

Introduction

FINDING THE AFRICAN VOICE

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It is always difficult to recover ordinary lives from the folds of history. This is especially true when it comes to slavery. For more than 400 years, men, women, and children from Africa were forcibly transported to other parts of the world. Most of their names have been lost. Their thoughts and feelings, their suffering and hopes, the little joys of their daily lives have disappeared from memory. New societies emerged and old ones were restructured as they absorbed enslaved African men, women, and children with a profound effect on the recipient societies and on those African communities that provided the slaves. Slavery and the slave trade also played a crucial role in the internal history of Africa, a past that post-abolition African societies recollect with even more difficulties than the relationships created by centuries of external slave trade between Africa and the rest of the world.

This volume of primary sources casts light on both the external and internal slave trade, and on the place of slavery in the political, economic, social, and cultural setup of Africa itself. The contributions are linked by the effort of giving voice to African perceptions and representations of one of the most tragic and sad aspects of African history.

Interest in the influence of slavery on human societies gripped the contemporary imagination in the United States, in part, as a result of the civil rights struggle. In finally acknowledging the rightful claims to full citizenship rights by peoples of African descent (most of whose ancestors had been enslaved), all Americans were forced to recognize the importance of slavery in shaping the history of the Americas. During this same period – that is, in the 1960s–1970s – social historians in Europe and the Americas were starting to challenge the elitist nature of the mainstream historiography. By examining the hidden histories of commoners, workers, women, and other historically subordinated groups, they brought to light the exploitation that many had suffered at the hands of the powerful and the prestigious. These were the contexts that saw the study of slavery and other injustices fire the historical imaginations of scholars far and wide but it took a bit longer for slavery and the slave trade within Africa to enter the picture. Colonial regimes, which held onto power up to the 1960s, saw these practices in Africa as a problem they had solved despite contrary evidence that they in fact continued to exist in places on the continent. African nationalists and the first generation of African scholars who had participated in efforts to free their countries from colonial domination also had no interest in exploring the heritage of slavery or the internal slave trade. They feared it would divide their new,

fragile nations. Instead, they focused on histories that contributed to the establishment of a unifying pride in the pasts of their newly independent countries. That objective was shared also by scholars from the West who focused on reconstructing the histories and cultures in Africa's past. Instead of considering the ignoble past of internal slavery and slave trade, they concentrated on collecting formal oral traditions, historical narratives that served as the charters for existing political structures and that could be used to construct the kinds of academic histories that nationalists needed to foster the much sought-after pride in local institutions and practices undermined by European colonialists. When both African and Western scholars, under the influence of the changing political and intellectual trends in the Americas and Europe, began to turn their attention to slavery, they soon learned that this field of research was fraught with difficulties. There were silences in colonial archives, and informants of slave origin were generally reluctant to discuss their histories. Memories of slavery were unsettling for those whose ancestors owned slaves and for those who were the descendants of the enslaved. The children and grandchildren of the masters often did not want to talk about what their ancestors had done, and the descendants of slaves did not want to speak of a status from which they sought to escape. Many of the oral sources presented in this volume illustrate this restraint.

In 1969, Philip Curtin published *African Slave Trade: A Census*,¹ which critically examined estimates for the slave trade and tried to produce new ones. This spawned a major body of research on slave trade demography² that has made available a great deal of information about the slave trade and about slavery within Africa. We know not only about overall numbers, but about regional and ethnic distribution, male-female ratios, the number of children exported, and the organization of the trade. Yet, there are limitations. The demographic studies about the export trade – whether they focus on Africa or the Americas – are based on European and American shipping and customs records. It was clear that slavery and the vast military and commercial machine that supplied the labor needs of the Americas, of the Arabic Peninsula, and of the Indian Ocean also fed a demand for labor within Africa. Field research generated some material about the internal trade and slavery within Africa, but European sources were far more abundant. The earliest works on slavery within Africa – those of Claude Meillassoux, Suzanne Miers, Igor Kopytoff, Frederick Cooper, Paul Lovejoy, Claire Robertson, and Martin Klein³ – focused less on quantitative analyses and more on qualitative descriptions. They did so using their own field observations and, for many, accounts produced by such European informants as slave traders, missionaries, and colonial administrators. But what of African perspectives? We need to hear how Africans understood and now remember that part of their own past associated with slavery and the slave trade. We need to listen to African voices.

Perhaps the earliest and most important effort to find African voices came once again from Philip Curtin, whose *Africa Remembered* culled a series of African narratives from

¹ From the University of Wisconsin Press.

² The culmination of almost forty years of research has been gathered together into the Transatlantic Slave Trade Database, which now contains data on about 35,000 of estimated 41,000 slave voyages across the Atlantic. See <http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search>

³ Claude Meillassoux (ed.), *Lesclavage en Afrique précoloniale* (Paris, 1975); Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (eds.), *Slavery in Africa* (Madison, 1977); Frederick Cooper, *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa* (New Haven, 1977); Paul E. Lovejoy, *The Ideology of Slavery in Africa* (Beverly Hills, 1981); Claire Robertson and Martin A. Klein (eds.), *Women and Slavery in Africa* (Madison, 1983).

