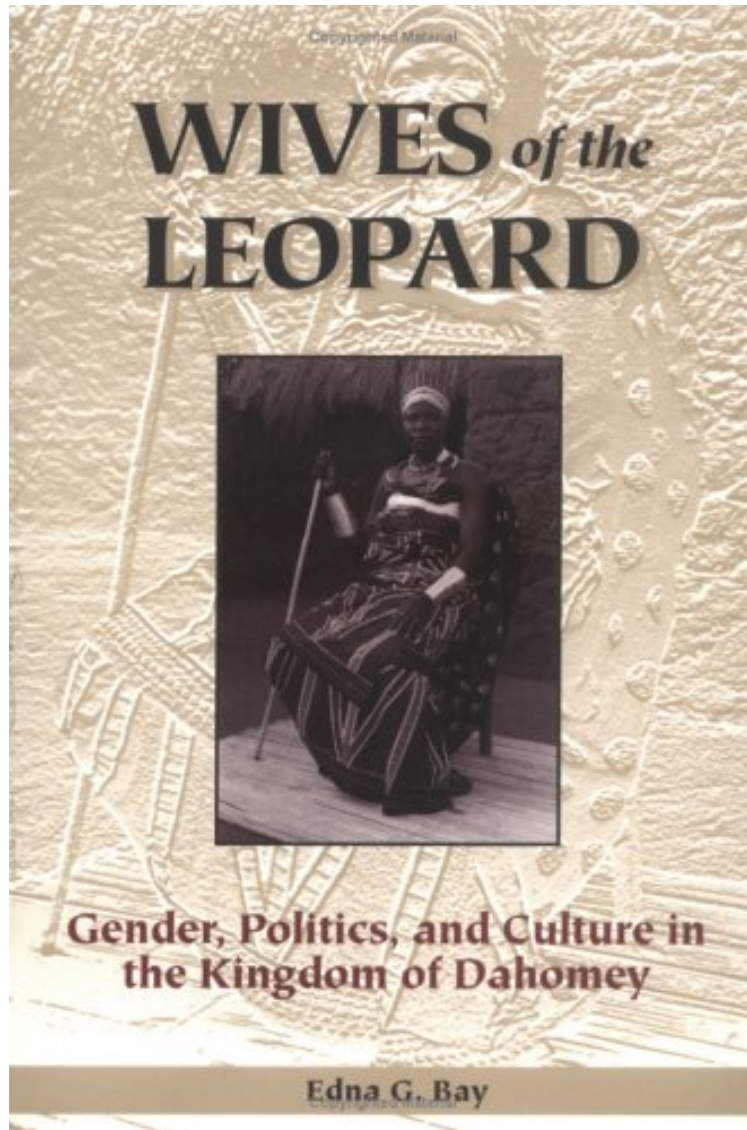


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Edna G. Bay

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2 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Great ResearchBy Upstate New YorkerExcellent research and understanding of subject by Edna. Bay. Will be a classic!6 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

Thoughtful; 4.5 Stars
By R. Albin
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. The almost exclusively female and very large Dahomean court was not merely a harem in the conventional sense but many women of the court had real power and functioned as major actors in the Dahomean state. All of this took place in the context the burgeoning Atlantic slave trade, in which the Dahomean royal lineage became major actors. The revenues of the slave trade, the nature of the trade, and the constant warfare involved also tended to boost the power of the royal lineage and reduce the number of men in Dahomey. Bay has interesting discussions of interactions with surrounding states and cultures in west Africa, particularly the Yoruba speaking cultures of what is now Nigeria. Beyond the almost constant warfare, there was considerable cultural borrowing, much of it probably in the form of practices introduced by enslaved captives. There was also some interesting connections with the wider Atlantic world in the form of an important Afro-Brazilian community on the coast of Dahomey. In the 19th century, Bay argues that the nature of the Dahomean monarchy changed significantly with diminishing importance for women in the royal court. The gradual, though incomplete, withering of the slave trade reduced the revenues of the royal lineage. In response, the royal lineage turned to another export, palm oil, as a substitute. But the palm oil trade was less lucrative, harder to monopolize, and apparently required more exercise of royal power over Dahomeans. Bay argues that the Dahomean rulers responded by gradually imposing a more central and in some ways hierarchial state. Actual power became more concentrated in the hands of the immediate royal lineage, particularly its male members, to the disadvantage of both women in the court and commoners generally. At the same time, there was more vigorous economic exploitation of women, particularly in the palm oil trade. As an analysis of a distinctive and interesting culture, this book is very strong. Bay is a good writer and the use of primary source material in the text is excellent. Minor complaints are that the maps in the book are not very good and the notes are endnotes, not footnotes. These are typical examples of publishers trying to save money.
23 of 25 people found the following review helpful. Top-notch history
By Bill Bell
If you are interested in the history of African kingdoms, the former Slave Coast, kingdom politics or just ethnography, this book is worth your time to read. It is not "gender history," it is a well-rounded, well-researched examination of an unusual kingdom, presenting many sides of the complex society which produced and supported the monarchy, including the wives of the kings and their important roles. I live and work in Benin, West Africa (formerly Dahomey) among the descendents of the very people Edna Bay has written about. Many of my friends trace their lineage to the kings of Dahomey and Allada. I spend my time in their villages, speak their languages (Ayizo Fon), listen to their stories, and share their lives. In several cases Bay's discussion of the way things "were" describe very well the way things are right now in the lives of my village friends. Several of her observations also helped to clarify and articulate cultural attitudes that differ from my own. In other words: she's done her research well. Bay's commentary on history and how it's written, particularly in the context of the kingdom of Dahomey, is fascinating all by itself. Her more general first chapters are informative. The subsequent chapters, which are divided by the reigns of the kings, are more detailed. Although keeping track of some of the titles and the players can get a little tricky, the chapters are well-woven and paint a strong picture of the kingdom and its development. No work is perfect, of course, and there are a few items which differ from my experience or the information provided by my Beninois friends, but without doubt this book is worth reading. On a technical note I would suggest that the title of the book would be better as "Mothers of the Leopard" since "Kpojito" is literally translated as "the leopard giving-birth person." All in all, it's a book worth having.

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, Edna 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.

A truly mature work of scholarship, *Wives of the Leopard* blurs the divisions between political and social history, between ritual studies and military history, between anthropology and history. Edna Bay challenges existing interpretations, advancing our knowledge of Dahomey and suggesting questions and paths to pursue in the study of other political systems in Africa and other parts of the world. (Beverly J. Stoeltje, Indiana University) About the Author Edna G. Bay is Associate Professor at the Graduate Institute of the Liberal Arts at Emory University and is the editor of several books in African studies.