Transformations in Slavery

This history of African slavery from the fifteenth to the early twentieth centuries examines how indigenous African slavery developed within an international context. Paul E. Lovejoy discusses the medieval Islamic slave trade and the Atlantic trade as well as the enslavement process and the marketing of slaves. He considers the impact of European abolition and assesses slavery's role in African history. The book corrects the accepted interpretation that African slavery was mild and resulted in the slaves' assimilation. Instead, slaves were used extensively in production, although the exploitation methods and the relationships to world markets differed from those in the Americas. Nevertheless, slavery in Africa, like slavery in the Americas, developed from its position on the periphery of capitalist Europe. This new edition revises all statistical material on the slave trade demography and incorporates recent research and an updated bibliography.

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Transformations in Slavery

A History of Slavery in Africa

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York University, Ontario
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A wide variety of currencies were used in Africa during the period of this study. Wherever possible, I have converted local currencies to pound sterling. I have also used the Maria Theresa thaler (MT$), which circulated widely in the northern Savanna and East Africa from the end of the eighteenth century. Cowries were also used in large parts of West Africa. Unless otherwise specified, all weights and measures are metric.
This is a work of synthesis. As such, it suffers from the same deficiencies that all studies of its sort do. I have examined some parts of the continent in much greater detail than others in preparing this book, and I have relied on secondary sources extensively, although there has been some use of primary material. Very likely there are points with which specialists will disagree, because the scope of the topic makes it impossible to be fully aware of the debates that affect particular periods and areas. Nonetheless, the study of African history, and more specifically the analysis of slavery in Africa, has suffered from the opposite problem to that of oversynthesis. There is virtually no historical framework in which the reconstruction of the history of slavery can be set. The numerous local studies that exist are uneven in quality and frequently are presented in a quasi-historical setting that is fraught with enormous methodological difficulties. Often studies of adjacent areas make no reference to each other. Sometimes, analysis is divorced from all outside influence, as if slavery in Africa existed in a vacuum. There are some brilliant local studies that have their own implications in terms of the study of slavery in general, but these, too, suffer from a failure to place the particular case in the context of Africa as a whole, or even specific regions within Africa.

With these problems in mind, I set out to write an interpretative essay, titled “Indigenous African Slavery,” which was presented at a conference on new directions in slave studies at the University of Waterloo in April 1979. I uncovered so much material that a more extensive project was necessary to consider the issues identified. That essay is in part a bibliographical study that can be used to accompany this book. It is incomplete, even with respect to relatively available materials, and it does not examine the extensive archival information that can be used for a study of this sort, although some archival material has been surveyed. In short, the collection and examination of source material continues, but the present volume is a necessary step in the further study of slavery.
This book attempts a more sophisticated interpretation than was possible for the Waterloo conference. The same basic framework will be evident: an effort to delimit regions within Africa that enable meaningful analysis and a periodization that identifies major turning points in the history of slavery. It will be clear that detailed studies of particular topics and areas are still essential. This is not a substitute for such research. Rather this book provides a thematic study of African history from the perspective of slavery. Its major thesis is that slavery was transformed, in part because of external influences and in part because of the dynamics of internal forces. On the most general level, it argues that Africa responded to outside influences to a greater extent than it influenced the outside world. The more important questions of how Africans shaped that response and the means through which outside influence was minimized are considered in detail. The implication of this thesis is that slavery was a central institution in many parts of Africa, and the study examines where and when this became the case.

The book should be seen as an introduction to the history of slavery in Africa. More specialized studies already exist that treat particular problems, often for much more limited periods. These include the analysis of the overseas slave trade, the abolition crusade, and the relationship between slavery and imperialism; but even these are often limited even within the general theme of study. The following scholars, whose works are cited in the bibliography, deserve special mention. Philip D. Curtin pioneered the study of the trans-Atlantic slave trade when he attempted a preliminary census in 1969. Today this study is out of date, superseded by more detailed research summarized in the appropriate chapters below. Of the many abolition studies, those of Suzanne Miers, Seymour Drescher, Roger Anstey, and François Renault are the most important here, but each has its drawbacks. Miers concentrates on the British and the last decades of the nineteenth century. Drescher and Anstey each focus on the forces of abolition in Great Britain, although their studies of the slave trade and the effects on Africa have modified the earlier work of Curtin. Renault provides the most comprehensive examination of French abolition by concentrating on Cardinal Lavigerie and his movement. Renault and Miers provide a good introduction to slavery in Africa during the era of European abolition. All of these studies assist in the historical reconstruction of African slavery, but invariably their treatment of slavery in Africa is of secondary importance to their main purpose: the external trade and European attitudes. These valuable contributions have been particularly useful here because, in the interpretation presented later in the book, the external trade and European abolition are both considered extremely important influences on African history and the evolution of slavery.

