

Review: Our New Husbands Are Here: Households, Gender, and Politics in a West African State from the Slave Trade to Colonial Rule

Reviewed Work(s): Our New Husbands are Here: Households, Gender, and Politics in a West African State from the Slave Trade to Colonial Rule by Emily Lynn Osborn

Review by: Saheed Aderinto

Source: *Journal of West African History*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Fall 2015), pp. 164-166

Published by: Michigan State University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.14321/jwestafrihist.1.2.0164>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Michigan State University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of West African History*

JSTOR

## Our New Husbands Are Here: Households, Gender, and Politics in a West African State from the Slave Trade to Colonial Rule

EMILY LYNN OSBORN

Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011; pp. 273, \$25.00 paper.

The relationship of household to statecraft in the Milo River Valley (present-day Guinea-Conakry) between the seventeenth and early twentieth centuries is the central theme of this highly valuable and timely book by Emily Lynn Osborn. Anyone familiar with the literature on African political and women's history would readily agree with Osborn that previous studies have paid limited attention to the relationship between statecraft and the household. They have tended to focus on the activities of male elites and the public institutions they created at the expense of discourse of how the domestic sphere was structured and recognized as a site of political power. According to Osborn, "when men make states—and men consistently dominate state-making during the period under study—they also make households" (1). She engages the shifting manner in which the past of the Bate society is narrated and its implication on how power was maintained, distributed, and transmitted across time and space. Her story of how a household-centered statecraft in precolonial Bate gave way to a public and male-dominated one under French colonialism is important not only for the history of politics and gender relations, but for coming to terms with the origin of one of the core issues in postcolonial discourse of underdevelopment—women's lack of political and economic agency.

Aside from its focus on the centrality of the household to statecraft, Osborn also challenges us to rethink the often rigid divide between precolonial and colonial historical research. Hence, her book contributes significantly to two eras in African history, namely the precolonial and the colonial. She is able to successfully prove that the precolonial phase of state-building is as important as the colonial, which tends to receive greater attention because of better access to

archival data produced by the colonizers. Osborn is definitely not the first historian to explore gender relations and statecraft in precolonial Africa. However, her book stands out from the pack for paying almost equal attention to the continuity and change in the relationship of household to statecraft during the precolonial and colonial periods.

Osborn's well-written book has a total of seven chapters divided into the precolonial and colonial eras. Chapter 1 lays the foundation of the book by engaging the origin of Bate. The migrant settlers who founded Bate were successful, not only because the male elites "used their household as the building blocks for the state," but also because they selectively adopted aspects of Islam that suited their experience, practiced agriculture to supply the daily food need of the community, and shunned slave trading, which had the tendency to create political convulsion and undermine the development of the nascent state (23). The narratives in this chapter depart from the conventional idea that tends to associate the rise and fall of states in West Africa to the transatlantic slave trade. In Chapter 2, Osborn engages the shifting gender pattern in relation to the role of the household in statecraft. Although the household remained a significant site of public power, the male elites' involvement in long-distance trade began to undermine the cardinal position women had occupied during the early years of the founding of Bate. As the author shows in Chapter 3, the emergence of a new, younger generation of male elites, who deviated from the pacific traditions of Suwarian Islam on which Bate's foundation was laid in the seventeenth century, and their focus on warfare and slave raiding seriously undermined the role of the household in statecraft. The impact of the conquest of Bate by Samori Touré, one of Africa's greatest resisters of colonial conquest, on statecraft and household is the main focus of Chapter 4, which ends the first part of the book. Osborn draws a sharp contrast between Bate under the indigenous rulers and under Samorian rule: "Unlike the Bate founders, Samori's household did not operate as the foundation and basis for the Samorian state. Rather, Samori used his household to express and reinforce power that he accrued on the battlefield" (93).

In Chapter 5, which opens the second section of *Our New Husbands Are Here*, Osborn adjusts the lens of her investigation to the period of French colonial rule. This era represents change and continuity in the people's experience of power both within the public and private spheres. As one would expect, the imposition of colonial rule paved the way for new political and social institutions. I could not agree more with Osborn that Africanist literature has "tended to implicitly recognize but not to critically analyze or treat as historically significant" the colonizers' division of the public from the domestic (115). Marriage and other sociocultural institutions, which helped the household to shape public politics in precolonial times, did not have a place under a French imperialism that was motivated purely

by economic greed. Chapters 6 and 7 detail the workings of French colonial rule, the reactions of the people to core issues such as citizenship and subjecthood, womanhood, and colonial education.

After reading Osborn's book, one clearly comprehends one of the core themes of the study—why women who appeared prominently in the precolonial narratives of statecraft vanished under French colonial rule. Osborn has written a book that is capable of initiating new research into the relationship of the household to statecraft. The book's methodology is sound, and its sources are creative. The arguments are clearly presented and supported with appropriate data. *Our New Husbands Are Here* is a milestone in African history of gender, politics, and statecraft. Although Osborn's beautifully crafted book focuses on the Milo River Valley in West Africa between the seventeenth and early twentieth centuries, "there is certainly no reason that this rubric of analysis could not be applied to other periods and places" (186).

**Saheed Aderinto**

Western Carolina University