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RESEARCH ARTICLE

'For King and Empire': The Changing Political, Economic, and Cultural Identities of Kru Mariners in Atlantic Africa, 1460–1945

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Abstract

This article traces histories of the Kru in West Africa from the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries, arguing that divergent identities of fifteenth- to eighteenth-century Kru canoers became unified when that unified identity was necessary for maintaining political, economic, and cultural autonomy during and after the slave trade. In conjunction with earlier multilingual work on the Kru mariners of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this article seeks to place the narrative of Kru identity and labor in a larger context of maritime history across the region at large. This article argues that the Kru relied on longstanding maritime traditions from localized groups to capitalize on the need for work and cash in a capitalist economy driven by growing European imperialism. The historical narrative of Kru maritime power shows how local and global identities in Atlantic Africa shifted in response to exploitation, blurring the lines between response and resistance.

Keywords: West Africa; Liberia; Atlantic World; labor; identity; accommodation to colonialism; microhistory

From 1939 to 1944, Benjamin Johnson, a West African Kru man, was employed in the Royal Merchant Navy as a donkeyman, a sailor who tended the auxiliary 'donkey' boilers that powered winches and capstans aboard the vessel.[1] Not much remains of Johnson's record, except for his UK identification card and a photograph of him from his time living in Wales. A banner at the top of the card reads 'For King and Empire'. Johnson was one of the last Kru men to be specifically identified as a mariner and hired on a European ship because of traditional seafaring skills associated with his ethnic identity as Kru. His labor, like that of thousands of his compatriots from the 'Kru coast' of Liberia, was integral to the maritime power of the British empire. Born in 1892, Johnson was the son of a Kru chief named John Johnson. He would have grown up in an established system of maritime commerce, skills which he used as a sailor first on the Elder Dempster steamship line, and then as a soldier in the Merchant Navy.[2] Johnson's role was the culmination of 500 years of Kru maritime skills being mobilized, first by other Europeans, and then by the British in the pursuit of imperial power. Over the course of the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries, the Kru became a unified group, defined not only through external occupational markers, but

[1]Historic England, 'Forgotten seafarers of the First World War', The Historic England Blog (https://heritagecalling.com/2018/06/05/forgotten-seafarers-of-the-first-world-war), 5 Jun. 2018.

[2]Historic Dock Project, 'African connections', (https://www.historicdockproject.co.uk/projects/african-connections); R. Eversley, 'Benjamin Johnson Facebook post', (https://www.facebook.com/groups/thekrios/posts/2524777944501368), *Facebook: The Krios Dot Com*, 19 Jun. 2020.

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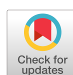

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also through internal social structures. Johnson's story is one example of how ubiquitous Kru mariners would become in the maritime worlds of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, working not only on the West African littoral, but serving in merchant navies, fighting in the world wars, and staffing ships for international steamer lines.

This article uses the microhistories of Kru laborers like Benjamin Johnson to illustrate how global processes affected labor and maritimity throughout West Africa. It was long argued that West Africa had no maritime history apart from Europeans. While this has since been challenged, many historians still conceive of West African maritime activity as originating out of external pressure from Europeans.[3] On the contrary, West African maritime traditions informed the ways that Europeans entered maritime trade with the continent in the first place. The knowledge and skills possessed by the Kru and other indigenous seafaring groups existed for centuries prior to European arrival. Transforming identities and roles are best understood as intensified responses to commerce and interaction with Europeans, and claims to authority over their own coastal trade and labor. Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Kru exploited their earlier positions as go-betweens to obtain greater status, money, and familial power. This article argues that the Kru relied on longstanding maritime traditions from localized, disparate groups to capitalize on the need for work and cash in a global, capitalist economy driven by growing European imperialism. Kru identity was a shifting product of involvement in canoeing, maritime labor, the slave trade, the antislavery patrols and blockades, and American colonization of Liberia, among other factors.

In conjunction with earlier work on the Kru mariners of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this article seeks to place the narrative of Kru identity and labor in a larger context of maritime history across the region at large. Recent work on Kru mariners has mostly focused on documenting Kru roles in European commerce, the global Kru labor diaspora, and Kru participation in European and American naval action against the slave trade.[4] Understanding Kru identity and maritime skill can better illuminate the importance of West Africans in global maritime history. Thus, this article is less concerned with what the Kru did, which is well-documented, than with why and how they developed new labor identities in conjunction with resistance and aid to colonial power in seafaring and commerce. Many of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century groups of local mariners who became Kru were defined not by their own traditions, language, and records, but by the observations and categorizations of Europeans.[5] Colonial opinions of the Kru and willingness to hire Kru labor was based on both perceived and actual maritime traditions that predated European arrival. In turn, the Kru institutionalized models of maritime trade and labor in ways that had

[3]J. P. Chauveau, 'Une histoire maritime africaine est-elle possible? Historiographie et histoire de la navigation et de la pêche africaines à la côte occidentale depuis le xve siècle (Is a maritime history of africa possible? Historiography and history of African navigation and fishing on the west coast since the 15th century)', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 26:101/102 (1986), 173–235.

[4]G. E. Brooks, *The Kru Mariner in the Nineteenth Century: A Historical Compendium* (Newark, DE, 1972); D. Chappell, 'Kru and Kanaka: participation by African and Pacific Island sailors in Euro-American maritime frontiers', *International Journal of Maritime History,* 6:2 (1994), doi.org/10.1177/084387149400600205; J. L. Hargrove, 'Krumen and the suppression of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade from West Africa', *Liberian Studies Journal,* 36:2 (2011), 28. For the most recent work on the Kru see J. Gunn, *Outsourcing African Labor: Kru Migratory Workers in Global Ports, Estates and Battlefields until the End of the 19th Century* (Berlin, 2021). Gunn discusses Kru labor in the Indian Ocean and across Africa, and a primary source letter from 1819 originated at 'Krooman's River' in India, showing how Kru mariners were vital to European shipping and Indian Ocean commerce as well. (M. Hamilton, 'Extract from Mrs. Hamilton's letter dated Krooman's River, New Latakkoo', *Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle and Religious Intelligencer* [1819], 767.)