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rare published literature.⁴ This study was supplemented in the 1990s by Marcia Wright's *Strategies of Slaves and Women*. In that volume, Wright tapped the life histories of women caught in the maelstrom of the East African slave trade, which had been collected by missionaries. It produced a picture that focused on the strategies of enslaved women.⁵ Then in the course of the 1990s, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Slave Route project encouraged research on the causes, forms of operations, and consequences of the slave trade.⁶ In 1998, the distinguished Ghanaian poet, Kofi Anyidoho, organized a seminar entitled 'Memory and Vision: Africa and the Legacy of Slavery', which took a group of African and diaspora scholars through the hinterland of Ghana to explore African tales of slavery and the slave trade. In the process, Anyidoho developed a methodology that focused not on personal histories, but on memories of places and events. In the same year, the historian Djibril Tamsir Niane brought together a number of contributions on oral traditions and slavery in an online publication sponsored by UNESCO.⁷ Scholars like Mamadou Diawara and Akosua Perbi were simultaneously finding ways to access memories of slavery by collecting songs, proverbs, and folktales,⁸ while Ibrahima Thioub was chastising his colleagues for having downplayed the role of slavery in modern African history.⁹ By making fresh materials available, this volume considers the ways Africans experienced slavery and the slave trade, and what followed in the course of abolition. Giving voice to slaves and the descendants of slaves has been our major concern. As our contributors make clear, this objective is not always achievable in the strict sense of finding sources articulated by slaves themselves. More often than not, their voices must be disentangled from narratives, texts, records, and an array of other evidence not originally meant to represent their perspective like missionary accounts, court records, and the historical narratives of master descendants.

The immediate genesis of this collaborative project was the organization in 2004 by Sandra Greene and Carolyn Brown of the African Slavery Oral Narratives Project. They believed that a lot of data on African slavery could be found in the field notes of scholars who were asking other questions and wanted to encourage scholars to take a deeper look at their data. A few years later, troubled particularly by the problem of finding slave voices, Alice Bellagamba suggested to Martin Klein that they organize a conference on the topic at the Rockefeller Foundation conference center at Bellagio, Italy. When it turned out that Brown and Greene had similar plans, we joined together. The conference took place in 2007. Much to our surprise, we received so many interesting proposals that we could not host them all at a conference center that had a capacity limit of twenty-three persons. As a result, we held a second and larger conference in Toronto in 2009.

⁴ Philip Curtin (ed.), *Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans from the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Madison, 1967).

⁵ Marcia Wright, *Strategies of Slaves and Women* (New York, 1993).

⁶ http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=25659&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

⁷ Djibril Tamsir Niane, *Traditional Orale et Archives de la Traite Nègrière* (Paris, 1998).

⁸ Mamadou Diawara, *La Graine de la Parole. Dimension sociale et politique des traditions orales du royaume de Jaara (Mali) du XV^e au milieu du XIX^e siècle* (Stuttgart, 1989); Akosua Perbi, *A History of Indigenous Slavery in Ghana from the 15th to the 19th Century* (Accra, 2004).

⁹ Ibrahima Thioub, "Regard critique sur les lectures africaines de l'esclavage et de la traite atlantique," in Issiaka Mande and Blandine Stefanson (eds.), *Les historiens africaines et la mondialisation* (Paris, 2005).

We found that many scholars – some established, but also a significant number of younger ones – were thinking about the same methodological problems that concerned us. Furthermore, some were interested in exploring different kinds of sources. We were interested in any kind of sources that cast light on how Africans experienced slavery, and in particular from the point of view of the enslaved. Much of what was presented at the conferences involved not new methodologies, but more critical and systematic ways of approaching older ones, although we were also interested in exploring new types of sources. We came to realize that there existed surprising potential in oral traditions, proverbs, and songs, but also in rituals and material culture. Kofi Anyidoho's foreword and poem invite us to pay attention to the living memories of slavery and the slave trade textured into the fabric of contemporary African societies. As they often require long-term acquaintance with people and contexts along with knowledge of the language in which they are performed and of the larger social and cultural background, such sources have often stymied researchers. This is one of the reasons why the selection of materials we present here opens with oral sources. The volume is divided into nine parts, each preceded by a short introduction. Each document has an introduction that comments on the way the sources were collected or identified and their value for the analysis of slavery. A list of questions helps the reader think critically about the source, and a short bibliography is provided for further reading.

The documents in Part One are not the formal state narratives that were the focus of research in the 1960s, but rather the oral traditions, historical tales, and interviews that present the perspectives of former slaves and their children as well as the descendants of the masters. They illustrate the diversity of traditions within Africa and the different kinds of information found in them. These documents give details on slave systems, life in slavery, and the struggles of ex-slaves for upward social mobility.

