

## BOOK REVIEW

Jennifer Lofkrantz. *Ransoming Prisoners in Precolonial Muslim Western Africa*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2023. viii + 228. List of Tables. Acknowledgments. Index. \$110.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9781648250644.

In *Ransoming Prisoners*, Jennifer Lofkrantz discusses ransoming practices in precolonial Muslim Western Africa in the context of changing religious and political landscapes in the region. Defining ransoming, a gendered practice, “as the practice of paying for the release of a captive at the time of capture or soon afterward” (12), Lofkrantz clearly states that her book is a “transnational study of ransoming.” Indeed, she contextualizes the history of ransoming within the nineteenth-century West African jihads, the socio-political and economic environment dominated by an increased demand for slaves inside and outside Africa, and the larger Muslim world. Lofkrantz explores ransoming and “ideas of slavery, freedom, religious and ethnic identity” (4). With this assertion, she wrote an “intellectual discourse on ransoming and slavery” (15) to fill in the gaps and expand the scholarship on “the intellectual history of Africa and the African diaspora” (5).

The book opens with the 2014 abduction of 276 girls in Nigeria, mostly Christians, from a government secondary school in the town of Chibock by the Islamist group Boko Haram. It closes with the 2018 abduction of 110 girls, most of them Muslims, from another government school in Dapchi by the Islamic State West African Province, a faction of Boko Haram. In both cases, the motivation for kidnapping captures the central theme of this study: “to ransom them for either money or for Boko Haram prisoners held in Nigerian jails” (1). Lofkrantz historicizes Boko Haram’s ransoming practices, which, like the Western African jihads, are “grounded in interpretation of Islamic law” (2) to discuss scholarly discourse on slavery and ransoming policies and practices in Muslim West Africa. She makes her arguments in five chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion. Chapter One discusses the intellectual context from which ransoming, captivity, and enslavement were derived. It examines the discourse of scholars such as Khaldūn, ‘al-Maghilī, and Bābā on Muslim identity, Muslim rights, enslavement, and ransom payments. Rooted in Maliki law, Lofkrantz argues that their writings on these subjects “provided the framework for the nineteenth-century Muslim West African policies and practices of ransoming” (52), mainly “the usefulness of ransoming to rescue freeborn Muslims” (52). In the Mediterranean world of the Maghrib and the Sahara, the focus of Chapter Two, scholars also grounded ransoming policies within Maliki jurisprudence. However, they conceptualized ransoming as an obligation to protect Muslims from enslavement but also as “a tool and a measurement” for financial and political gain (78). Chapters Three and Four highlight state and officials’ ransoming policies in the Sokoto Caliphate and

the Umanian states during the jihad movements. In these states, ransoming was also rooted in Islamic legal frameworks that obligated Muslim rulers to free captive freeborn Muslims through ransoming, a “useful and legitimate tool for doing so” (78). Despite similar ransoming practices, in the Sokoto Caliphate, a ransoming policy provided mediators and supported funds to pay ransoms, while in the Umanian states, a ransom policy was not firmly articulated, leaving families not the state to ransom family members. Chapter Five discusses ransoming practices among ordinary citizens. It details the motives of ransoming, the importance of communication links, social status, and the use of mediators in successful ransom negotiations.

To capture the intellectual history of ransoming, Lofkrantz borrows Talal Asad’s concept of “discursive tradition.” Proceeding from this concept, she uses biography, colonial archives, and a wide variety of other sources (treatises, poems, correspondences, oral sources, and testimony in different languages to highlight the agency of Muslim African scholars and jihadists in the global transmission of knowledge and deconstruct the concept of “Islam Noir.” Her approach to ransoming ensures that this is not simply a story about ransoming prisoners. Instead, she sheds light on tight connections between ransoming and slavery. As societies in Muslim Western Africa debated the legality and illegality of enslavement and “who was and who was not a Muslim?” (4) and “who should be ransomed?” (174), Lofkrantz demonstrates the importance of slavery and the law in understanding ransoming practices. Arguing that “ransoming was viewed as a remedy for potential illegal enslavement” (3), she states that the jihadists Umar Taal in Fuuta Toro and the Fodiawa (‘Uthmān, ‘Abdullāhi, and Muhammad Bello) in the Sokoto Caliphate offered “legal responses to the question of enslavement, and specifically, remedies for illegal enslavement” (7). These responses, she demonstrates, drew upon a discourse of slavery and a discussion of law that bridges together Maliki law and Tijāniyya and Qadiriyya teachings. However, she differentiates the ransoming of captives from the redemption of slaves, arguing that a ransomed person, compared to a redeemed slave, never suffered “a slow death” (3). She concludes that ransoming in Muslim West Africa complicates “the discourse on slavery resistance.” Her focus on this region develops a fresh analysis of ransoming. However, readers may wonder why only one female Muslim scholar, Baba of Karo, was mentioned in this study. Moreover, a study of ransoming in Fuuta Jalon, which also witnessed a jihad movement, would provide a better understanding of ransoming in the larger Western African region. The use of the word “prisoners” in the title may be misleading because Lofkrantz uses the word “captives” more than prisoners. Original in her approach and rigorous in its research, this book is a great read for anyone interested in intellectual history, legal history, slavery, Islam, African history, and the African Diaspora.

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