

Slavery and Slave Trade in West Africa, 1450-1930

Patrick Manning

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In 1450, a West African population of perhaps 20 to 25 persons million lived in relative stability. This population, while divided into numerous ethnic, linguistic, and political communities, was at the same time interconnected with ties of trade, migration, and religious affiliation. For thousands of years, West African populations had developed their societies in the overlapping zones of forest, savanna, and desert edge.

Among the many social institutions and structures of these populations were some that could be called “slavery,” in that war captives, pawns, and other dependents were held in subservience by individuals, families, and states. While historians have little direct evidence for these early antecedents to West African slavery, it is clear that the small scale of slavery in West Africa contrasted with the far more developed systems of slavery in the regions of the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, and the Middle East. Holding people in captivity could succeed only if the captors had substantial resources and substantial incentives to carry out this oppression. Slavery could expand only if connected to significant demand for captive labor — brought by the ability of a monarchy to extract servile labor, or by the existence of markets for slave-produced goods, or through purchasers who would carry captives a distance to where these conditions obtained.

In 1450 all three of these conditions did obtain along the Sahara fringe. The declining kingdom of Mali and the rising kingdom of Borno gathered, exploited, and exported captives, as is documented in Arabic-language records. For the rest of West Africa, slavery became a major factor only after 1550, when trans-Atlantic encounters brought collapse of Amerindian populations and a resulting demand for African labor.

Europeans voyaging and visiting the West African littoral found that they were able to seize and purchase captives, and gradually increased their purchases. An estimated six hundred persons per year were taken from the West African coast between 1450 and 1500, and this number grew steadily for three centuries. By 1650 the European purchases of enslaved West Africans had risen to about 4000 per year, a number more than six times greater than maritime slave exports in 1500, and which equaled the number of captives sent from West Africa across the Sahara in 1650.¹ By 1780 the number of trans-Atlantic slave exports from West Africa had multiplied by another factor of ten, to 50,000 per year. (In the same period, slave exports across the Sahara rose from about 2800 per year

in the late fifteenth century to about 7000 per year in the late eighteenth century.) These figures indicate that, to explain the expansion of slavery and slave trade in West Africa, one must focus on the study of the interactions among Europeans and West Africans, far more than on the earlier patterns of life among West Africans.

For the period from 1450 to 1650, we will focus on the beginnings of the processes that would later deliver many more slaves to the Atlantic. These initial patterns of trade and exploitation, replicated and reinforced over four centuries, ultimately brought dramatic and unfortunate changes to the population and society of West Africa.

Well-informed West Africans in 1450 knew about the Mediterranean Sea and the Europeans living to the north of it. But it was different to have Europeans on African shores in advanced ships, opening new routes of communication. The Europeans had known, similarly, of the trade across the Sahara: this exchange in West African captives, linked to trades in gold, salt, and cowries, had been in existence for centuries. The majority of West African captives went through Mali to Morocco as domestics and to desert stations as laborers in oasis agriculture and salt mines. A smaller number crossed the desert from Borno and the Central Sudan to Fezzan and then to the Eastern Mediterranean. European visitors to West Africa sought to undercut the trans-Saharan trade, and to some degree they succeeded. But in other ways the trans-Saharan trade expanded along with that of the Atlantic.

In the days before Columbus, the Portuguese focused their attention on four areas of the West African coast — Senegambia, Upper Guinea, Gold Coast, and Benin — and these remained the principal areas of West African contact with the Atlantic until 1650. The first Portuguese slave trade was the transportation of captives to Portugal and, secondarily, to the Atlantic islands — the Azores, Madeira and, later, the Cape Verde islands.² This trade, lasting from 1450 until it contracted sharply by 1550, brought West African slaves into the production of wheat in Portugal and the islands. Slaves from the Upper Guinea coast were most numerous in Cape Verde; slaves from Senegambia were most numerous in Portugal.

Between the Senegal and Gambia rivers, Portuguese merchants purchased gold brought from the mining areas in Bambuk and Bure, and purchased slaves, mostly Wolof-speaking. The wealth brought by slave sales enriched local and provincial leaders, but undermined the monarchy of the Jolof kingdom; by 1500 the kingdom had broken up into smaller kingdoms, each seeking to benefit from the growing Atlantic trade. The Portuguese, unable to establish a firm base on the mainland, established a base in the Cape Verde islands. From there, merchants led voyages especially to the Upper Guinea coast to purchase captives who had been seized in the region's expanding slave trade. The Portuguese did establish a firm base on the Gold Coast, with the construction of Elmina

castle in 1480-82. It served as a center for gold trade for several centuries, drawing gold for export from the Akan hinterland and from further afield. Portuguese mariners set up commercial ties with the kingdom of Benin, buying slaves and beads to sell for gold at Elmina, and buying pepper to send to Portugal.