[5]This even includes the name 'Kru': the term they used for themselves was Krao or Klao. See also: K. H. B. Keefer, 'Group identity, scarification, and Poro among liberated Africans in Sierra Leone, 1808–19', *Journal of West African History,* 3:1 (2017), doi.org/10.14321/jwestafrihist.3.1.0001; P. Mark, '"Portuguese" architecture and Luso-African identity in Senegambia and Guinea, 1730–1890', *History in Africa,* 23 (1996), doi.org/10.2307/3171940; J. Sidbury and J. Cañizares-Esguerra, 'Mapping ethnogenesis in the early modern Atlantic', *The William and Mary Quarterly,* 68:2 (2011), doi.org/10.5309/willmaryquar.68.2.0181.

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not existed prior to European ingress. This combination and amalgamation of ethnicity, identity, and maritime occupation reflects similar trends in other geographically and ethnically defined laborers such as the lascars in South Asia and the kanakas in the Pacific.[6]

Regions like South Asia and the Pacific have long been defined as 'maritime', but West Africa also fostered longstanding maritime traditions.[7] The roles of the Kru in coastal mediation using canoes, maritime labor on European ships, and other forms of transient maritime labor were part of a larger regional tradition of seafaring, coastal trade, and aquatic commerce. European and American need for labor within nineteenth century global maritime commerce helped cement the importance of Kru and other contracted laborers. Thus, transforming identities and economic or cultural roles are best understood not as great divergences from precolonial patterns, but as 'intensifications of adaptive responses' leading to a growing integration of various regions and groups of people into more hegemonic identities from both external pressures and internal motives.[8] The historical narrative of Kru maritime power shows how local and global identities in Atlantic Africa shifted in response to exploitation, blurring the lines between response and resistance.

Kru ancestors in West Africa

Krumen, Kruman, Crew, Crewmen, Kroo, Krooboys, Krou, Kroumen, Kroah, and Kru were all names used to refer to this group of mariners. Initial European definitions of the Kru cite them as coming from five towns on the Liberian coastline.[9] It is likely that a mass migration in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries drove Kru-speaking groups to migrate toward the coastal areas of Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire.[10] By the early nineteenth century, the English term 'Kru' had come to refer not just to a specific group of people from coastal Liberian towns, but to a type of laborer who worked in maritime trades across the world, especially in Liberia and Sierra Leone.[11] In the twentieth century, Kru mariners like Benjamin Johnson migrated across the globe working for European and American shippers and navies.

Europeans were able to enter Africa and trade in the mid-fifteenth century partly because of their reliance on canoe traders to surmount coastal surf. Much of this trade was abetted by brokers and go-betweens, including canoers, like the Kru, as well as those in landed communities and further into the interior.[12] The centrality of Kru mariners to the West African maritime world was

[6]Kanaka is now regarded as an offensive term in Australian English to refer to the descendants of South Sea Islanders whom Australians forced into labor on the continent in the nineteenth century. However, they were also active in maritime trade in the Pacific. See Chappell, 'Kru'.

[7]Chappell, 'Kru', 85; C. P. Burrowes, *Between the Kola Forest and the Salty Sea: A History of the Liberian People Before 1800*, (Monrovia, 2016); R. Smith, 'The canoe in West African history', *The Journal of African History,* 11:4 (1970), 515–33; P. C. W. Gutkind, 'The canoemen of the Gold Coast (Ghana): a survey and an exploration in precolonial African labour history (les piroguiers de la côte de l'or [Ghana]: enquête et recherche d'histoire du travail en Afrique précoloniale)', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines,* 29:115/116 (1989), 339–76.

[8]F. G. Richard, 'Thinking through "vernacular cosmopolitanisms": historical archaeology in Senegal and the material contours of the African Atlantic', *International Journal of Historical Archaeology,* 17:1 (2013), 47; Sidbury and Cañizares-Esguerra, 'Mapping', 200; G. E. Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society, and Trade in Western Africa, 1000-1630* (New York, 1993); C. Coquery-Vidrovitch and P. E. Lovejoy, *The Workers of African Trade* (New York, 1985), 44: 'European contact did not create new structures but advanced those already in place'.

[9]Brooks, *The Kru Mariner,* 78 and 88.

10See Brooks, *The Kru Mariner*, 100-end, esp. 107 and 112; P. E. H. Hair, *Africa Encountered: European Contacts and Evidence, 1450–1700* (New York, 1997), 51–2. Burrowes, *Between the Kola Forest,* 139–158.

[11]Brooks, *The Kru Mariner*, 107.

[12]The landlord-stranger model of interaction for European-West African relations prior to the eighteenth century is a major argument put forth by (among others) G. E. Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers*; J. Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800* (2nd edn, Cambridge, 1998). On 'canoemen', prominent cases are the Luso-Africans (see Mark, '"Portuguese" architecture and Luso-African identity'), and the Canoemen of Ghana and the Gold Coast: see Gutkind, 'The canoemen of the Gold Coast'; Smith, 'The canoe in West African history'; and V. Unwin,

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first documented by European writers, who called them Kru as early as the 1780s.[13] However, the Kru and other canoers like them influenced Atlantic commerce and culture before the first Portuguese voyages to the Liberian coast in the 1460s. The Portuguese relied on local canoers to trade with their seagoing ships and to work as pilots, navigators, porters, sailors, and other laborers at sea.[14] Largescale migration and commerce patterns arose out of European integration into African trade networks, especially as a result of the slave trade's increase in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[15] Despite making extensive voyages to the West African coast, early European interlopers like the Portuguese do not mention the word 'Kru' specifically, though they did use canoers as trade brokers and describe these canoes in similar terms as contemporary Kru canoes.[16]

By the sixteenth century, the English, Dutch, French, and other Europeans had broached the western coast. A few writers of this time mention the Grebo in the area of Liberia, but do not emphasize the role of Kru mariners like nineteenth-century British sources do.[17] Dutch writer Pieter de Marees describes West African canoers using a system similar to the later Kru headman system, wherein younger men would seek migrant employment on ships in the gold trade, gather wealth, and return home.[18] In addition to sailing up and down the coast for local trade, canoers also approached European vessels at a distance from the shore and served as brokers between the land and arriving ships.[19] De Marees also references Africans trading domestically via maritime pathways, describing how palm wine or palm oil reached the coast from the interior.[20] These canoers' seafaring skills were remarkable from a nautical perspective, given that their surfboats often measured less than a meter deep and were able to surmount waves of five or more meters.

