**Where the Negroes Are Masters: An African Port in the Era of the Slave Trade.**


Reviewed by Rebecca Shumway, Carnegie Mellon University

With *Where the Negroes Are Masters*, Randy J. Sparks continues to explore the connections between West Africa and the British Atlantic world as he did in his 2004 book, *The Two Princes of Calabar*. The focus of his new book is the town of Anomabo (“Annamaboe”) in the modern Republic of Ghana, which, like the better-known towns of Elmina and Cape Coast, was an active international port during the era of the transatlantic slave trade. The book is addressed to general readers rather than specialists and is mainly a synthesis of published material, supplemented by the records and correspondence of the English trading companies. The work seeks to tell the story of how Anomabo became a central place in the Atlantic world and highlights the commanding roles played by the town’s African merchant elites in their commercial relationships with visiting English and American traders.

This study makes a valuable contribution to Atlantic history by drawing attention to the much-neglected topics of African port towns and the African elites who participated in the transatlantic slave trade and/or gleaned political power from its prevalence in Atlantic Africa. As Sparks correctly insists, the Fante-speaking region—of which Anomabo is a part—was a place where black people and white people forged complex diplomatic and familial relationships, as well as commercial ones, that shaped the overall patterns and structures of the slave trade from the late seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century. More enslaved Africans were sold and embarked from Anomabo than from any other coastal market on what was then known as the Gold Coast, including Cape Coast and Elmina. Several hundred thousand captives sold at Anomabo faced the Middle Passage and, if they survived that, a life of slavery in the Americas. Some of the main beneficiaries of this violent and dehumanizing traffic were the political rulers of Anomabo, including the paramount chief, John Corrantee (Eno Baisee Kurentsi), and his successor, Amoony Coomah (Amonu Kuma). Sparks presents many revealing excerpts from the accounts of English traders in which they express utter exasperation in dealing with Fante men, who seem continually to outsmart them in both trade and diplomacy.

The Fante elites’ sophistication in Atlantic trade and diplomacy, Sparks shows, developed not only from decades of international trade on the Gold Coast but also from their own experiences traveling to Europe and America.

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The book begins with the story of William Ansah Sessarakoo, a young man from Anomabo who traveled in the 1740s to London, where he became known in fashionable circles as the Royal African. Like a small but influential group of his Fante peers, Sessarakoo returned home to the Gold Coast after visiting England and entered the slave-trading business. The emphasis on Africans’ experiences traveling around the Atlantic world recalls the story of two young men from Old Calabar (modern-day Nigeria) who made their way to British America and England in the 1760s and 1770s, the subject of Sparks’s last book.

Sparks’s most original scholarly contribution is his analysis of the practice of pawning on the Gold Coast, much of which appeared in a 2013 article in the *William and Mary Quarterly.* In West Africa during the era of the slave trade, it was customary for African merchants to receive trade goods on credit from slave ship captains and to provide a certain number of family members or dependents as a form of human collateral. The “pawns” were returned to the African merchant upon delivery of the slaves purchased. Sparks explains that English slave ship captains were reluctant to set sail for the Americas with pawns on board who were the friends or relatives of influential Fante elites, even in cases when the pawns had not been redeemed by the African merchant and therefore became the ship captain’s legal property. Instead, the captains would exchange these local people for foreign slaves (duncos) so as not to incur the displeasure of the delinquent Fante merchant, who might prove a valuable trade partner on a future voyage. By highlighting this practice, Sparks reveals the subtler aspects of African power within the commercial exchanges that constituted the slave trade on the Gold Coast and enriches scholarly understanding of the institution of pawning.

Much of the book is less helpful in illuminating the lived experience of the African population of Anomabo, and as a whole it falls short of the Africa-centered analysis suggested by the book’s subtitle, “An African Port in the Era of the Slave Trade.” Sparks does not situate Anomabo within its local African context nearly as well as he locates it within the British Atlantic world. Because the book does not explain Anomabo’s place within the history of the Fante people, readers are deprived of the opportunity to understand the indigenous African foundations of the Anomabo merchant elite’s political and commercial power. Rather than situate his study within the rich historiography of Fante political and cultural history (including works by A. Adu Boahen, Kwame Arhin, Kwame Y. Daaku, Ray A. Kea, David P. Henige, and James R. Sanders, as well as my own), Sparks makes only superficial and sometimes contradictory references to Anomabo’s position within the Fante

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and Gold Coast political and cultural landscape. He variously describes Anomabo’s political status as part of a “Fante . . . confederation,” “Fante nation” (18), or “Fante confederacy” (241), or simply as “independent” (18). There is no description of the nature of the greater Fante polity of which Anomabo was one of many settlements, or how Fante society was changing during this violent and tumultuous era.³

By focusing only on the Anomabo merchants’ interactions with English and American traders, Sparks excludes the essential regional West African

commercial networks and politico-military alliances upon which the African merchants’ elite status depended. He also entirely neglects the foundational work of Akosua Adoma Perbi on the indigenous history of slavery and slave trading within Ghana. While there is some truth to Sparks’s notion that “the residents of Annamaboe were traders down to their fingertips” (3), they were also warriors, diplomats, and practitioners of local belief systems, and these aspects of their history played crucial roles in the rise of Anomabo as a hub of Atlantic trade.

What is lacking in detail about the African context is more than made up for by analysis of English/British and American traders’ activity at Anomabo. An entire chapter is devoted to the Irishman Richard Brew, who lived and traded for most of his life on the Gold Coast and was the subject of Margaret Priestley’s book on the Gold Coast slave trade. Another chapter is devoted to the Rhode Island–based slave trade, which effectively illustrates Anomabo’s North American connections. But there are several other such transatlantic connections—particularly with Barbados and Jamaica—that accounted for more sustained and culturally relevant ties between the Fante and the New World. The final chapter of the book, ominously entitled “Things Fall Apart,” inaccurately attributes the decline of Anomabo in the nineteenth century entirely to the actions of non-Africans: the death of Richard Brew, the American Revolution, and the British Parliament’s abolition of the slave trade. Those familiar with the history of the Gold Coast will know that the single most disruptive event of that period from the Fante point of view was Asante’s invasion and subjugation of the Fante area. Anomabo was the main target of Asante’s invasion in 1806–7, which destroyed the town and placed it under Asante imperial rule for the next twenty years. While it is true that the trade in slaves from Anomabo declined following British abolition in 1807, nothing can compare to the disastrous effects of Asante’s conquest on the commercial and political life of the town. In Sparks’s account, the Asante invasion is briefly described but not given nearly the weight it deserves.

It is not easy to get general audiences to read about small places in Africa that participated in the slave trade, but the African dimensions of Atlantic exchanges are essential to scholarly understanding of Atlantic history. With this book, Sparks will start many much-needed conversations about those African dimensions. The inclusion of a bibliography would have been helpful in this regard to provide readers an accessible introduction to the literature. Towns such as Anomabo were indeed as important to the making of the Atlantic world as port towns in Europe and the Americas, as Sparks insists,

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5 Priestley, *West African Trade and Coast Society*. 
and not only as points of embarkation for the enslaved. Sparks gives us a valuable tool for broadening the scope of discussions about Atlantic history to be more inclusive of Africa and Africans.