In the years from 1500, enslavement of people in West Africa began to expand in several directions.³ Portuguese merchants returned from the Indian Ocean with cowries, and sold them in West Africa. Spain built up a substantial system of enslaved labor in the sixteenth century on the Canary Islands, with slaves purchased from the Portuguese; Morocco too expanded its production of sugar. At the desert edge, the rising empire of Songhai (more than its predecessor and neighbor Mali) relied on slavery and slave trade as a pillar of its economy. Ottoman demand for slaves may have encouraged more trans-Saharan slave trade through Libya. The total of all these exports from West Africa reached about 6500 persons per year in 1500.

Only after 1550 did West African captives go in large numbers to the Americas. Small numbers of Africans participated in the early voyages of discovery and conquest, and an early effort at sugar plantation on Hispaniola in the 1520s relied on African slave labor. Spanish and Portuguese conquest of mainland territories in the Americas took decades, and the conquerors sought first to obtain laborers by enslaving local Amerindian populations. After 1550, however, it became clear that the Amerindian population was declining because of disease, and both Spanish and Portuguese turned to African slave labor. The Spanish, ill-equipped to collect slaves directly, awarded a contract known as the *asiento* to merchants of other nations: Portuguese merchants dominated these *asiento* contracts from 1580 to 1660. Three main centers of slave population in the Americas grew up in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. West African captives went first to the urban center of Lima in Peru and second, in Mexico, to Mexico City and Vera Cruz. Urban slaves served especially as artisans and as domestics; rural slaves worked as field laborers, artisans, and as miners. As Bowser and Palmer have shown, these slaves came especially from Senegambia, Upper Guinea, and the Bight of Benin.⁴ They were brought to the Americas via the Portuguese *asiento*.

For the third center of African population in the Americas, Brazil, the slaves came from Central Africa rather than West Africa. From 1480 Portuguese merchants had taken slaves from Kongo to the island of São Thomé, and made it the main center of sugar production in the sixteenth century. Thereafter, sugar production in Brazil began to grow, and by 1600 had exceeded that of São Thomé. Slaves from Kongo and then from Angola went mainly to the plantation settlements of Brazil's northeast coast, especially in Bahia and Pernambuco. A few captives from West Africa went to Brazil.

We should not exaggerate the impact of slavery and slave trade in the era up to 1650. Some of the important changes of that era resulted not from slavery in particular but more generally from new connections in maritime and land-based trade. These included expansions in West African exports of gold, pepper, gum Arabic; imports of such commodities as cowries, metals, and textiles; and expanded trade among West African ports.

But slave trade did grow, and the initial lineaments of the West African system of slavery and slave trade were in place by 1650. The quantity of captives exported from West Africa almost tripled from 1450 to 1650, and most of the increase came from regions bordering the Atlantic. The expansion of enslavement generated improved techniques for seizing captives: armed raids, kidnapping, and judicial enslavement. Individual regions underwent cycles of expansion and contraction in slave trade. In the peak export years, men came to be in short supply, and populations declined. Walter Rodney has argued, for the Upper Guinea region, that the first century of contact with the Portuguese resulted in an expansion of slavery where it had not previously been prevalent, and John Thornton has shown, for the same region, the social change brought by the shortage of men. The developments up to 1650 in Senegambia, Upper Guinea, Songhai, Gold Coast and Benin served to foreshadow the elements of the larger system that was later to emerge.⁵ The local and episodic impact of enslavement had yet to become broad and general, but the writing was on the wall.

Slaves from West Africa become involved on a large scale in sugar cultivation beginning in about 1650, as the global economy entered a period of growth. Since 1500 the regions of the world had been put in contact by maritime transport. The initial connections, however, had brought more devastation than fortunes — cycles of war and disease, plus the difficulty of making new acquaintances, meant that the early days of the world economy were difficult. For West Africa, as for the world, global connections grew, but the local societies did not prosper.

With time, however, commercial and political systems began to fit more closely with global realities. From the 1570s, silver mines of Mexico and Peru had begun to provide coins that circulated throughout the world. A growing system of global trade now encompassed Africa and its labor. For instance, Europeans used Mexican silver to purchase textiles in India and cowries in the Maldives. These commodities, after passing through Europe, went to West Africa in exchange for slaves; some of the slaves became mine workers in the Americas.

Hints of changing times that would draw West Africans into the sugar-and-slavery nexus came from new military and commercial ventures. The Dutch, seeking to develop their own commercial power and break free of Spain, launched expeditions all over the world

from 1580, and by 1650 had established themselves as the greatest commercial power in Europe. The Sa'adian dynasty in Morocco, seeking also to build up commercial and military strength in opposition to Iberian powers, defeated Portugal in 1578 and destroyed Songhai in 1591. While sugar production declined in seventeenth century Morocco, the import of slaves from the Niger and Senegal valleys expanded. These and other changes opened up the era in which slave trade dominated the Atlantic economy, when West Africa paid the price for that economic growth.

