

REVIEWS

Claude Meillassoux. *The Anthropology of Slavery: The Womb of Iron and Gold*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1991. 421 pp.

Yet paradoxically, it is in Africa, the last of the continents to supply the slave trade, that some seek an explanation for the origins of slavery on the basis of an endogenous development of societies which are still suspected of primitivism and isolation and which are, therefore, laboratories for retarded fantasies (p. 21).

As the above quote indicates, Claude Meillassoux, the renowned French Marxist anthropologist, takes aim at the latest theories of the origins of African slavery, in particular the work of Miers and Kopytoff. *Slavery in Africa*, an extensive examination of slave institutions in Africa by Miers and Kopytoff, concludes that the slavery in Africa is the result of being kinless or an alien in a society based on blood or supposed blood ties. Meillassoux not only disagrees with their conclusion, but quite effectively shows that slavery is the antithesis of kin-based society, and the very fact of human beings in a society working for the profit of other human beings means that a domestic economy, where distribution is based on blood ties has become or is in transition towards class society, based on exploitation.

Thus, if slavery is the extension of kinship that Miers and Kopytoff say it is, then, argues Meillassoux, one cannot find its origins in domestic societies. According to Meillassoux, the societies in West Africa that developed slave-based economies were not isolated from the rest of the world but had "been involved, closely or from a distance, in world-scale upheavals and in particular in merchant revolutions, often against their will." (p. 40) To understand the origins of African slavery one must look at world history and its relationship to Africa.

Meillassoux carefully and with great skill dismantles piece by piece the arguments of Miers and Kopytoff and others who believe that slavery within Africa developed on its own without an outside stimulus. He continues giving his own theories concerning the development of slavery in Africa, and this, I believe, is where he gets into trouble. First, he acknowledges in a few places that he is primarily looking at very centralized societies in West Africa, but then goes on to make certain broad generalizations that clearly could not apply to other parts of Africa. East Africa, for example, is an area where domestic slavery is an adaptation of the 19th century and under very different circumstances

from those found in the West African Islamic empires during the Middle Ages.

The other serious problem with this book is the author's analysis of the role of African women in the development of slavery. He has been criticized time and again by women anthropologists and others for stating that the major role of women in African societies is that of reproducer. When looking at slavery and the enslavement of women, he is forced to concede that, in fact, the reproductive rate of slave women is so low that they cannot even reproduce themselves. He argues that this is a mitigating factor in the transformations of slave societies into military powers. The constant need to reproduce the slave work force, something slave women cannot or will not do, forces slave societies to raid and conquer other people, thus developing their military. Yet he never gives up on his tired argument of African women's primary role as reproducer. Women that are not slaves, are now, in slave society, primarily reproducers. This could be true when referring to upper class women, but unless the society is totally divided into noble and slave, there is a large section of the population where women are both producers and reproducers.

Coupled with his view of African women as primarily reproducers is his ahistorical view of women in African history. He applies historical materialism to every facet of his analysis save gender. Women start out as dependents in African domestic society and remain the same under slave society. In fact Meillassoux states:

Protected and thus in a position of submission in her own community, alien and exiled among her affines, assigned to servant's work, the woman's situation in domestic society was a forerunner of slavery. (p. 103)

He drags out that tired, old, male anthropological argument about wife capture. In fact, he argues that wife capture was the impetus to the transition of matrilineal society to patrilineal. There is an element of truth to this only in matrilineal societies, such as the Yao of Southern East Africa, who had already started the transition to a slave economy. It was certainly not a common feature of matrilineal societies wherein the need to incorporate "alien" men was important, not the converse.

While Meillassoux claims to be the great defender of the role of African women he lets his Western male prejudices show in such statements as: "Not only were women considered physically superior to men [for slavery], but they had the additional advantage of being more docile" (p. 111). I am sure the European colonists would have had a different opinion of the "docility" of African women, especially after the Ibo women's revolts or the Kom women's rebellions or the actions of Kikuyu women in Kenya. It is always disappointing when well-

respected African scholars are able to criticize the Eurocentric analysis of others, but don't recognize their own inability to break with their western concept of gender and often force their biases onto African societies.

The book, as I hope the above review indicates, is controversial and important for all African scholars to read. Meillassoux discusses his analysis and critiquing of other theories in the beginning of the book. He then divides the book into three major parts: first is "Womb: the Dialectic of Slavery" in which he talks about the theoretical concept of slavery (especially in the West African context); the second part is titled "Iron: Aristocratic Slavery" where he analyzes the history of the various slave states in West Africa; the third part is "Gold: Merchant Slavery" where he shows the transition of West African slavery into chattel slavery and the accompanying changes in Africans' lives. Meillassoux lays his argument at our feet, clearly and strongly. We may not always agree with him, but he forces us to examine and re-examine established theories on African history.

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