Prior to nineteenth-century employment by the British, the heyday of Kru maritime identity, coastal communities and mariners identified under a common umbrella at least in terms of language, if not in culture and history. A 1588 English record of West Africa depicts the Kru coast of Liberia under the term 'Crua', reflective of the Kru term for themselves: Krao.[21] An early English reference to the Kru occurs in Thomas Winterbottom's 1803 account of Sierra Leone.

'Facilitating early modern globality: uncovering the role and status of the remadores on the Gold Coast', *Global Histories: A Student Journal*, 3 (2017), doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2017.116.

[13]I. K. Sundiata, 'The rise and decline of Kru power: Fernando Po in the nineteenth century', *Liberian Studies Journal*, June 1975, 27.

[14]G. H. T. Kimble (ed. and trans.), *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis by Duarte Pacheco Pereira* (Hakluyt edn, London, 2010); P. de Marees, *Description and historical account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea*, (Oxford, 1987 [1602]), 116; Gutkind, 'The canoemen of the Gold Coast'.

[15]For examples of this largescale migration and archaeological signatures of change related to increased European colonization and enslavement, see C. Decorse (ed.), *West Africa during the Atlantic Slave Trade: Archaeological Perspectives* (London, 2001).

[16]Hair, *Africa Encountered*, 49. One Portuguese author described West African canoes as being shaped 'like weavers' shuttles', a shape that is ubiquitous in later drawings and photographs of Kru surfboats. See Gunn, *Outsourcing African Labor,* 35, and Kimble, *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis,* 110. See also J. L. Tokpa, 'Une main-d'oeuvre internationale en Côte D'ivoire au début du siècle: les Kroumen, 1893–1993', *Africa: Rivista Trimestrale Di Studi e Documentazione Dell'Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente*, 53:3 (1998), 320: 'Enfin, les Anglais n'ont ni été les premiers, ni les seuls à commercer avec ce peuple. En effet, les Portugais furent les premiers à sillonner, après le franchissement du Cap-Bojador en 1434, la côte dite des Krou entre 1460 et 1462. Si Pedro de Sintra fut le premier à atteindre Béréby, [Joao] Senterem et Pedro de Escobar, eux, dépassèrent le Cap des Palmes et explorèrent la côte orientale des Krou'. Kru traditions also emphasize the Portuguese as their first European trading partners (see Gunn, *Outsourcing African Labor,* 3).

[17]Hair, *Africa Encountered,* 227. Hair writes that the English and Germans both mention a form of the Grebo. English voyager Towerson also mentions beginnings of the Kru language family in the sixteenth century (see E. S. Donno, *An Elizabethan in 1582: The Diary of Richard Madox, Fellow of All Souls* [Hakluyt edn, London, 1976]).

[18]Marees, *Description of Guinea*, 27.

[19]*Ibid.*,45.

[20]*Ibid.*, 64.

[21]Gunn, *Outsourcing African Labor,* 3: citing J. Welsh, 'A voyage to Benin' in R. Hakluyt (ed). *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* (London, 1904).

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Winterbottom's description of 'Kroo' work patterns and temporary labor is the same as those of coastal people described by earlier authors like De Marees and Portuguese captain Pedro de Sintra.[22] In the account, Winterbottom mentions a mariner of the Kru coast who had red curly hair and freckles, suggesting that those on the coast had consistent, close contact with Europeans prior to 1803 when the account was written.[23] Winterbottom also suggests that the people on the Kru coast were not members of one unified cultural group, but belonged to different cultural or religious groups, since they had different 'fetishes' from each other.[24] These differences noted by Winterbottom could either be taken to mean differences in religious objects and material cultures, or differences in certain ritual practices. Reportedly, many Kru people did not convert to Christianity prior to the nineteenth century like other indigenous Liberians. It was more common for diasporic Kru mariners to convert to Christianity while in naval or shipping service than it was for them to convert at home on the Kru coast. Prior to this point, they seem to have held traditional religions instead, showing a commitment to more local identities.[25] Micro-level regional variations in ritual and religion reflect the various divisions among different Kru-speaking and Kru-identified groups, or *dakwe*.[26] Their strongest affiliations were to their regional polities, kinship and familial-based groups called *dako*.[27] However, regional and polity differentiation does not rule out a common Kru and maritime identity in this area; in fact, sixteenth-century Europeans noted commonalities in language and culture among those living and trading on the Kru coast.[28] Being and becoming 'Kru' was a larger occupational and ethnic identity alongside localized identities; increased employment by European ships by the eighteenth century would result in stronger claims to common identities around maritime labor.

