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African Lace-bark in the Caribbean: The Construction of Race, Class and Gender

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Steeve O. Buckridge

African Lace-bark in the Caribbean: The Construction of Race, Class and Gender.

London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. xix + 189 pp. (Cloth US\$112.00)

The lacy bark of the *Lagetta lagetto* tree is the centerpiece of historian Steeve O. Buckridge's tribute to the perseverance, ingenuity, and entrepreneurship of Caribbean women. This well-illustrated and satisfyingly thorough study traces lace-bark's uses from skilled artistry through personal self-fashioning and the formation of a local industry, and on to its role in the touristic image of the region and contributions to the Atlantic world economy. As Buckridge explains, the women of his own family in Jamaica inspired a lifelong interest in dress and seamstress creativity that led to his previous book, *The Language of Dress: Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaica* (2004), with the present work building on his twenty-some years of research on lace-bark—just one of the many avenues that Caribbean women pursued in the quest for independent livelihoods, overcoming of stereotypes, and participation in the world of fashion during and after the era of enslavement.

Although the book's primary focus is lace-bark production and consumption during the pre- and post-Emancipation nineteenth century, its source material, methodology, and topical engagement situates its subject in relation to gender and material culture studies, climate and ecology, the global history of bark and raffia textiles, and Jamaica's transition from plantation colony to tourist destination. Its introduction reviews the role of dress in Caribbean historiography and explains Buckridge's use of terms; glossaries of botanical and textile-related terms are provided in the appendix.

Chapter 1 describes production and use of bark- and other cloth in Africa and the pre-Columbian Caribbean. African bark-cloth initiated the continent's rich textile heritage but sometimes was also disparaged as newer fibers like cotton and silk became available. Buckridge argues that African textile production is the main source of the Jamaican transformation of bark to cloth. African textile regimes varied widely yet frequently involved gendered roles in processing, as among the Ashanti, with men making the cloth and women acting as cloth traders. Turning to the indigenous Taíno in the Caribbean, he argues that although European colonization destroyed the whole social fabric, including textile traditions, their extensive botanical knowledge was passed along early to enslaved Africans, who combined it with textile production know-how from their West African homelands. In Jamaica, Sunday markets became sites of trade in cloth and places to display fashionable enhancements to the basic fabrics that enslavers provided. Lace especially embodied a notion of refinement

through which enslaved women showed themselves to be as accomplished as the European elite.

The *lagetto* tree gained botanical recognition in the eighteenth century, thriving in the Cockpit Country of the Leeward Maroons around Accompong Town. Chapter 2 traces this history, beginning in 1687 with the career of Hans Sloane, one of the first scientists to study Jamaican plants. In this era bio-prospecting and natural history collecting extended throughout British colonies, with Sloane's Jamaican lace-bark objects becoming foundations for the collections of the British Library and British Museum. Lace was integral to European displays of elite status, with access mediated by sumptuary law. Lavish spending on it in Jamaica raised complaints of excess but some European lace filtered into the dress of enslaved women and was used in carnival costumes like those famously sketched by Isaac Mendes Belisario. By 1814 Jamaican women acknowledged lace-bark as a Maroon specialty and sold it to cloth traders (likely female) for further enhancement. Illustrations of items from 1827 and 1833 include slippers, a dress, and a cap—airy, translucently layered, and of such fragility that it is no wonder few remnants from this era have survived.

The Victorian era, focus of Chapter 3, was marked by elaborate ornateness and new technologies including the sewing machine. In Jamaica, Whites tried to establish a paternalistic hierarchy but the formerly enslaved did their best to escape it. Lace remained an important status good which Buckridge links to the emergence of a tripartite class system. Practices of uplift and refinement that asserted genteel status became important ways to thwart ascriptions of backwardness and coarseness associated with slavery, particularly among the mulatto middle class, while the African-descendant lower-class majority became a mostly poor “peasant” class engaged in agriculture and other forms of manual labor but enjoying displays of style whenever time and resources permitted. Bark-lace weaves in and out of this social mix, as a stand-in for European style, a vehicle to “Jamaicanization” of Victorian sensibilities, and a craft seen as promoting the “civilizing” mission of self-help societies, which grew into a major industry in which Jamaican artisans, mainly female, created fine wares for the tourist market and display in international exhibitions.

Sadly, this florescence of activity brought the *lagetto* tree to the brink of extinction. Yet Buckridge is able to conclude on a hopeful note, describing conservation efforts now underway to repopulate Caribbean forests with the trees whose legacy he describes so vividly.

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