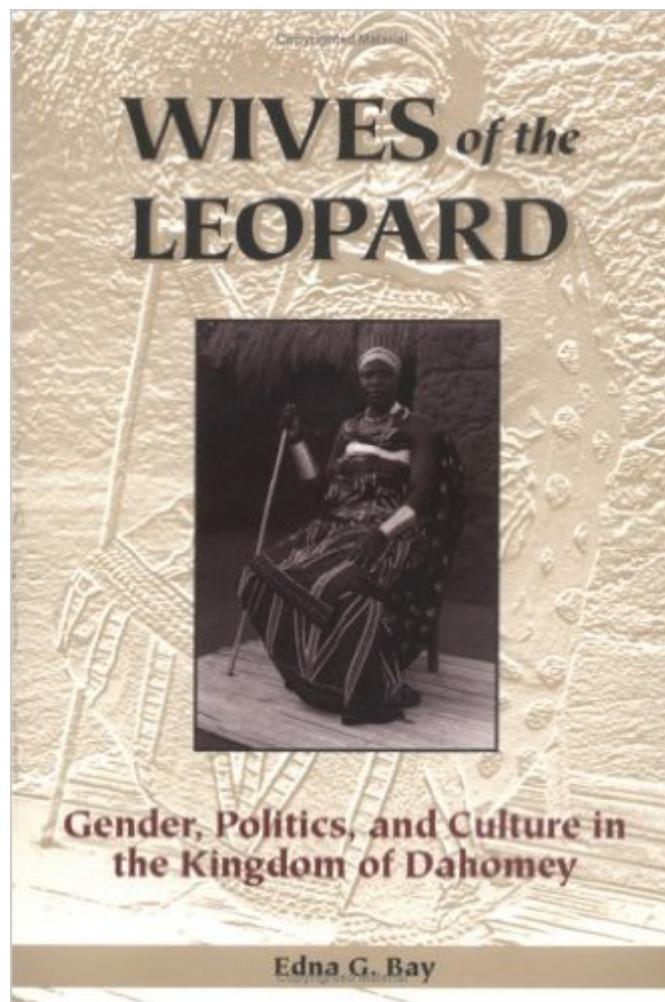


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Wives Of The Leopard: Gender, Politics, And Culture In The Kingdom Of Dahomey



Synopsis

Wives of the Leopard explores power and culture in a pre-colonial West African state whose army of women and practice of human sacrifice earned it notoriety in the racist imagination of late nineteenth-century Europe and America. Tracing two hundred years of the history of Dahomey up to the French colonial conquest in 1894, the book follows change in two central institutions. One was the monarchy, the coalitions of men and women who seized and wielded power in the name of the king. The second was the palace, a household of several thousand wives of the king who supported and managed state functions. Looking at Dahomey against the backdrop of the Atlantic slave trade and the growth of European imperialism, Edan G. Bay reaches for a distinctly Dahomean perspective as she weaves together evidence drawn from travelers' memoirs and local oral accounts, from the religious practices of vodun, and from ethnographic studies of the twentieth century. Wives of the Leopard thoroughly integrates gender into the political analysis of state systems, effectively creating a social history of power. More broadly, it argues that women as a whole and men of the lower classes were gradually squeezed out of access to power as economic resources contracted with the decline of the slave trade in the nineteenth century. In these and other ways, the book provides an accessible portrait of Dahomey's complex and fascinating culture without exoticizing it.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A very interesting and generally well written analysis of the monarchy of the west African kingdom of Dahomey from the early 18th century to its extinction by the French at the end of the 19th century.

Bay particularly emphasizes the roles of women in the Dahomean monarchy and rule of the Dahomean state. Eighteenth and 19th century European accounts of Dahomey described 2 somewhat distinctive features of the Dahomean state; the royal court was almost entirely populated by women and a substantial fraction of the Dahomean army was female. A good part of the book is devoted to understanding these anomalous features. Bay's reconstruction and analysis is impressive in good part because of the limited source material. She draws on prior histories, contemporary European accounts, anthropological studies of 20th century Dahomean life, and a substantial body of oral traditions collected in the 20th century. A particularly interesting and fruitful approach is analysis of changes in Dahomean religious practice. Given the close correspondence in the Dahomean world view between the physical and spirit worlds, changes in religious practice-beliefs are a guide to changes in the structure of Dahomean society. Analyzing the foundation myth of the Dahomean royal lineage, Bay suggests that the monarchy was established by outsiders in what became the heartland of the Dahomean state. Bay suggests that the success of the outsiders was due in good part to a series of implicit partnerships - power sharing of a sort between the royal lineage and commoners, between the outsiders and the natives of the heartland, and an adaptation of the traditional patrilineal system to feature an unusually large role for women in the Dahomean monarchy.

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