

Book Reviews

River of Wealth, River of Sorrow: The Central Zaire Basin in the Era of the Slave and Ivory Trade, 1500-1891. By ROBERT W. HARMS. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981. Pp. xv+227. Maps, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$24.00.

Robert W. Harms seeks to explain the transformations undergone by the riverine societies of central Zaire during the four centuries preceding the imposition of colonial rule. His working plan is to reconstruct the economic, political, and social structures of these societies prior to the advent and during the last decades of international commerce in the region. The example of the Bobangi, who rose from simple fishermen to dominate trade along the middle river, is used as a case study. Because the riverine societies possess no local historians, elaborate oral traditions, royal genealogies, or precolonial written documentation, the bulk of the evidence for this monograph comes in the form of oral family histories collected from informants in central Zaire during field research. The genealogical depth of this oral data, however, rarely extends beyond five generations or the latter 1800s. Consequently, Harms is forced to adopt a most unconventional method — process models. This method involves constructing models of sixteenth and late nineteenth-century Bobangi society from the scanty sources available and, thereafter, explaining the transformations as part of an historical process.

Harms presents sixteenth-century Bobangi society as a small ethnic group whose economic activities were dominated by fishing, the most prominent form of labor organization being teams of related and non-

related fishermen. Everyone had access to the means of production, since a canoe and a few fishing nets were the sole requirements of the enterprise. Most trade involved short-circuit exchanges between Bobangi fishermen and neighboring agriculturists. The availability of the majority of the items required for everyday life and for purposes of socio-political prestige hindered the development of markets and regional and long-distance trade. Because inequality was viewed as detrimental to society, wealth was redistributed within the kin group, the basic organizational unit of the riverine societies. The largest unit of political organization was the village, a corporate cluster of families of common descent. Matrilineal affiliation determined social relations within the village, while ritual chiefs and clan heads constituted its leadership.

Late nineteenth-century Bobangi society, on the other hand, is presented as an expanding ethnic group, whose livelihood was based almost exclusively on trading. Since trading required large amounts of capital investment in the form of canoes, labor, and goods, only a handful of Bobangi fishermen succeeded in commerce. The merchants who succeeded headed powerful trading enterprises which monopolized commerce along the central Zaire basin. They utilized their wealth to establish retainers, laborers, and captives of diverse regional origin in their own villages, acquire titles of socio-political prestige, and subsidize the expansion of their commercial enterprises. The importance which trading came to assume in Bobangi society thus undermined traditional economic structures, social relations, village organization, and political leadership. Moreover, because trade wealth seriously affected the Bobangi cosmological view of inequality, social tensions increased. Slavery also became more widespread, as wealthy merchants acquired greater numbers of enslaved persons to augment the size of their villages and labor force. Commercial activities were dominated by regional and long-distance trade in local foodstuffs and commodities. To ensure that trade flowed through the river without major disruptions, alliances were concluded between ethnic groups, although this did not always deter inter-ethnic conflicts.

Harms traces the dynamic of the changes undergone by Bobangi society to stimuli generated by the European seaborne trade in the Atlantic. In his view, increased coastal demand and higher prices paid for slaves and ivory after 1750 created new incentives for Bobangi fishermen. Higher slave and ivory prices also permitted the Bobangi to further transport a variety of foodstuffs and lesser commodities for exchange along the Zaire River and, thereby, to increase their profits. Regional and long-distance trade thus emerged, while markets arose to facilitate exchange, and domestic production increased. Harms argues,

however, that international trade had little effect on existing methods of production, since the specific and extractive nature of its requirements were not conducive to economic development.

Given the dearth of sources available, Harms's attempt to reconstruct the precolonial history of central Zaire basin societies is commendable. The explanatory model he presents, however, is not totally convincing. Harms portrays Bobangi society as an entity without internal dynamics, responding only to the pressures of the international market. This static presentation is due to the restrictive nature of the oral data Harms has at his disposal, which can be utilized to reconstruct synchronic models of the structures of Bobangi society, but not to explain the changes it underwent. Harms draws upon international commerce to provide the explanation for the transformations evident in Bobangi society. This Eurocentric explanation could have been tempered, if not averted, by comparing the Bobangi with the better documented riverine societies of West Africa, which were also subjected to the penetration of European merchant capitalism.

Nor is Harms's methodology exempt from criticism. His reconstruction of late nineteenth-century Bobangi society from the oral family histories of Bobangi informants is quite legitimate. That of the sixteenth-century Bobangi social formation, however, is not. Because the genealogical depth of his oral data is rather shallow, Harms draws upon the oral family histories of Moye informants to reconstruct late nineteenth-century Moye society and then extrapolates from it to represent sixteenth-century Bobangi social formation. He justifies this on the basis that Moye society in the late 1800s was similar to that of the Bobangi in the 1500s: that is, both social formations were predominantly based on fishing and had little contact with international trade. Since the Moye belong to the same cultural group as the Bobangi, Harms contends that the late nineteenth-century economic, political, and social structures of the former must have resembled those of the latter in the 1500s. This justification rests upon two assumptions: (1) that societies of the same cultural group undergo similar changes when pressured by the same forces, and (2) that the structures of pre-capitalist societies change little over long periods of time. No evidence exists to establish as historical fact the hypothetical structural resemblances between the Moye of the latter 1800s and the early Bobangi social formation. Although the Moye were subject to the same external pressures as the Bobangi, the Moye did not engage in long-distance trade until late in the 1800s. Thus, extrapolation of late nineteenth-century Moye society into the distant past as representative of the sixteenth-century Bobangi social formation, is unwarranted. This restricts the historical analysis of the volume to the late 1800s, when the trans-

formations discussed had already taken place. The historical validity of the interpretation presented is therefore rather limited.

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The Early Abbasid Caliphate: A Political History. By HUGH KENNEDY. Totowa, N. J.: Barnes and Noble, 1981. Pp. 238. Maps, glossary, index, bibliography. \$25.00.

Hugh Kennedy's *The Early Abbasid Caliphate* is a discussion of the political events of the period from the Abbasid Revolution to the end of the Caliphate of al-Ma'mun, 748-832 A.D. A study of this period is highly significant for the understanding of Islamic history not only because of its political events, succession crises, Alid rebellions, and civil wars — events which were not restricted to this period and largely resembled their counterparts in the preceding Umayyad period and those of the later Abbasid —but for the social and economic developments which became the basis for Islamic culture and civilization.

Kennedy restricts his generally lucid and readable account to political events. His discussion, however, with some notable exceptions such as the chapters on the geographical background and the patterns of provincial power, is mostly an account of personality conflicts, jealousies between important individuals, and an accounting of Shi'i and other rebellious groups rising up against the central government. Such a discussion would have been more meaningful had the author integrated it with other important issues such as land tenure problems, finances, and religious doctrinal developments, all of which were very much tied to the political struggle taking place during the period under study. This broader approach would have enhanced Kennedy's work considerably. At rare moments Kennedy does delve into that kind of analysis, especially when discussing the partition of the Caliphate by Harun al-Rashid and the Alid rebellions, but it does not go far enough.

The book ends with a brief but informative discussion of the primary sources used supplemented with a brief note on suggested readings from the secondary sources. In sum, this book although it does not break any new ground in discussing the politics of the period and skillfully skirts controversies regarding early Abbasid history (and this period is full of them), it has some use (if the