Sugar and slavery, 1650-1800

Senegambia, the Bight of Benin, and the Gold Coast were the first regions to feel the impact of expanding slave trade in the mid-seventeenth century. Dutch, English, and French merchants came to West Africa as part of a world-wide commercial expansion. In the early seventeenth century these northern European adventurers each seized West Indian islands and North American territories (as well as ports in the Indian Ocean) and from mid-century they searched for West African slaves to work on new Caribbean sugar plantations. The Dutch East Indies Company (VOC), founded in 1602, focused its efforts on the Indian Ocean.⁶ The West Indies Company (WIC), founded in 1621, took as its objective the conquest of Brazil from the Portuguese and the expansion of a slave colony supplied from Angola — but that venture had failed by 1650. Once expelled from Brazil, the Dutch retreated to islands they had seized in the Caribbean, especially Curaçao, and became merchants rather than planters. In 1663 the Dutch WIC, replacing Portuguese shippers, gained the *asiento* contract for supplying slaves from West Africa to Mexico and Peru through the Caribbean. Dutch seizure of Elmina castle in 1637 gave them control over gold exports, and strengthened their base in West Africa.

In Senegambia, the expansion in volume of slave exports soon ran into problems.⁷ The Dutch had established a fort on the island of Gorée from 1621, French merchants had established a base on the island of Saint-Louis in the mouth of the Senegal (where they built a fort in 1659), and Afro-Portuguese merchants from the Cape Verde islands also purchased Senegambian slaves. Slave purchases expanded, but opposition to slave trade arose, especially among Moors north of the Senegal River. In the war of the marabouts, 1657-1679, Islamic leaders gained wide popular support in their attempt to halt the enslavement of Muslims and create a theocratic state. The effort failed after initial success, as French aid to the embattled Wolof kings enabled them to regain their thrones and continue slave exports. Yet Senegambia, while its slave exports expanded, was not able to satisfy the demand for slaves in the Caribbean. In part this was because Senegambia and the upper Niger valley also sent slaves to Morocco during the seventeenth century. In Morocco, the large free and slave population of Africans was organized into the royal military force. Alawite sultan Mawlay Isma'il (son of the previous sultan and a concubine enslaved in West Africa), began his fifty-year reign in

1672 by impressing all black men into his army. This corps, known as the 'Abid, grew to a reported 150,000 by the 1720s and maintained the strength of the monarchy.

In the Bight of Benin, in contrast to Senegambia, Atlantic slave exports grew rapidly.⁸ The kingdom of Ardra, composed of Gbe-speaking people in modern Benin Republic, was a polity that experienced the growing linkages of the global economy. In the late sixteenth century, Ardra opened ties with Portuguese merchants from São Thomé, who purchased slaves for work on the island and for dispatch to Brazil. By the mid-seventeenth century this region encountered, in addition, a trickle of Dutch, English, and French merchants, and a pair of Spanish priests who wrote a catechism in the Gbe language that came to be widely used in Spanish America. In this densely populated area, the kings and merchants of Ardra and surrounding states were willing to sell slaves to Europeans. Dutch merchants set up lodges for purchase of slaves in Savi, Ardra, and Grand Popo, and delivered them to the Caribbean – to the Spanish through the *asiento*, and to Dutch, English and French buyers on Caribbean islands. The English Royal African Company, founded in 1672, took up trade in slaves to supply the expanding English colonies of the Caribbean and North America. Both Dutch and English merchants imported substantial quantities of cowries as money for purchase of slaves, and contributed to the expansion of the region's money supply.

Also imported were firearms and gunpowder, and military forces in the region became reliant on musketry and cannon. Slave trade and gun trade reinforced each other as warfare and slave exports both grew in the Bight of Benin. Savi and Ardra positioned themselves against each other in the slave trade, and each set up rituals in which Europeans provided gifts to open trade and became allies of the states in regional wars.

Parallel processes developed at much the same time on the Gold Coast, though the number of slave exports was somewhat smaller.⁹ The rise of Akwamu, spreading from the interior of the Volta valley to seize the coastal Ga kingdom in 1680 and then areas to its east, brought sales of slaves to the Danes at Accra and to the Dutch along the coast of modern Togo. Ga refugees fled eastward along the coast to settle in Little Popo, and there the rise of military leaders such as Foli Bebe launched a series of wars among neighboring Gbe-speaking peoples that continued to the 1730s. From the 1690s, slave exports from the region reached 5000-6000 per year. This was a rate of loss sufficient to bring about population decline in the region, but the wars and the slave trade went on.