United by the slave trade: the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the term 'Kru' was broadened from its initial geographic and ethnic limits to include those who participated in maritime wage labor.[29] By the eighteenth century, European reliance on canoers was complicated by the issue of enslavement; free canoers were more expensive to hire, whereas enslaved mariners could be underpaid or unpaid.[30] Canoers often went on strike, destroyed property, or engaged in other forms of resistance to European exploitation.[31] It was around this time, prior to abolition of the slave trade, that Kru

22See Kimble, *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis;* G. R. Crone and R. Hakluyt (eds.), *The Voyages of Cadamosto and Other Documents on Western Africa in the Second Half of the Fifteenth Century* (Hakluyt edn, London, 1937); Marees, *Description of Guinea.*

[23]T. M. Winterbottom, *An Account of the Native Africans in the Neighbourhood of Sierra Leone*, Vol. 1 (London, 1803), 193. This mariner was one of a few mentioned. Others have dealt extensively with the Luso-African traders, *lançados,* and *tangomaos,* descendants of Portuguese navigators, who lived across West Africa and had become incorporated into African communities by this time. See Mark, '"Portuguese" architecture and Luso-African identity'; J. S. Horta, 'Evidence for a Luso-African identity in Portuguese accounts on Guinea of Cape Verde (sixteenth-seventeenth centuries)', *History in Africa*, 27 (2000), doi.org/10.2307/3172109; A. Ito, 'Usos, reusos, e abusos: atravessando "fronteiras" e "Luso-Africanidades" nas historiografias de Angola, Cabo Verde, e Guine Bissau para os seculos xv, xvi, et xvii', *Revista Brasileira de Estudos Africanos*, 4 (2020), doi.org/10.22456/2448-3923.94704.

[24]Winterbottom, *Account*, 235.

[25]Gunn, *Outsourcing African Labor,* 112.

[26]For example, see E. Tonkin, 'Sasstown's transformation: the Jlao Kru 1888–1918', *Liberian Studies Journal*, 1978, 1–34, and E. Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge, 1995) for discussion on the Jlao Kru at Sasstown. Other Kru groups are discussed in Gunn, *Outsourcing African Labor*, 23.

[27]J. Martin, 'Krumen "down the coast": Liberian migrants on the West African coast in the 19th and early 20th centuries', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 18:3 (1985), doi.org/10.2307/218646.

[28]See the account of the area between Cape Mount and Cape Palmas in Donno, *An Elizabethan in 1582.*

[29]T. Ludlam, 'An account of the Kroomen, on the coast of Africa', *African Repository & Colonial Journal*, 1:2 (1825), 43–4. See also Tokpa, 'Une main d'oeuvre internationale'.

[30]Coquery-Vidrovitch and Lovejoy, *The Workers of African Trade*, 30.

[31]*Ibid.*, 35.

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mariners in West Africa made their first unified claim to a common identity: possession of a facial tattoo that was known to Europeans as an ethnically Kru mark. Secondly, Kru mariners began to define their identities around maritime labor and employment for European ships, especially for the British and American antislavery patrols. As scholars on the Atlantic world have mentioned, 'many ethnic identities scholars have long read back onto the coastal regions of West Africa were products of slavery and diaspora'.[32] The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Kru demonstrate this increased ethnicization as result of European exploitation.

One distinct marker of Kru identity was the Kru tattoo, commonly described by Europeans as a polygonal facial tattoo that determined Kru identity in relation to other African mariners and coastal populations. European observers described the tattoo or mark as a dark-colored stripe or arrow down the forehead and nose.[33] Some Kru sailors had other tattoos, such as blue triangles or stars, on their faces.[34] In the earliest known artistic depiction of Kru mariners, a 1775 sketch by a British naval lieutenant, one of the Kru pictured has an almost-indistinguishable star tattoo on his right cheek.[35] The Kru seem to have used their tattoos as a form of verification for their labor and identity for Europeans; as an extremely visible mark, it would have signaled immediately that they were members of this free wage labor group, rather than coastal Africans who could be enslaved.[36] The mark established a unified identity around their wage labor as mariners.[37] It persisted for centuries. A 1916 portrait of Liberian soldiers drawn in a German prison camp during the First World War features a man with the Kru tattoo — another testimony of the constant mixing of local and global, and the longstanding connections between Kru labor and the British empire.[38] In *A Lone Woman in Africa,* missionary Agnes McAllister writes about how the 'Kroo mark' was born out of slavery and the slave trade. Given in childhood, the mark was received before adolescence and before a child reached working age. It offered protection from enslavement and capture, but, as a later story of a captive Kru man shows, was not a guarantee in areas where the mark was not recognized.[39] Given that most Kru men went to sea between the ages of 14 and 40, similar to other groups of sailors, the mark had to be received at or before the time of puberty.[40] Prepubescent children were rarely enslaved by Europeans, so it is possible that the mark was received somewhere around late childhood as a rite of passage into maritime trades.[41] The mark was more important for distinguishing teens and adults who were of working age in maritime spaces.[42] Kru men often tattooed names or dates on their arms in a similar fashion to European

32Sidbury and Cañizares-Esguerra, 'Mapping', 186.

[33]Brooks, *The Kru Mariner,* 34; H. Johnston, *Liberia*, Vol. 6 (London, 1907).

[34]Johnston, *Liberia*, Vol, 6, 972 and 974.

35Royal Museums Greenwich, London, PAJ2038, G. Bray, 'Three Kroomen of Sierra Leone', 1775.

[36]Brooks, *The Kru Mariner*, 34–5; T. Canot, *A slaver's log book: or 20 years' residence in Africa* (New York, 1976 [1854]).

[37]Encyclopædia Britannica, 'Krumen', *Encyclopædia Britannica* (London, 1911). Johnston, *Liberia*, Vol. 6, 976.

[38]See R. Kuba, 'An ethnologist on the warpath: Leo Frobenius and the First World War', *Bérose - Encyclopédie internationale des histoires de l'anthropologie*, (2020). The painting was created by Thomas Baumgartner in 1916 for Leo Frobenius's *Die Feinde Deutschlands und seiner Verbündeten (The Enemies of Germany and its Allies),* and as far as it appears, is privately owned.

[39]A. McAllister, *A Lone Woman in Africa: Six Years on the Kroo Coast* (New York, 1896), 143–5.