Humphrey and Allen Fisher, John Grace, and Frederick Cooper have completed book-length studies of slavery in Africa. The Fishers’ interpretative essay on the Islamic heritage of slavery in Africa is based primarily on the observations of Gustav Nachtigal from the 1870s. It is broadly conceived but draws on very limited sources. Grace’s work is largely on Sierra Leone, with some
Preface

information on other areas of British influence along the West African coast. It is historical but not balanced. Cooper’s study of plantation slavery in East Africa, summarized later here, is the most perceptive treatment of an individual slave system. This case is unique, for the major slave owners were not Africans but Omani Arabs, and hence some care has to be taken in order to place Cooper’s study in the larger African setting.

Essays on slavery in different contexts have been collected into several published volumes, including those by Claude Meillassoux, Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, James L. Watson, John Ralph Willis, and myself, and others will be forthcoming shortly. These cover diverse cases and present various thematic approaches. The Meillassoux volume contains the interpretations of a dynamic school of French Marxist anthropologists, and Meillassoux published a theoretical study that was an outgrowth of his association with the contributors to this volume. Miers and Kopytoff have done comparable work in the English-speaking world; their introduction provides a theoretical perspective as valuable as that of Meillassoux and his associates. The Willis volume includes specialized studies of slavery in the Islamic context, whereas Watson’s collection provides a comparative perspective for Asian and African cases. My own collection focuses on ideology, providing a forum for discussion between those who have been most strongly influenced by the French Marxists and those who are most influenced by Miers and Kopytoff. The trouble with all these short studies, invaluable as they are, is that as the number increases so does the confusion for the nonspecialist.

This brings us back to the present endeavor. It is an intermediate stage in research and analysis. Its contribution is intended primarily on the historical level, that is, on the plane of chronological reconstruction, although the chronological framework is a bare beginning. Because historical reconstruction has been so minimal in earlier studies, there are bound to be mistakes here. Furthermore, the context of recent research has contributed to the general problem of interpretation in three ways. Firstly, the climate of research has been romantic. The aim of many historians has been to glorify the African past for reasons related to the emergent nationalism in Africa and the sentiments of people of African descent in the Americas. This has made it difficult to discuss the inglorious past. Secondly, the development of African history as a subdiscipline has grown from almost nothing to a large body of data and analysis. This development requires periodic syntheses such as this one; however, the speed with which new material becomes available inhibits such synthesis and furthermore reveals the thin base on which much earlier work has relied. Finally, the political climate in Africa has been a difficult one in which to do sensitive, critical research, both for foreigners and nationals. The hazards of examining archival materials and interviewing elders vary as always, but these have often been the least of a researcher’s problems in recent years. Police pressure, university censorship, and academic rivalries in close quarters have sometimes been more serious obstacles.
This will not be the last interpretation of the history of slavery in Africa. Indeed, my own interest in the subject has grown with the writing of this book. The quantity of material that is available in published and archival form is so voluminous that different thematic studies become more and more desirable. Some of these possibilities will be readily apparent, as will the need for a more detailed examination of specific aspects of local and regional history. This book, therefore, is an assessment of the topic initially brought forth in 1982.