These events of the Bight of Benin and the Gold Coast at the end of the seventeenth century brought the largest West African impact of slave trade to that date. Warfare expanded, population declined across a substantial coastal belt, monarchy and elite families became heavily dependent on revenue from slave exports, government was transformed, residential patterns changed, and the holding of slaves as well as the selling

of slaves expanded. The most clearly documented aspect of these changes was the sharp increase in the selling price of slaves to European merchants, which rose by a factor of from three to six from the 1690s to the 1720s. During this era of conflict and transition, gold trade continued, but slave exporting grew as prices rose. For a while, the Gold Coast imported gold (from the newly opened mines of Brazil) as well as exporting it. Prices for slaves were so high that slaves were sold for cash, much as cowries came to the Bight of Benin. Perhaps more socially significant, but more difficult to document, was the holding of numerous women in slavery throughout the region, and the expanding requirements for their labor, especially as men were in short supply. In a pattern that was to be repeated up and down the coast, the Bight of Benin, after decades of heavy involvement in slave trade, found itself with declining numbers of slaves to deliver, and prices that became so high as to be uncompetitive.

In response to these changes, two powerful states arose, conquering much of the region. The great expansions of Asante (1701-1707) and of Dahomey (1724-1727) were in large part a response to the crisis created by expanded slave trade. But if the two states were similar in their expansion, they differed sharply in their subsequent histories. In 1701 the Asante confederation defeated Denkyera and soon gained control of most of the Akan-speaking area. Asante control of this region reduced slave raiding within its realm, but maintained the capture of slaves from its periphery. As a result, population of the Gold Coast as a whole declined for much of the eighteenth century. To the east, the impact of slave trade was to be more severe. The kingdom of Dahomey, which expanded as an efficient machine for warfare and enslavement, conquered Ardra in 1724 and Savi in 1727, and was poised for a regional dominance parallel to that of Asante. But repeated cavalry invasions from Oyo combined with long-term resistance from Savi and Grand Popo left the coastal Bight of Benin to experience perpetual warfare — accompanied by enslavement and population decline into the 1780s. The Akwamu kingdom, located between Asante and Dahomey, was destroyed in 1730 by a coalition of its enemies and its rebellious subjects.

As the Atlantic slave trade from West Africa expanded in the early eighteenth century, the balance among European merchants changed.¹⁰ Merchants from Brazil arrived at the Gold Coast and the Bight of Benin, so that by the 1720s a substantial export of slaves from the Bight of Benin to Brazil had opened up, continuing to 1850. By the early eighteenth century, the English were able to establish primacy over the Dutch in many areas of commerce. The English colonies in the West Indies expanded their sugar output, and English merchants in India gained access to the cottons that were so important in the purchase of slaves. (Despite all their wars against each other, the Dutch and English also cooperated widely in Europe in organizing African voyages.) English success in acquiring slaves won for them the *asiento* in 1713, after which the English delivered slaves to the Spanish for the rest of the eighteenth century.

With the sharp increase in slave prices in the early eighteenth century, region after region expanded its slave exports: in chronological order, the Niger Valley, the Bight of Biafra, and Upper Guinea. In the Niger Valley, a band of marauding warriors under the leadership of Mamari Kulibali developed by 1712 into the leaders of the Bambara kingdom of Segou, and their captives went to Senegal and across the desert as well. The Wolof and Bambara slaves from Senegal became important in settling the new French colony of Louisiana.

The Bight of Biafra entered the export of slaves on a large scale in the early eighteenth century.¹¹ The system of collecting slaves that evolved there was sharply different from that of the Gold Coast or Bight of Benin – rather than large-scale war, it focused in individual kidnappings and seizure of individuals through court proceedings. The Ijo port of Bonny and the Efik port of Calabar became the main entrepôts. The Aro clan among the Ibo, relying on its dominance of the widely respected oracle at Arochukwu, built up a network for channeling captives of kidnappings and judicial procedures to the ports of Bonny and Calabar. By the mid-eighteenth century, the Bight of Biafra too was experiencing population decline. For Upper Guinea, slave exports remained at a low level in the early eighteenth century, expanding modestly as both Portuguese and French merchants collected cargoes. After 1750, exports rose to a peak of over 15,000 captives per year, and initiated a fifty-year period of regional population decline.¹²

Resistance to enslavement now became more general and easier to document. Some groups organized to fight off attacks, as with the Mahi populations caught between Dahomey and Oyo. Others moved to hills or swamps to escape raids: the Dogon moved up the escarpments east of the middle Niger and the Dasha moved to hills north of Dahomey, while the Weme and Holli escaped Dahomey by moving to swampy regions. Settlements of escaped slaves are documented for Senegambia, and captives on board ship rebelled with regularity.

For West Africa in general, the number of captives sent across the Atlantic increased steadily, from about 4000 per year in 1650 to about 50,000 per year in 1800. During this time the trade in slaves across the Sahara from West Africa remained roughly constant at about 8000 per year.¹³ The overall patterns were that population declined for West African population generally from 1730, and the decline continued well into the nineteenth century. Enough women were lost that the remaining population was unable to replace them or their children. In addition, the loss of many more men than women left West Africa with a substantial shortage of men. Of the women who remained, many were in slavery. The result was development of a new social system in which women were held in slavery within families. The system reinforced multiple marriage, concubinage, and sent women to work in areas beyond what had earlier been their

occupations. The women who went overseas in slavery were overwhelmingly from the coastal regions of West Africa. In ethnicity and language, they were Wolof, Kisi, Mandingo, Akan, Gbe-speaking, and Ibo-speaking. The men, in contrast, came from these groups and from all other groups, such as Bambara, Gur-speaking, Hausa, Songhai.