Part Two looks at a relatively unexplored set of sources: proverbs, songs, and material culture.¹⁰ These sources present us with few facts, but rather with the way images have persisted, sometimes buried in fantastic folktales or religious rituals, at other times in songs and proverbs. These folk memories begin to give us a picture of the fears engendered by four centuries of slave-raiding and the ways those memories are perpetuated into the present.

Part Three focuses on African written accounts of slavery. It includes the defense of slavery by a slaveholding African chief, culled from the archives, the treatment of slavery in an African-authored text, and the effort of an African intellectual to understand the history of his own society. These documents suggest that more sources can be found illustrating diverse African attitudes and experiences. Some documents also display the ambiguous situations in which some Africans found themselves.¹¹

The African voice is sometimes implicit in action and at other times is presented in the words of others. Part Four deals with European travelers' accounts. There are documents on slave flight in Tunisia, an account by a European travel writer of the poignant dilemma of the African concubine of a French pharmacist, a French description of a slave

¹⁰ At the Toronto conference, Nicholas Argenti presented a paper of the memories of slavery buried in children's stories from Cameroon. It is being published as "Things that Don't Come by the Road: Folktales, Fosterage, and Memories of Slavery in the Cameroon Grassfields", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52 (2010), 224–254.

¹¹ Randy Sparks presented at Bellagio the letters of the sons of prominent slave traders from Calabar, who were enslaved in a local conflict but quickly freed and lionized while living in England, often by people hostile to slavery. We did not publish these because Sparks has written on the case. See Randy Sparks, *Two Princes of Calabar: An Eighteenth Century Atlantic Odyssey* (Cambridge, MA, 2004).

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woman shipped north into Saharan slavery, and an account of a European sailor who at the beginning of the eighteenth century described the social inequalities and hierarchies of the Gold Coast.

Part Five suggests that in spite of the research already done, there is a lot of material to be found in colonial archives. The African voice is found in the letters and petitions Africans addressed to their colonial rulers and in the things Africans did. It is filtered through the reports and perceptions of colonial administrators and military officers who had to deal with slaves and sometimes reported their dealings. But a critical reading of these documents gives us a picture of the struggles of ordinary Africans.

One of the most important sources on the African experience is the courtroom. Part Six presents cases in which slaves appear either as litigants or as object of litigation. There are limitations to what we can get from judicial sources. African testimonies are shaped by their strategies and by the advice of prosecutors, defense attorneys, and judges. They do, however, provide examples of slaves speaking in their own voices. The cases presented here illustrate the trade in and exploitation of slave women, but one deals with slavery and inheritance and another involves the report of a slave trader brought in front of the court for his activities.

Part Seven involves missionary sources. Unlike administrators, missionaries stayed in one place and generally learned the languages of those they were trying to convert. Most of the early converts to Christianity were slaves. The missions often wrote up the experience of their converts in order to publicize what they were doing and to raise money to continue their efforts. Mission archives are thus often a rich source of the slave experience.¹² The cases presented here give a few of those stories, including two documents that raise the issue of human sacrifice.

The possibility of Muslim sources, written either in Arabic or in African languages using Arabic script, has recently come to light as scholars have begun working with documents preserved in private archives. The Ahmed Baba Institute in Timbuktu has 700,000 documents. There are more in other repositories. Many of these documents have not yet been studied, but Part Eight contains letters between a commercial family and a slave who traded on its behalf (Chapter 42). There is also a study of a court case involving a runaway slave in Mauritania (Chapter 43). Finally, Chapter 44 presents a totally unexpected source: slave wills from the island of Pemba in East Africa. This is particularly interesting because slaves were not supposed to be able to bequeath.

The last part of the volume focuses on the contemporary legacy of slavery, specifically the way in which the descendants of slaves and the descendants of masters shape their current relationships. In many parts of West Africa, the stigma associated with slave origins endures, but so too have slave descendants continued their struggle to gain respect and social recognition in the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.¹³

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Carolyn Brown was part of the team that initiated this project. She was valuable in the conceptualization of the conferences that led to this book, provided valuable contacts, and did

¹² Wright, *Strategies* Edward Alpers, “Suema.”
¹³ For more such cases, see Alice Bellagamba, Sandra Greene, Martin Klein, *The Bitter Legacy. African slavery past and present* (Princeton, 2013). For contemporary slavery, see Kevin Bales, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1999); Joel Quirk, *The Anti-Slavery Project. From the Slave Trade to Human Trafficking* (Philadelphia, 2011); Benjamin N. Lawrance and Richard L. Roberts, *Trafficking in Slavery’s Wake. Law and the Experience of Women and Children in Africa* (Athens, 2012).

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some editing. We valued her collaboration and regret that other commitments forced her to drop out of the editing of this volume.

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