[40]J. Connelly, 'Report of the Kroo people', *Annual Reports of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States*, 39:34–43 (1856), 38–40; C. N. de Cardi, 'Ju-Ju laws and customs in the Niger delta', *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 29:1/2 (1899), doi.org/10.2307/2842576; Ludlam, 'Account'. See also Encyclopædia Britannica 1911, 'Krumen': 'at 14 or 15 the Kru boys eagerly contract themselves for voyages of twelve or eighteen months. Generally, they prefer work near at home, and are to be found on almost every ship trading on the Guinea coast'.

[41]For example, see Curtin's analysis of ages of people kidnapped into the slave trade. P. D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, 1972).

[42]McAllister, *A Lone Woman in Africa*, 142–5. See also H. Johnston, *Liberia*, Vol. 2 (London, 1907). Johnston describes Kru, Grebo, and Bassa tattoos as overlapping, and even including traditional sailors' tattoos like anchors, mermaids, or one's own initials. The Kru facial tattoo could be accompanied by these tattoos or by scarification or other body modifications. For a preliminary study on Kru tattoos and protection from enslavement, see M. Crutcher, 'Jack Tar's ink: a comparative analysis

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and American sailors, showing how Kru mariners integrated themselves into global maritime cultures.

The second distinct marker of Kru identity after 1800 was employment on European ships, especially British ships. Systematic hiring of Kru men in the 1780s corresponded with a growing switch to 'legitimate' commerce — trade in palm oil, kola nuts, and other non-human cargos, as opposed to slave trading. Legitimate commerce led to an explosion in Kru recruitment on European vessels involved in palm oil trade and naval warfare.[43] Europeans incorporated West African mariners into their crews because they could navigate the coast, interpret, and resist tropical diseases that felled hundreds of European sailors.[44] Kru men worked as sailors on British ships patrolling against the illicit slave trade and as laborers in most ports of the West African colonies. In the multiple British 'small wars' along the African coast, starting with the war against the French in 1793, the Kru worked on British warships.[45] The British would hire and select crews of Kru mariners from the coast to be shipped out to other British warfronts.[46] During this period, Kru mariners were often paid the same amount as ordinary seaman in the British Navy.[47] Kru men worked on more than British seagoing ships; they also were present in Livingstone's expeditions and in other British explorations of riverine regions in West Africa.[48] By 1880, agricultural labor on Fernando Po (Bioko) was monopolized almost exclusively by Kru migrant workers.[49] Overall, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century antislavery patrols with the British and American Africa Squadrons are what solidified Kru recruitment and identity as mariners, corresponding with a massive spike in British hiring of Kru mariners.

The primary role that Kru mariners played in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was as manpower for antislavery patrols on the African coast, which, in hindsight, were statistically ineffective at preventing the illicit slave trade.[50] Kru mariners worked as informants and featured prominently in British abolitionist narratives.[51] Large groups of Kru men were recruited for individual British and American abolitionist ships.[52] British travelers emphasized their seamanship, courage, devotion to duty, manliness, and support of the British Empire and imperial expansion.[53] Stories of the Kru as 'Anglo Africans' served to bolster the empire. On the other hand, most accounts

of Euro-American and West African sailors' tattoos during the eighteenth to twentieth centuries', *Maritime Studies*, 22:3 (2023), doi.org/10.1007/s40152-022-00291-0. On tattoo and scarification in Sierra Leone and Liberia in the nineteenth century, see K. H. B. Keefer, 'Scarification and identity in the liberated Africans department register, 1814–1815', *Canadian Journal of African Studies,* 47:3 (2013), 537–53; Keefer, 'Group identity, scarification, and Poro'. Kru women in Sierra Leone in the twentieth century were said to tattoo their lips; little, if any, scholarship on this subject exists, but it has been confirmed through oral traditions from Kru elders recorded by the author in July 2023.

[43]Brooks, *The Kru Mariner*, 110.

[44]Chappell, 'Kru'.

[45]Brooks, *The Kru Mariner*, 38–9.

[46]A. A. Gore, 'Leaves from my diary during the Ashantee War', *The British Medical Journal*, 2:714 (1874), 301–4.

[47]R. Burroughs, '"[T]He true sailors of Western Africa": Kru seafaring identity in British travellers' accounts of the 1830s and 1840s', *Journal for Maritime Research,* 11:1 (2009), 63; Hargrove, 'Krumen and the suppression of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade', 80.

[48]G. W. Clendennen and D. H. Simpson, 'African members of the Zambezi expedition, 1861–1864: a prosopographical foray', *History in Africa*, 12 (1985), doi.org/10.2307/3171710; J. A. Croft, 'Exploration of the River Volta, West Africa', *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of London,* 18:2 (1873), doi.org/10.2307/1799975.

[49]Sundiata, 'The rise and decline of Kru power', 37.

[50]Hargrove, 'Krumen and the suppression of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade'.

[51]In *A slaver's log book*, Canot describes how one of his illicit slaving journeys was foiled by a Kru man acting as a spy for the antislavery patrols, resulting in Canot's loss (256). British accounts of the Kru portray them as vehemently antislavery, but this is not necessarily the case: see Ludlam, 'Account'; 'The Kroomen', *Peabody's Parlour Journal*, 2:8 (1834), 60–1; Connelly, 'Report of the Kroo people'; Burroughs, '"[T]He true sailors of Western Africa"'.

[52]See photographs of Kru sailors in the US Navy in Babcock, *USS Sacramento (1863–67)*, Photograph, 1867, NH no. 45376, US Naval History and Heritage Command, Washington, DC.

[53]Burroughs, ' "[T]He true sailors of Western Africa"', 58; M. Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750* (Cambridge, 1989).