In sum, slavery expanded to create a global system of forced labor.¹⁴ The European trading powers grew in influence on the African coast and especially in their American colonies. The volume of Atlantic commerce grew, and that growth included the expansion in African exports and in the size of the money supply (in cowries and other commodities). But the loss of population and the social disruption of enslavement caused an economic shrinkage for West Africa. Slavery brought growth to the Atlantic economy as a whole, but not to West Africa.

But when slave trade is explored region by region within West Africa, a far more complex pattern comes to light. Some regions exported almost no slaves in the seventeenth century; for each region there was a period of rapid expansion in slave exports, usually followed by a decline in slave exports in a cycle of about 40 years, though in some cases exports continued at a high level. The effects on West African regions varied greatly: sometimes there were expansions of great states, sometimes there was social and political devastation, sometimes a large number of slaves was exported without apparent transformation of the region.

The Atlantic system of slavery, as it reached its peak in the late eighteenth century, began to reveal significant weaknesses. The anti-slavery movement began the moment enslavement began, in the minds of those enslaved, and was revealed in acts of rebellion in the barracoons, on board ship and on slave plantations. Among writers in Europe and the Americas, anti-slavery began during the eighteenth century. The movement rose to a crescendo at the end of the eighteenth century with the abolition of slavery in several American territories, and with an active anti-slavery movement in Europe and North America. More than anything, however, the uprising of slaves in Haiti and their assertion of freedom and, eventually, independence, created an anti-slavery movement that led ultimately to the emancipation of almost all those held in slavery.

Slavery and anti-slavery, 1800-1900

In the course of the nineteenth century, slavery and slave trade in West Africa were at once challenged, reaffirmed, and transformed. By the end of the century, the capture and export of slaves had been greatly curtailed, but the number of West Africans living in slave status was larger than at the opening of the century. Along with its expansion, the system of enslavement was transformed from reliance on female slaves held within households to the development of systems of slave villages, with links to production for markets in Africa and overseas.

The complexity of slavery in nineteenth-century West Africa was matched by the complexity of slavery elsewhere in the world.¹⁵ For British, American and eventually French territories in the Americas, slave resistance and the anti-slavery movement brought a decline in slave imports from West Africa. But imports to Cuba expanded and those to Brazil continued. Trans-Saharan demand for slaves expanded. Slave exports from Central Africa expanded in the early nineteenth century — from the 1820s, slave exports from Central Africa (and also from Eastern Africa) exceeded those from West Africa, though the number of people enslaved within Central Africa never reached that of West Africa. The Haitian revolution of 1791-1804 launched the most memorable signal threatening slavery as a system. In those tumultuous events, slaves overthrew the system of their oppression and joined with free people of color to defeat numerous invaders and establish an independent nation. Yet emancipation and abolition, though now announced as inevitable, were to be slow in reaching their completion throughout the world.

In West Africa, at the moment when the Haitian revolution was unfolding, another revolution exploded in the Central Sudan, linked in part to the issue of slavery. This revolution promised for a while to reduce enslavement but ended up expanding it.¹⁶ The jihad pronounced by Usman dan Fodio, which overthrew one after another of the Hausa kingdoms and replaced them with the expanding Sokoto Caliphate, began with a critique of the enslavement of Muslims by Muslim raiders. It ended up with the establishment of a powerful regime that enslaved few Muslims but many others. In the wars of the Caliphate, combatants on both sides were captured and sold, so that the number of Muslims among captives sent to the Americas rose sharply at the end of the eighteenth century.

Before the launching of these holy wars, the empire of Oyo to the south had embarked on an active program of slave raiding in the 1780s, and this brought the expansion in the number of Yoruba, Nupe, and Igala captives sent to the Americas. The wars of Oyo became connected to those of the Hausa and Fulani to the north, and further expanded the exports of captives from the region. Ultimately, Oyo collapsed in c. 1830, and in the abandonment of its capital and the dispersal of its factions, civil wars developed among the Yoruba peoples, resulting in still more exports of slaves. In sum, the era from 1780 to 1850 brought a great expansion of slavery throughout modern Nigeria, and brought expansion in export of slaves of Yoruba, Hausa and other ethnicities of the region. The exception was Eastern Nigeria where, for the Ibo slaves sent out from Efik and Ijo ports, slave exports came virtually to an end in the 1830s.

