

BOOK REVIEW

Muslim Intellectuals and the Slave Trade in West Africa

Ransoming Prisoners in Precolonial Muslim Western Africa

Jennifer Lofkrantz. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2023.
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What are the best ways to understand ransoming practices and the role of ransoming and violence in the economics of captivity, enslavement, and political reform? What are the links between historical and contemporary ransoming practices and Islamic wars; between ransoming, jihad, state formation, and social, ethnic, economic, and religious formations; the ideological justification of kidnapping and ransom; and the antislavery basis of Muslims revolutions in nineteenth-century West Africa?

In *Ransoming Prisoners in Precolonial Muslim Western Africa* Jennifer Lofkrantz offers an intellectual history of these questions by focusing on how West African Muslim intellectuals discussed captivity, slavery, and the slave trade. The author also assesses how Muslim intellectuals utilized ransoming as one of the tools with which they strove to curb the enslavement and sale of freeborn Muslims. This solidly researched and clearly articulated study breaks new ground in various fields, including West African intellectual history, Islamic traditions regarding slavery, enslavement, and ransoming, and how all of the above influenced the region's Islamic revolutionary era from 1650 through the 1850s. The book builds on existing works that detail how African Muslims scholars were fully engaged with the Atlantic and African slaving systems and wished to reform it, albeit to protect their followers. But while other writers tend to focus on how antislavery has been a powerful motive in Islamic West African religious history, specifically in the outbreak of jihads along the Sahel from Senegambia to Somalia between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, Lofkrantz's discussion of African contributions to global political philosophy and intellectual history on ransoming is novel. It shows that African Muslim scholars were interested in reforming slavery and eager to prevent enslavement in Islamic societies.

Lofkrantz's rich text is supported by extensive research and a wide range of original source material, including Islamic texts from North and West Africa and the Middle East, commentaries and government and missionary archives in Nigeria, the UK, Niger, and France, as well as oral traditions about ransoming — both those preserved in published local histories and others collected by the author.

Lofkrantz central thesis is that Muslim authorities did not reject the enslavement of “bad” Muslims (those accused of diverging from the authorities of Islam) or unbelievers. Ransoming was a solution to a related problem: how to respond to the enslavement of a “freeborn Muslim.” Drawing on diverse politico-legal traditions, from the Qu’ran to the teachings and analyses of



Islamic laws and traditions by the scholars, jihad was justified to spread Islam and for political reform, which often included redeeming enslaved Muslims through ransom, and punishing those engaged in such illegal operations.

West African Muslim scholars like Ali Maghili, Ahmad Baba, and the Fodio family were products of their societies and eras, and captured prevailing ideas around them. They engaged in a vociferous debate and disagreed (sometimes sharply) on the meaning or definition of a good Muslim — involving the related issues of the construction and reconstruction of racial, religious, and ethnic identities — which served to distinguish insiders who were in principle protected from enslavement or due for ransom from “others” who were legitimately enslavable and could not be ransomed, as well as about the validity of jihad. One of Lofkrantz’s most persuasive arguments revolves around the extent to which relatively small groups of West African Muslim intellectuals were able to impose themselves on public opinion and on states, as policy makers and administrators.

The book shows how West African scholars offered a range of legal and political opinions that paralleled their more celebrated European and American contemporaries in providing the intellectual basis for political and religious revolutions in Europe and the Americas. The direct parallels between the rise of the Protestant revolution and “national” churches in Europe and Ahmad Baba’s attack on Morocco for privileging race and Northern African Islam over Muslims in West Africa, and the near simultaneity of the French and Haitian revolutions and the formulation of Fodio’s policies in Hausaland cannot be ignored.

Ransoming Prisoners is divided into five chapters arranged chronologically. Chapter One discusses West African Muslim intellectual backgrounds and scholars’ discourse on slaving operations with emphasis on distinguishing legal from illegal enslavement and the value of ransoming as a remedy against illegal enslavement between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. The discourse draws on the sociology of West African societies, their laws and ethics, and explores the insertion of West Africa into Atlantic and Mediterranean discussions about the rights of citizens and the duties of the state. Chapters Two to Four are the most substantial part of this work. With a focus on Northern Africa, Chapter Two addresses historical ransoming operations in Afro-European relations with an emphasis on tension between Christian Europe and Islamic Africa. Lofkrantz details the religious, economic, and territorial foundations of captivity, enslavement, and ransoming relations, showing how kidnapping and ransoming served as tools of imperialism, territorial control, commercial struggle, religious war, labor recruitment, ethnonationalism, and investment aimed at making profit from exchanging captives.

Chapter Three focuses on Sokoto and explores the intellectual contributions of the Fodiye family: their education, intellectual background, and connections within the wider Muslim scholarly tradition going back to the fifteenth century. In it, Lofkrantz considers how the application of Islamic laws — such as the state offering to cover the cost of ransoming poor Muslim captives and barring the ransom of enemy prisoners — influenced Sokoto policies on slavery and ransoming. The chapter highlights some of the challenges facing the caliphate in its inability to stop “illegal enslavement,” including disagreements among the Fodiye and some of their contemporaries on how best to categorize a “Muslim” in order to understand and enforce the law, and the limits of an ideology when faced with political realities.

Chapter Four pivots to the Umariyan State and positions its policies in relation to influences from Sokoto and elsewhere within a longer history of Islamic reform and jihads. Lofkrantz argues that the Umariyan state constituted a continuation of sociopolitical reforms in Upper Guinea that dated as far back as the sixteenth century Futa Toro, aimed to protect freeborn Muslims from violence associated with the collapse of Old Mali and Songhai, the Atlantic slave trade, and European imperial expansion through Senegal and Sierra Leone. Chapter Five explores ransoming negotiations and tactics, from the point of captivity to the release of captives, detailing the agency of captives, diplomatic and personal negotiations, the calculation of prices, the role of the state in arranging ransoming, and responses to specific cases of failed negotiations.

This book will be valuable to teachers and students seeking a unique perspective on the religious basis of warfare, violence, captivity, enslavement, and ransoming in Africa and in the Islamic world more broadly. Lofkrantz offers an appealing insight into precolonial African philosophers and political reformers which will help the ongoing work of breaking Europe and the Americas' mental hold over "enlightened" ideas about citizenship, state practice, and reform.