The individuals who have assisted in one way or another in the preparation of this book include those who have made material available to me, those who have engaged in an ongoing dialogue on aspects of the topic over the past few years, and those who have read or commented on specific parts of the manuscript. I mention these individuals as a further reference to sources, for in most cases the scholars are actively engaged in research on the topic of slavery: Mordacai Abir, Frederick Cooper, Dennis Cordell, Philip D. Curtin, Mark Duffill, Raymond Dunnett, Jan Hogendorn, Allen Isaacman, Martin Klein, Norman Klein, Igor Kopytoff, Patrick Manning, Suzanne Miers, Joseph C. Miller, David Northrup, Richard Roberts, David Tambo, and Jan Vansina. David Eltis, Stanley Engerman, Henry Gemery, and Joseph Miller critiqued my efforts to synthesize the material available on the volume of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and, along with Pieter Emmer and Robert Stein, Miller and Eltis also made available unpublished material. Myron Echenberg, John Fage, Allen Isaacman, Sydney Kanya-Forstner, Martin Klein, Patrick Manning, Joseph Miller, and Emmanuel Terray read all or substantial portions of the manuscript, and hopefully most of their criticisms have been satisfied. John Priestley kindly undertook the translation of several French quotations. Several research assistants were helpful in tracking down material; these include Geoffrey Da Silva, Murray Hoffbauer, Stephen Giles, Mary Pat O’Reilly, and Marc Epprecht. I would also like to thank Michael Craton for the opportunity to present the preliminary paper on indigenous African slavery that provided the foundation for this larger study. Financial assistance for the collection of material has come from York University. It has been possible to devote time to writing this book because of a Faculty of Arts Fellowship from York University for 1979–1980, which released me from most of my teaching and administrative responsibilities. York University has also been particularly generous in providing secretarial assistance, and I would like to thank the many people in Secretarial Services, under the direction of Doris Brillinger, who have worked on various parts of the manuscript. Diane Jenner and Michelle Srebrolow also typed portions of the manuscript. Finally, the Interlibrary Loan department of Scott Library, York University, has been responsible for the tremendous task of locating the often very obscure materials that have been essential to this study.

Paul E. Lovejoy
Toronto, Canada
Preface to the Second Edition

Twenty years have passed since I first offered an overview of the history of slavery in Africa (Lovejoy 1979). The first edition of this book was my attempt to relate the internal development of slavery in Africa to external forces. My approach was to use the newly available quantifiable data on the scale, timing, and direction of the slave trade across the Atlantic to explore the political, economic, and social history of Africa, looking for correlations in the trans-Atlantic trade with developments in western Africa. From an Africanist perspective, such an approach also required consideration of the Islamic trade in slaves, Indian Ocean patterns, and Dutch use of slaves at the Cape of Good Hope. My approach tried to tie the known dimensions of the external trade in slaves to a history of slavery in Africa. Since the publication of the first edition, there has been considerably more research done on the demography of the slave trade, resulting most especially in the combination of various data into a single database, the W.E.B. Du Bois database, which draws on records of more than 27,000 slaving voyages between Africa and the Americas.¹

In preparing the second edition, I have relied on the Du Bois database, although in certain minor ways, the Du Bois data have been supplemented.² In the first edition, I generated my own synthesis of available data on the scale of the slave trade, drawing heavily on Curtin’s earlier work (1969). This overview was in turn subjected to critique and revision.³ The Du Bois database makes much of the debate over the initial Curtin census (1969) and the subsequent revisions obsolete. In addition, other statistical studies have meant that most of the tables in the first edition have had to be modified. Hence most of the tables in this edition are new, although reference to the earlier literature is retained for purposes of comparison. To take account of the new demographic data, I have altered the discussion of the various tables accordingly, and additional references have been provided to reflect ongoing scholarship on the history of Africa and the role of slavery in that history. Where appropriate, I have
qualified or otherwise modified my analysis in exploring the implications of the revised figures.

Although I have relied on the Du Bois database for my analysis of the demography of the slave trade, I am well aware of numerous weaknesses in its conceptualization and implementation. The database is weak on Portuguese and Spanish sources, and hence is less reliable in studying the trade to Brazil and Hispanic America, especially in the early period, than the trade to the Caribbean in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Not only is there a need for caution because of the extent of lost or corrupted data, but much of the database is based on derived statistics that warrant additional caution. To calculate the scale of the trade, scholars have been forced to make a variety of assumptions, such as the carrying capacity of ships on the basis of ship tonnage, or the loss of slaves during the trans-Atlantic passage, in order to standardize material for analysis. In using the database, therefore, I am aware of the risks in presenting a false degree of certainty. Methodologically, I have attempted to use the imputed statistics of the Du Bois database to verify or otherwise inform historical developments in Africa that are also documented in other ways. The analysis suggests that demographic data can reveal significant issues of history, in this case the impact of forced migration through slavery on the history of Africa.