The British and American governments declared the Atlantic slave trade to be illegal as of 1808, and the British gradually began enforcing the abolition of slave trade on other European powers and on African states and merchants. Anti-slave-trade measures were

effective almost immediately for British and American vessels, but did not become effective for vessels of other nations until about 1820. The British anti-slavery fleet was established and, especially at the conclusion of the Napoleonic wars, began to have effect in cutting back slave exports. As a result, a new sort of settlement developed on the West African coast, in which liberated slaves built communities under the protection of great-power navies. Freetown in Sierra Leone was the earliest and most substantial such community, but others grew up on Fernando Po, at Monrovia in Liberia, and at Libreville in Gabon; emancipated Brazilians settled along the Bight of Benin without external protection. British anti-slavery treaties with African states became effective in Gold Coast in the 1820s, in the Bight of Biafra in the 1830s, and in other areas after 1850.

The era from the 1830s to the 1880s brought a complex mix of expansion and contraction in slavery. In the U.S., slavery expanded, even without import of many new captives, as cotton production replaced the earlier emphasis on tobacco. Similarly in Brazil, the expansion of coffee production in São Paulo led to migration of a million slaves from sugar fields in Bahia to coffee plantations. While sugar production declined in Brazil, slave production of sugar expanded dramatically in Cuba, with import of thousands of African slaves up to 1850. For the mainland territories that gained independence from Spain, slavery was abolished by stages – by 1828 in Mexico, but not until the 1850s in Venezuela or Peru. In the British territories, slavery was formally limited in 1832, but the slaves were forced to work in indenture until their liberation in 1838. Slavery expanded rapidly in Egypt under Muhammad Ali, but the parallel expansion of slavery in North Africa was halted after France, newly converted to anti-slavery in 1848, restricted slave trade in Algeria and then in Tunisia. For both West Africa and Central Africa, the export of slaves to the Americas had virtually ended by 1850, and with that change, almost all ties between Africa and the Americas were interrupted for a century.

Quantities of West African slave exports declined in the 1790s but remained steady from then to the 1830s, with about 30,000 captives sent across the Atlantic and with trans-Saharan exports rising to over 10,000 per year. Thereafter the Atlantic trade dropped almost to zero after 1850, while the Saharan trade continued at nearly 10,000 per year until late in the century.¹⁷ (Central African exports of captives across the Atlantic, meanwhile, reached a plateau at about 30,000 per year from 1800 to 1850.)

The global combination of abolitionism, industrialization, and expanding trade brought a wave of transformation in West African slavery.¹⁸ Sugar was no longer produced by slave labor, and other crops entered the market in Africa as overseas. Coffee, cotton, palm oil and peanuts became major export crops, each relying on slave labor. New markets arose for African products, within and beyond the continent. From the 1830s, prices of slaves along the West African coast began to fall, as the purchases by Europeans decreased. At mid-century, when the export of slaves across the Atlantic had almost ceased, prices of

slaves had declined by roughly 50% from their peak at the beginning of the century. This brought the purchase of slaves into the realm of possibility for a larger number of Africans, and slave ownership increased. The male slave population of West Africa rose in particular, as males ceased to be exported to the Americas.

As the nineteenth century continued, a thriving system of slavery and slave trade developed in the West African savanna, especially in the Sokoto Caliphate, but also in the middle Niger and in Borno. Now the system came to depend as much on local demand as on external demand. Slave labor was used for grain production, for textiles, for leather work. Control of slave women and children became the prerogative of wealthy men throughout the region. Thus a new social system developed, as substantial numbers of males were held in slavery. Slave families too changed. Now slave households developed, and they developed lineages subordinate to those of the masters.

One measure of the expansion of slavery in West Africa was the wave of slave uprisings at mid-century. Best documented of these was the set of demonstrations of slaves near Calabar in c. 1850, who protested against their liability to being executed at the funerals of their owners, and won that and other concessions on their status. Within the next couple of years, the recently-captured Yoruba slaves of the King of Dahomey rose in rebellion on the palm-oil plantations of the Abomey plateau. They were put down firmly, but the masters were careful thereafter about collecting such large numbers of slaves in one place.

As the nineteenth century progressed, European powers became steadily more aggressive. At mid-century, these powers controlled small segments of the African coastline, in a modest expansion of the enclaves they had dominated for centuries. Then after 1880 the French, Germans, and British claimed larger territories, and by 1900 had sent armies to ensure the submission of almost all of West Africa to the expanded European empires. This sudden expansion of European empire in West Africa brought dramatic changes for the institution of slavery, but it did not bring immediate emancipation for most of those held on subjugation.

The campaign against African slavery, from the 1880s, provided the ideological prop for the European advance. France, which had not itself abolished slavery until 1848, justified its advance up the Senegal River during the 1860s and 1870s in part to abolish slavery. Yet as the wars with al-hajj Umar and later with Samori Touré turned difficult, the French regimes turned to holding captured slaves in bondage rather than liberating them. As late as 1905, the French regime held thousands of men, women, and children in captivity along the middle Niger and required them to grow grain for the French army and administration.