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infantilize and caricature the Kru, emphasizing their ignorance and obedience and giving them patronizing names like 'Bottle of Beer' or 'Tom Coffee'.[54] The Kru carried a reputation in British sources for never having traded in enslaved people, which was factually incorrect but contributed to an identity around anti-slavery and abolition that the British assigned to their Kru workers in the Africa squadron. A 1911 encyclopedia article claims: 'morally as well as physically the Krumen are one of the most remarkable races in Africa. They are honest, brave, proud, so passionately fond of freedom that they will starve or drown themselves to escape capture and *have never trafficked in slaves*'.[55] Kru oral traditions also emphasize that the Kru people were never enslaved.[56]

However, many British sources rarely mention that the Kru worked in the slave trade in addition to the anti-trade squadrons.[57] As late as 1849, slaving factories were still common on the coast in most areas of Kru habitation, including the stretch from Cape Palmas to Cape Mesurado.[58] Slave ship captain Theodore Canot (alternatively spelled Conneau) interacted extensively with coastal brokers, like the Kru, noting their sailing skill on the rough coastal waters.[59] Others that Canot met were descended from European and African parents, showing how these mixed communities played a major role in coastal trade brokerage.[60] The Kru also fought against the Liberian government's suppression of the slave trade in the mid-nineteenth century, perhaps because it encroached on their ability to trade independently with European ships.[61] Kru employment on both slave ships and anti-slave trade patrol ships shows participation in a colonial system of wage labor built on enslavement and willingness (or necessity) to rely on multiple streams of income from colonial powers regardless of the flag flown by a European ship. This complicates the established narrative.

As a result of increased status and increased labor for and against the slave trade, Kru identity became unified, at least while at sea. Diasporan communities constructed traditional social structures based on dakwe and even named streets in Krutowns in Liverpool and Freetown after hometowns on the Kru coast.[62] At home, however, the local was still more important than the global. Missionary Agnes McAllister describes regional identities in her 1896 account. For example, at her mission near the Po River, local people warred with other groups in small battles over land and kin. There appears to have been no larger, regional identity in her account.[63] Francis

[54]While Brooks does not himself treat the Kru this way, he cites many primary sources which do: 'Africans', *Niles' Weekly Register*, 12:26 (1829), 410; 'The Kroomen', *Peabody's Parlour Journal*; F. Bacon, 'Cape Palmas and the Mena, or Kroomen', *The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London,* 12 (1842), doi.org/10.2307/1797997; J. C. Brent, 'Leaves from an African journal', *New-York Monthly Magazine of Literature, Art, Politics & Society,* 33:1 (1849), 41–8; McAllister, *A Lone Woman in Africa*; Connelly, 'Report of the Kroo people'; Johnston, *Liberia*, Vol. 2. Compared to each other and to the accounts of sailors, most primary accounts leave out details which others deem vital to the narrative. And when the Kru are mentioned in detail, it can be difficult to penetrate the infantilizing tone of colonial writers. Kru women are rarely mentioned. For an exception, see McAllister, *A Lone Woman in Africa* and Johnston, *Liberia*, Vol. 2. Johnston's only reference is to call Kru women ugly (934). Two Krumen are recorded in the British parliamentary papers on Sierra Leone, Liberia, and the settlement of those areas, but other than those testimonies, records of Krumen are mostly told in European and American voices (see Brooks, *The Kru Mariner*, 113).

[55]Encyclopædia Britannica 1911, 'Krumen'. Emphasis added.

[56]Gunn, *Outsourcing African Labor,* 53.

[57]Burroughs, '"[T]He true sailors of Western Africa"'; Ludlam, 'Account'; 'The Kroomen', *Peabody's Parlour Journal*; Bacon, 'Cape Palmas and the Mena, or Kroomen'. For contrasting evidence, see Canot's references to Kru (he spells it 'Kroo') sailors on slavers, Kru spies on the coast, and Kru involvement with barracoons.

[58]Brent, 'Leaves from an African journal', 44–5.

[59]'Kroomen' are mentioned extensively in Canot's text: notable sections include those on 243, 252, 262, and 282.

[60]'Mongo John' or John Ormond is a good example of this. Featuring prominently in the first half of the narrative, he was the son of an African woman and a trader from Liverpool, educated in England, and working as a trade broker when Canot met him. Canot took a lover from his seraglio; see 53–62.

[61]H. Akingbade, 'The Liberian settlers and the campaign against the slave trade 1825–1865', *Africa: Rivista Trimestrale Di Studi e Documentazione Dell'Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente*, 38:3 (1983), 366.

[62]L. B. Breitborde, 'City, countryside and Kru ethnicity', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute,* 61:2, (1991), doi.org/10.2307/1160614.

[63]McAllister, *A Lone Woman in Africa.*

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Bacon's 1842 account of Cape Palmas, on the southern point of modern-day Liberia, identifies the Kru and fishmen both as the 'Mena', possibly confusing the Kru with the Mina of the Gold Coast.[64] He writes that they were present on every vessel in West Africa and many beyond, showing how large the population of African sailors and seafarers was. This shows how diverse groups of seafarers could have been lumped into a category as 'Kru' as Bacon did to these mariners. Anthropologist Elizabeth Tonkin suggested that the Kru identity 'was characterized by extreme boundary maintenance, together with easy means for boundary crossing'.[65] To be taken onboard required that the Kru carried no cultural baggage from their local or regional identities, but rather identified with a larger group of Kru mariners.[66] Kru maritime activity was largely defined and framed through the interactions of the sailors and their colonial employers.[67] The Kru had to fit into British expectations of what a Good Kru Man looked and acted like, and the pressure to create a common identity led various disparate groups to unify.[68] The involvement of the Kru in global trade led to a growing emphasis on larger regional identity rather than on local expressions of that identity.

