaeological evidence including cloth fragments, and various tools used in textile production, such as ceramic spindle whorls. Such reliance on physical evidence is uncommon among historians. Her “archives” also span museum objects found in collections in Britain, Europe, and North America as well as descriptions of objects that can be found in the published literature. Her documentary evidence includes ethnohistorical photography, oral traditions, linguistics, and botany. The volume is unconventional and possibly unparalleled in its commitment to drawing on various disciplinary practices, debates, and theoretical perspectives from archaeology, art history, and sociocultural anthropology. Such interdisciplinary work is not all together atypical in the field of African Studies.

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Kruger focuses on cloth in the history of the Lower Niger River basin, in present-day Nigeria, and along the Guinea Coast of West Africa. This region was a vibrant center for the manufacture, exchange, and consumption of fabrics produced locally and traded afar through the trans-Saharan trade and merchant ships on the coast. In this respect, the processes involved in textile production across West Africa, including spinning, weaving, dyeing, tailoring, and decorating, point to a global story. To tell this story, Kruger focuses on three distinct examples of textile production: vertical loom or continuous warp loom produced cloth with brocaded and other woven decoration, treadle loom woven strip cloth intended for tailored clothing with embroidered decoration, and resist dyeing of cloth using indigo. Though each of these textiles was produced in the 20th century Kruger intends to use these discussions as frameworks to retrace a longer history of cloth production and consumption in the region.

Kruger contends that West Africa was not merely a “passive receiver” in European trade. In step with recent histories of Africa, she aims to counter the archival evidence that privileges colonialist narratives and concerns to show how West African artisans grappled with external competition long before the 20th century. For example, West Africans were cultivating cotton and manufacturing plain and loom patterned cotton textiles by the 11th century. As cotton production expanded with the growing influence of Islam and the trans-Saharan trade from the 11th to the 15th century and as European traders plied the West coast of Africa, textile producers continued their craft oftentimes incorporating new materials and ideas. As an anthropologist, I would have appreciated greater emphasis on the local voices in the text; how one accomplishes this however, is, as Kruger rightly points out, methodologically difficult. Nevertheless, her argument that colonial trade was fashioned by discerning consumers and artisans is an important one.

Kruger succeeds in reminding scholars that aesthetics played an important part in the history of trade in the region. Although the circulation of textiles in West Africa was largely influenced by “visual preferences,” written sources have proved inadequate for investigating the visual and tactile nature of cloth. Here color photos would indeed add weight to Kruger’s argument. Even so, Kruger’s technical analysis of textiles in West African history is rich; her chapters are replete with descriptions of looms and weaving techniques and how diverse materials, including locally produced as well as imported yarns, were valued by local artisans and consumers over time. Of particular importance is her argument that imported textiles still had to conform to the desires of local markets, that imports were “far from being dramatic new trendsetters” (p. 38-39). Though Kruger’s scholarship seems to be motivated by an appreciation of the social meanings of cloth, there is little attention given to analyzing meaning in a rigorous way, especially in relationship to the circulation of these objects of value exchanged as part of bridewealth or mortuary payments. Perhaps again this is the difficulty of working with the sparse archive of historical evidence concerning cloth. Clearly cloth remains central to West African societies for its potential to express hierarchy and difference, honor, and respectability as well as to translate genealogies into forms of political and religious authority.

Beth A. Buggenhagen is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Indiana University. Her research considers circulation, new and old, in relation to commodities, Islam, gender, translocalism, and recently, visual culture in Senegal and North America. She is presently

completing work on a book manuscript tentatively titled “Prophets and Profits: Gender and Islam in Global Senegal,” which relates the global circuits of Senegalese Muslims in urban Dakar, rural Tuba/Mbacke and the North American cities of New York and Chicago to the politics of social production in Senegal.