Aftermath: slavery under colonial rule

European regimes in West Africa gave high priority to halting slave trade, but low priority to emancipating slaves. The French conquerors of Senegambia and Dahomey announced that slavery was abolished, but made no systematic effort to enforce the announcements. In these and other areas, the arrival of European-led armies enabled slaves to escape and attempt to make their way home. The new administrations gained a monopoly of armed force, and thus rapidly ended most new acts of enslavement. The colonial regimes stopped short, however, of formally declaring the emancipation of all slaves, and made almost no attempts to free the slaves or to guide them to their homes or to places of safety.

As a detailed report from colonial Dahomey made clear, it was far more difficult for enslaved women to take their freedom than for men. Many of the women had children by their masters or other free men, and the children belonged by law to the men – a law that the colonial regimes declined to alter. Women could take their freedom only by abandoning their children, and commonly declined to do so. Instead, these women and the men who chose to remain with their masters sought to renegotiate terms. In some cases they were able to gain control of land; in other cases they became subordinate lineages within the master's lineage.

In addition, the colonial regimes turned to justifying slavery in West Africa. In a striking change of attitude, the imperial agents of European powers changed their approach to slavery once they had gained power. Even E. D. Morel, later known for his courageous critique of King Leopold's violent regime in Congo, underwent a sudden change from his 1895 condemnation of slavery in the Sokoto Caliphate to his 1900 justification of slavery as a natural and benign institution in African society.

Slavery did indeed undergo major reform with the colonial conquest.¹⁹ The establishment of European rule meant that it was virtually impossible to conduct raids to enslave new captives. For those already enslaved, however, their captivity was recognized as legal, and they could still be bought and sold. Slave owners, unable to obtain large numbers of new captives, turned to better treatment of adult male slaves and especially of women and children. Thus "slavery without slave trade," whether in the Americas or Africa, urged owners to treat their slaves more generously, as they could no longer be replaced with a cheap captive. African slavery in the post-slave-raiding days of the twentieth century therefore became comparable to that in the Americas after the abolition of slave trade – that is, it was similar to "antebellum" U.S. slavery from 1808 to 1865, to slavery in British territories from 1808 to 1838, to slavery in French territories from the 1820s to 1848, and in Cuba and Brazil from 1850 to the 1880s.

For each West African territory, the laws leading to the end of slavery differed. In several territories, laws approved in the first decade of the twentieth century specified that all children born after a certain date would be free – or would be free once they reached their majority. Sierra Leone -- with its capital in Freetown, the haven of freed slaves -- nonetheless did not adopt an ordinance ending slavery throughout the colony until 1928. In Northern Nigeria, the slave population remained at the level of perhaps three million persons even in the mid-1920s. There were no holidays or emancipation proclamations to celebrate the return of slaves to citizenship, only a slow and individual accumulation of the rights and privileges of ordinary life.

It was under these circumstances of life in the early colonial period, the era from 1900 to 1930 that European ethnologists and colonial officials wrote up their descriptions of West African society and slavery. At a time when the violence of pre-colonial slave raids had been halted by the might of colonial armies, and when slaves, thought not yet freed, nonetheless began to be able to make demands for fair treatment — under these circumstances, the official ethnologists wrote up their descriptions of African slavery. Linking their current observations to a belief that African societies were static and unchanging, these authors wrote that slaves were treated benignly as subordinate members of the master’s family, and that they had almost enough advantages to their situation to balance the disadvantages of enslavement. These descriptions, usually written in the form of a social balance sheet, provided the data from which later analysts of African slavery developed their interpretations.

Slavery has left a complex residue in West Africa today. A historical approach to slavery in West Africa — recognizing its early origins but tracing its expansion and transformation through the impact of external demand for servile labor — helps explain the complexity. Following the impact of market demand, another sort of external force, the power of imperial armies and administration, halted the expansion of slavery and initiated its decline. Yet the colonial regimes were more devoted to social hierarchy than to social equality, and prevented the full elimination of slavery. With independence, the new republics of West Africa inherited the inequalities of slavery along with the inequalities of colonialism.

Study Questions

- 1) Explain the importance of the role of Africans in the Atlantic slave trade.
- 2) The African slave trade is often described as part of a *triangular trade*. Why? Give reasons for this.

- 3) List the main geographical areas from where African slaves were captured, where they were sold, and where they were ultimately put to work. What kind of labour were captured Africans doing in slavery?
- 4) What was the demographic impact of the slave trade on Africa?
- 5) How did colonial rule affect the international trade in slaves, as well as the use of slavery *within* Africa?

Suggested Readings

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NOTES

¹ On the volume of slave exports before 1650, see Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, 1969); Ivana Elbl, "The Volume of the Early Atlantic Slave Trade, 1450-1521," *Journal of African History* 38 (1997), 31-75; and Ralph A. Austen, "The trans-Saharan Slave Trade: A Tentative

Census,” in Henry A. Gemery and Jan S. Hogendorn, eds., *The Uncommon Market: Essays in the Economic History of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (New York, 1979), 23-76. See also Nehemia Levtzion and J. F. P. Hopkins, eds., J. F. P. Hopkins translator, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History* (Cambridge, 1981).