Early analyses of Kru mariners argued that Kru mariners enlisted on European and American ships to earn enough money for a bride-price at home, often completing this same mission multiple times.[69] While marital status may have motivated seafaring occupations, seafaring increased social capital in other ways; by serving on ships and growing their wealth through wage labor for Europeans and Americans, younger, more inexperienced men could advance to the ranks of warriors and headmen.[70] What the European observers called a bride-price could have been the money sent home to sustain extended networks and communities. Kru sailors also created and established lifelong careers in seafaring. Wealth acquisition stabilized families and communities at home, while being Kru became synonymous with seafaring and sailing, merging ethnic and occupational identities.[71] Mariners' migration to port towns resulted in the 'ethnicization of a profession'. Those who spoke Kru languages were called 'Krumen', but were actually many individuals and subgroups with identities that were ignored or conglomerated by colonial powers.[72] Different identities can also be seen in the varying shape of paddles ascribed to Kru groups.[73] Some Kru men found affiliation with the British empire beneficial, and were defined as British laborers, by both British sources and by Kru themselves; other Europeans were far more critical of the Kru.[74] For example, in early nineteenth century Cote d'Ivoire, other groups may have taken on Kru identities as part of their profession, affiliating themselves specifically with the Kru of Liberia to obtain employment on European ships.[75] However, many boundaries between territories and identities were rhetorically enforced by colonial powers, and a certain fluidity existed in reality. Identifying as Kru seems to have increased

[64]Bacon, 'Cape Palmas and the Mena, or Kroomen', 205.

[65]Tonkin, 'Sasstown's transformation', 4.

[66]Burroughs, '"[T]He true sailors of Western Africa"',' 59.

[67]Sundiata, 'The rise and decline of Kru power', 28.

[68]Tonkin, 'Sasstown's transformation', 4. Connelly also mentions how various Kru speakers united ('Report of the Kroo people', 39).

[69]Brooks, *The Kru Mariner*, 11–2; Brent, 'Leaves from an African journal'; Ludlam, 'Account'.

[70]De Cardi, 'Ju-Ju laws and customs in the Niger delta'.

[71]Wealth acquisition and community stability were central motives for Black sailors across the Atlantic: see W. J. Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail,* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), ch. 6.

[72]J. Ibo, 'Le phénomène 'Krouman' à Sassandra: la marque d'une institution séculaire', *Canadian Journal of African Studies,* 32:1 (1998), doi.org/10.2307/486224, 67; J. Martin, 'Krumen "down the coast"'; Tonkin, 'Sasstown's transformation'; F. D. McEvoy, 'Understanding ethnic realities among the Grebo and Kru peoples of West Africa', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute,* 47:1 (1977), doi.org/10.2307/1159195, 67; Canot, *A slaver's log book*, 255–56; Brooks, *The Kru Mariner*, 109; Brent, 'Leaves from an African journal', 46.

[73]See Brooks, *Kru Mariner,* and the image on Brooks' cover of Krumen with paddles. The mariners are depicted with a form of paddle that is not found in other sources, alluding to the varied ethnic identities of the Kru.

[74]Brooks, *The Kru Mariner*, 26, mentions how the French had difficulty working with the Kru.

[75]Ibo, 'Le phénomène 'Krouman' à Sassandra'; Brooks, *The Kru Mariner,* 102.

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other African mariners' abilities to obtain gainful employment on ships because of the European and American association of the Kru with maritime labor.

The Kru also migrated to other Atlantic port cities, integrating into communities and forming enclaves of Kru laborers, such as Krutown in Freetown, Sierra Leone, and Kru Town in Liverpool, UK.[76] The early mariners who would become the Kru may not have originally intended to migrate around the globe in search of work. They were more closely tied to the homeland. This is evident in the stories of six Kru men who ended up stranded in Baltimore in 1829 after being picked up off Cape Mesurado by a Mexican brig. The men had been looking for work on the coast when they were blown off course and were picked up by the brig and taken to the next port of call in the Americas. These Kru mariners expressed a great desire to return home to their families and livelihoods rather than stay and be employed based on their maritime skills.[77] Later, however, Kru mariners both strategized and were pushed further from the homeland to look for maritime work across ports of the British empire — a symptom of the growing imperialist, capitalist economy. British colonization of Sierra Leone made it easier to find employment within the imperial network, but it also diminished Kru abilities to seek employment on their own terms from their homelands in Liberia.

Twentieth-century tensions and diaspora

The twentieth century saw Kru maritime laborers migrate across the globe and form diasporic settlements. By this point, Kru identity encompassed not just those living in the five original towns on the Liberian coast or relying on ancestral maritime skills, but also those competing for wage labor for the British in maritime-adjacent trades, including in the armed forces like Ben Johnson and the Kru men painted in a First World War German prison camp.[78] Kru diasporas across West Africa and Kru migration to the UK and US solidified this common identity in the face of external pressures.[79] The Kru had 'developed a strategic engagement' with the British, with both parties relying on contractual wage labor for about two centuries.[80] During the twentieth century, Kru mariners worked for British shipping companies, such as the Elder Dempster line, and on British naval vessels during the world wars.

Overall, however, the European and American focus on Kru maritime skill and their employment declined throughout the early twentieth century. British sailors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had started to unionize and campaign for better wages. Division of shipboard labor across racial lines and unwillingness of white seamen's unions to include Black sailors decreased support for hiring of African sailors like the Kru.[81] In response, the Kru unionized on their own terms; for example, a 1911 strike in Liverpool campaigned for better wages in comparison to their white counterparts.[82] Other Kru revolts and movements against the Liberian government protested greater restrictions on their abilities to engage in trade and diasporic labor migrations.[83]

[76]D. Frost, 'Diasporan West African communities: the Kru in Freetown & Liverpool', *Review of African Political Economy,* 29:92 (2002), 285–300.

[77]'Africans', *Niles' Weekly Register*, 410.

[78]R. W. Davis, 'The Liberian struggle for authority on the Kru Coast', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies,* 8:2 (1975), 226.

[79]D. Frost, 'Ethnic identity, transience and settlement: the Kru in Liverpool since the late nineteenth century', *Immigrants & Minorities,* 12:3 (1993), doi.org/10.1080/02619288.1993.9974820; Frost, 'Diasporan West African communities'.

[80]Gunn, *Outsourcing African Labor*, 217.

[81]L. Tabili, '"A maritime race": masculinity and the racial division of labor in British merchant ships, 1900- 1939', in M. S. Creighton (ed.), *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World: 1700–1920*, (Baltimore, 1996), 175, 182, 185, and 187.

