

Reluctant Landscapes: Historical Anthropologies of Political Experience in Siin, Senegal.

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Fragmentary time in Atlantic West Africa

François Richard's *Reluctant Landscapes* describes places that refuse to be fully absorbed into political and commercial systems, and where global -isms themselves remain on-going or unresolved (p. 63). Richard's volume is thus compelling for contemporary archaeology not only because it offers a valuable West Africa-centred perspective on the varied impacts of expanding Atlantic trade, but also because it illustrates where global themes like statehood, sovereignty and commodity value are always unsettled.

Reluctant Landscapes offers a long-term history of the West African rural enclave of Siin over the last 500 years, writing from the perspective of socio-economic landscapes but often pivoting to consider peasant farmers as the main actors. Indeed, Richard distances himself somewhat from views of landscapes that focus overmuch on their agency and "plasticity" (p. 39), instead treating landscapes as archival, composed of fragments that include historical documents, oral traditions and archaeological traces. The resulting approach is an "epistemology of fragments", acknowledging that visions of the past will always be incomplete and only partially accessible, via diverse sources that operate on awkward scales. This focus on fragments lends itself to what Richard describes as an "archaeological optic", an analytical lens that takes a broad remit and considers how time works differently in things than, say, in texts (58). Richard's work thus offers a different approach from comparable multi-disciplinary studies of West Africa's *longue durée* (e.g. Stahl 2001), and allows him to address a broad range of themes in the long past of Siin.

His chapters are organised according to several themes: the development of genres of political writing hinging on the inevitable dominance of Atlantic trade; the creation of Siin peasants in the French colonial imagination, including the tensions between fantasised and ‘authentic’ notions of Siin ethnicity; the function of the state in Siin from 1400 CE into the Atlantic Era; and the changing values of commodities and taste in this context. In this long view, Richard weighs the significance of colonialism and global mercantilism but never allows these to be the fulcrum around which West African history pivots; Siin’s landscapes, he argues, are too undisciplined to be so easily or fully co-opted into these new systems. Instead, he directs attention to where centuries of attempts to make sense of the political structure and identity of residents in Siin have run aground on material ambiguities that archaeology can illuminate. Drawing on over a decade’s worth of excavation and survey, Richard illuminates patterns of settlement that articulate rulers’ efforts to accumulate wealth in people (increasing densities of occupation and demographic expansion during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries) rather than imposing wholly new social structures, and politics of spectacle that depended on both trade goods *and* familiar ancestor-based traditions.

Related to this, *Reluctant Landscapes* offers a critique of commodity value within global systems that focuses on how these goods entered hinterland exchange networks. We see “exotics” like alcohol being re-inscribed with meaning as they were incorporated into local regimes of political distribution and consumption. But we cannot simply assume that new goods such as foreign-made beads and textiles replaced longstanding ones in value; Siin’s assemblages do not show this sort of displacement and thus they urge caution in assuming that we can model the behaviours of Atlantic markets.

Reluctant Landscapes is a work of impressive multi-disciplinarity, and raises questions about how its underlying evidence can be pushed further to ask questions about how we approach the emergence of the modern world and its hinterlands. For instance, the author

asks (pp. 190) how things “undercut and expand our interpretive fetishes”, drawing attention to how material properties manifested themselves differently in texts and on the ground.

Alcohol (and its containers) would appear an ideal candidate for tracing experiences of food culture and moral/religious judgments across diverse historical registers, especially given its archaeological and historical prevalence in this book. Richard does consider how colonial sensibilities may have coloured representations of alcohol consumption in Siin, and argues that the consistencies among these accounts make them useful in archaeological interpretation. But a greater interrogation of the epistemologies behind these particular fragments (What were the contexts of the ethnographic/historical reports of alcohol consumption? How did they relate drinking to other Siin activities considered unruly? Did these observations change over time and across networks?) would elaborate on precisely the sort of exploration into interpretive fetishes described above.

Richard similarly argues (p. 58) for “scrambling boundaries between disciplines” to produce his archaeological optic – a pervasive and useful call within African studies as a whole. An undisciplined approach to primary sources can be exceptionally illuminating, but when dealing with *secondary* sources an awareness of the disciplinary and epistemological frameworks underpinning these is essential. At times in *Reluctant Landscapes*, it is challenging to distinguish among sources – their character and epistemologies – without being familiar with West Africa, and so a close attention to referencing is necessary when reading.

One final, related point concerns the description of landscapes as archives throughout the book (e.g. pp. 14, 36, 41, 58, 60). This is certainly a useful way of thinking of the “epistemology of fragments” that Richard describes, and draws attention to the different temporalities at work in these fragments. Richard is also not the only West Africanist to link archives and landscapes (Logan 2016), and one wonders whether we are seeing a trend

unfolding. This formulation is intriguing, because it implies a greater analytical burden for archaeologists, if taken seriously. Archival work entails in-depth critical attention to the systems of knowledge production and biographies associated with each object, and to where power inheres in the archive's assemblage and accessibility, including its life outside the archive. If Richard is indeed suggesting this as an approach, it would demand archaeologists engaging more rigorously with primary historical sources, and possibly even encourage different genres of archaeological writing to deal with the diverse epistemologies at work – both of which are interesting prospects.

In sum, *Reluctant Landscapes* presents a detailed view of the last five centuries within a West African enclave, without treating its incorporation into Atlantic imperialism as inevitable. François Richard thus offers useful perspectives on long-term experiences of capitalism and mercantilism in Africa that will be of interest to archaeologists of the recent and contemporary past. Moreover, he reminds us that, while we may be accustomed to thinking of modernity as “mega”, some places refused that sort of intrusion and disclose more ambiguous stories of politics, economy and globalism.

References

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- Stahl, A. B. 2001. *Making History in Banda: Anthropological Visions of Africa’s Past*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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