² On Portuguese slave trade to 1550, see Elbl, “Early Atlantic Slave Trade”; Boubacar Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*, Trans. Ayi Kwei Armah (Cambridge, 1998); John William Blake, ed., *Europeans in West Africa 1450-1560*, vol. 1 (London, 1942); and A. F. C. Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans, 1485-1897* (New York, 1969).

³ On expansion of slave economy, see Jan S. Hogendorn and Marion Johnson, *The Shell Money of the Slave Trade* (Cambridge, 1986); Manuel Lobo Cabrera, *La Esclavitud en las Canarias Orientales en el Siglo XVI (Negros, Moros y Moriscos)* (Santa Cruz de Tenerife, 1982.); and J. P. Olivier de Sardan, “Captifs ruraux et esclaves impériaux du Songhay,” in Claude Meillassoux, ed., *L'Esclavage en Afrique précoloniale* (Paris, 1975), 99-134..

⁴ On American slavery 1550-1650: Frederick Bowser, *The African Slave in Colonial Peru, 1524-1650* (Stanford, 1973); and Colin W. Palmer, *Slaves of the White God: Blacks in Mexico, 1570-1650* (Cambridge MA, 1976).

⁵ For slave trade from West Africa 1550-1650: Walter Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast 1545-1800* (Oxford, 1970); and Barry, *Senegambia*.

⁶ Dutch slave trade from 1650: Johannes Menne Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade 1600-1815* (Cambridge, 1990).

⁷ For slavery and slave from 1650 to 1800 in Senegambia, the Niger Valley, and Morocco, see: Barry, *Senegambia*; Philip D. Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa: Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade*; 1 vol. and supplement (Madison, 1975); James Searing, *West African slavery and Atlantic commerce: The Senegal river valley, 1700-1860* (Cambridge, 1993); Richard L. Roberts, *Warriors, Merchants and Slaves: The State and the Economy in the Middle Niger Valley, 1700-1914* (Stanford, 1987); and Jamil M. Abun-Nasr, *A History of the Maghrib in the Islamic Period* (Cambridge, 1987).

⁸ On the Bight of Benin, 1650-1800, see Patrick Manning, *Slavery, Colonialism, and Economic Growth in Dahomey, 1640-1960* (Cambridge, 1982); and Robin Law, *The Slave of Coast of West Africa 1550-1750: The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on an African Society* (Oxford, 1991).

⁹ On the Gold Coast, including its overlap with Bight of Benin, 1650-1800, see Ray A. Kea, *Settlements, Trade, and Politics in the Seventeenth-Century Gold Coast* (Baltimore, 1982); and Kwame Yeboa Daaku, *Trade and Politics on the Gold Coast, 1600-1720* (Oxford, 1970).

¹⁰ For data on the English, French and Dutch slave trades, see David Eltis, Stephen Behrendt, David Richardson, and Herbert S. Klein, eds., *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM* (Cambridge, 1999).

¹¹ On the Bight of Biafra, 1650-1800: David Northrup, *Trade without Rulers: Pre-Colonial Economic Development in South-Eastern Nigeria* (Oxford, 1978).

¹² On Upper Guinea, 1650-1800: Rodney, *History of the Upper Guinea Coast*;

¹³ For regional volumes of slave exports, 1650-1800, see Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental, and African Slave Trades* (Cambridge, 1990).

¹⁴ On social change, 1650-1800, see: Manning, *Slavery and African Life*; and David Geggus, “Sex Ratio, Age and Ethnicity in the Atlantic Slave Trade: Data from French Shipping and Plantation Records,” *Journal of African History* 30 (1989), 23-44.

¹⁵ David Patrick Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington IN, 2002).

¹⁶ For slavery and slave trade in the Sokoto Caliphate, the Oyo Empire and its successors, 1800-1900: H. A. S. Johnston, *The Fulani Empire of Sokoto* (London, 1967); Robin Law, *The Oyo Empire, c. 1600 – c.1836* (Oxford, 1977).

¹⁷ For quantities of slave exports 1800-1900; David Eltis, *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New York, 1987); and Manning, *Slavery and African Life*.

¹⁸ Social change 1800-1900: Manning, *Slavery and African Life*; Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge, 1983); A. J. H. Latham, *Old Calabar, 1600-1891: The Impact of the International Economy upon a Traditional Society* (Oxford, 1973).

¹⁹ For slavery in colonial Africa, see: Paul E. Lovejoy and Jan S. Hogendorn, *Slow death for slavery: The course of abolition in Northern Nigeria, 1897-1936* (Cambridge, 1993); Suzanne Miers and Richard Roberts, eds., *The End of Slavery in Africa* (Madison, 1988); Martin A. Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule*

in French West Africa (Cambridge, 1998); Claire C. Robertson and Martin A. Klein, eds., *Women and Slavery in Africa* (Madison, 1983).