[82]D. Frost, *Work and Community Among West African Migrant Workers Since the Nineteenth Century*, (Liverpool, 1999), 56, 88–89, 95, and 99.

[83]Davis, 'The Liberian struggle for authority on the Kru Coast'; J. Sullivan, 'The Kru Coast revolt of 1915–1916', *Liberian Studies Journal*, (1989), 51–71; Gunn, *Outsourcing African Labor*, 194.

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A major reason Kru employment declined in numbers was due not only to Liberian interference but also to Kru reliance on British contracts.[84] Kru men developed a strong relationship with the British as a reaction against Liberian colonization at home, leading to them migrating in large numbers not only to British ports and ships in West Africa but also to the UK itself. By 1849 Kru mariners had been across the British empire and to the Americas.[85] Mariners' travels between Kru villages on the Liberian coast and these diasporic communities connected the local homeland with the Atlantic port cities.[86] Mass migrations of Kru men throughout West Africa created diasporic communities based on a common professional ethnicity. Increased commercialization of shipping on the African coast also led to a breakdown of the headman system as the demand for labor multiplied.[87] Kru labor became more decentralized and dislocated from coastal homelands, but Kru identity became more monolithic in the face of threats from the Liberian government and colonial authorities across West Africa.

Because of their interests in the British imperial economy, Kru political and economic power often diverged from Liberian priorities and led to conflict. Previous Liberian blocks on slaving and taxes on Kru labor grew the tensions.[88] Liberian export limits and head taxes on migrating Kru laborers, as well as growing conflict with American colonizers, led to decreased recruitment of Kru from their territory on the Liberian Kru coast, and with greater technological advancement this combined to decrease their involvement in the West African trade. Authority of the Liberian coast, therefore, came to mean not just control of land, but control of free labor as well.[89] It also meant consistent conflict.

Drastic decreases in shipping at the start of the First World War only increased the tensions over labor control, which broke into outright war in 1915 and led to the deaths and displacement of thousands of Kru families. The Kru wars against the Liberian government in 1915–6 united disparate groups to resist Liberian colonization.[90] When they did unite, it was not just under an identity as Kru but also as British subjects. The Kru resistance hoisted the Union Jack in southern Liberia in 1915, signifying their allegiance to the British over the Liberian colonizers.[91] As a result, the Liberian government brutally suppressed the Kru using the newly strengthened Frontier Force.[92]

Throughout the twentieth century, the Kru continued to resist the Liberian government, and many left Liberia to seek employment elsewhere; a 1925 author reported that 'The Krumen are well known throughout West Africa as constituting the most hardy, courageous and efficient seamen; but to exercise their craft they have to migrate to the English and French colonies'.[93] In 1931, the Kru revolted against the Liberian government and once again faced brutal repression. The actions of the Frontier Force against the Kru led the Americans to take charge of the military unit as well as a British investigation.[94] While Kru identity overseas may have deepened because of diasporic maritime labor, at home Kru maritime employment diminished in the face of increased colonial oppression.

[84]For example, this argument is put forth by Gunn throughout *Outsourcing African Labor*.

[85]Brent, 'Leaves from an African journal', 41.

[86]Breitborde, 'City, countryside and Kru ethnicity'; L. B. Breitborde, 'Structural continuity in the development of an urban Kru community', *Urban Anthropology*, 8:2 (1979), 111–30.

[87]Sundiata, 'The rise and decline of Kru power', 40.

[88]Davis, 'The Liberian struggle for authority on the Kru Coast'.

[89]Gunn, *Outsourcing African Labor,* 185–6; and see also R. Murray, *Atlantic Passages: Race, Mobility, and Liberian Colonization* (Gainesville, 2021), chs. 2–3.

[90]Sullivan, 'The Kru Coast revolt of 1915–1916', 54–5.

[91]Brooks, *The Kru Mariner*, 58–59; Davis, 'The Liberian struggle for authority on the Kru Coast', 222.

[92]Sullivan, 'The Kru Coast revolt of 1915–1916', 62–3.

[93]F. M. Dyke, 'The problem of Liberia', *Journal of the Royal African Society,* 34:135 (1935), 173.

[94]United Kingdom, *Parliamentary Debates*, Lords, 25 Apr. 1934, 'Liberia', Vol. 91, cols. 723–57, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1934/apr/25/liberia.

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Conclusion

As Europeans entered West Africa, coastal traders relied on longstanding maritime traditions to expand and facilitate trade networks. Early accounts of West Africa detail the roles that Kru mariners, other African canoers, and African maritime laborers took in supplying European ships. By the eighteenth century, a common identity as Kru emerged among mariners in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Cote d'Ivoire. The Kru used their skills as canoers, institutionalized hierarchies and labor models, and distinct markers of identity like tattoos to obtain employment on European ships. In the nineteenth century, Kru labor became central to British and American interests in ending the slave trade off the coast of West Africa. Kru sailors were known for their involvement in anti-slave trade naval patrols, but they were also known for their involvement as coastal traders and transporters. As Kru identity cemented over the course of the nineteenth century and employment with the British, Kru men migrated across West Africa and to the UK and US on European and American ships. By the twentieth century, Kru mariners were serving in merchant navies and aboard Allied vessels in the world wars.

Microhistories of the Kru in Liberia illustrate shifting identities across time and place. The stories of the Kru show how West African maritime history has a vital place in the story of trade throughout the early modern Atlantic world. This history of the Kru in the Atlantic world has sought to tie together the local and global, emphasizing blurred boundaries in identity, politics, and borders. Groups like the Kru were unified in identity, culture, customs, and trade just as much as they were separate and competing interests from highly localized polities, lumped together from external and internal pressures. One of these pressures was development of the Liberian nation in the context of the American Colonization Society in the nineteenth century. Future research could investigate how Liberian nation-building and territorial expansion in the nineteenth century shaped Kru identity and remembrance of Kru maritime pasts.

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