In developing a thesis that emphasizes the transformation of servile institutions under the pressures of the slave trade, particularly the trans-Atlantic and Islamic slave trades, I have sought to place African events and processes at center stage, despite my emphasis on the importance of external influences. Pursuing insights that I gained from Walter Rodney, I have focused on the impact of the slave trade on change in Africa, fully recognizing that transformations always occur in context, which is inevitably local. Hence it is not a question of whether internal or external influences were more important, but how these influences affected the course of history. I have not been interested in demonstrating that the trans-Atlantic slave trade caused African underdevelopment, although I think that the evidence demonstrates a causal relationship. Rather, I have wanted to explore the ways in which the demand for slaves in the Americas and elsewhere affected the political economy of the areas from where the slaves came, and in so doing to demonstrate the interaction between local and global forces. Critics, however, have sought to demonstrate that internal economic, political, and social factors were so overwhelmingly dominant or otherwise impervious to external influence that there were no transformations within Africa that resulted from the slave trade. For Eltis, economic indicators are used to demonstrate the economic marginality of the slave trade on African economies. For Inikori, slavery did not exist in Africa during the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and the transformation that occurred took place in the Americas in a racialized context. Thornton, on the other hand, argues that slavery was so pervasive in Africa that the Americas could be settled by slaves only because of their prior availability. For Thornton, the extent of transformation has been overstated.
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Based on available demographic data, it seems clear that the impact of trans-Atlantic slavery varied considerably, and much of the impact was in fact concentrated in relatively restricted regions of western Africa. Similarly, the trans-Saharan slave trade and Indian Ocean trade were concentrated in their impact, affecting areas along clearly marked trade routes and political frontiers that changed over time but are nonetheless discernable in the historical record. The analysis is supported by the simulated demographic study of Manning, which attempts to demonstrate the probable range of impact of different slave regimes. As Manning also argues, enclaves of external influence had a ripple effect into the interior, which by the nineteenth century meant that slavery was widespread in many parts of Africa, not only in areas that had become enmeshed in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In this book, I explore changes in the political economy that account for the spread of slave use within Africa, specifically exploring the effects of Islam, external markets, and the actions of slaves and former slaves themselves in the debate over abolition and emancipation.

Theoretically, I draw attention to the process of change that resulted in the intensified use of slaves as a “mode of production” based on slavery, in which the institutionalization of enslavement, the formal structure of trade, and the codification of slavery in law and custom guaranteed that slavery was central to the production process. The conceptual framework that emphasizes slavery as a system, and not simply an institution, is intended to demonstrate a fundamental difference between slavery in those places in the diaspora where many of the enslaved were forced to go, including the Americas and the Islamic world north of the Sahara, and slavery in sub-Saharan Africa itself. Enslaved Africans were found in Africa as well as in the Americas and North Africa, but they were taken to distant lands as slaves; they were not enslaved there. I argue that the specific features of slavery as a mode of production in Africa harnessed the mechanisms of enslavement with the slave trade and slave use. Elsewhere, enslavement was not an integrated part of the slave system, other than through the biological reproduction of slaves themselves and the purchase of slaves from Africa. There was no such geographical and structural separation between enslavement and the trade and use of slaves. In Africa, the structure of slavery that underpinned the social and economic formations of the largest states and societies was closely tied to enslavement itself. The book explores the implications of these differences, but only in the African context.

Many issues arising from the analysis of the transformations in the political economy of slavery that are presented here cannot be examined in a revised edition. The extent to which local situations were influenced by the market for slaves, and how that influence was shaped, requires detailed, local studies, such as those that have since been published. The available studies, many of which are included in the revised, and expanded, bibliography in this edition, demonstrate that the concentration of slaves in the export sector and along trade routes led to the transformation of local conditions and society in ways that are comparable to those discussed here. Because the centralization of slaving
Preface to the Second Edition

activity at specific places on the coast directed the flow of people, the slave trade thereby affected the ethno-linguistic identities of the enslaved. Although unwillingly, people had to adjust to the forces of change. Moreover, slaves of similar ethno-linguistic background, including those who accommodated themselves to the dominant-language community, tended to be concentrated in specific places in the Americas, and indeed in the Islamic world, so that slavery had the effect of shaping the ethnic map of the Americas, as well as altering the ethnic map of Africa. However, the issues relating to the connections between the African homelands of the enslaved and the diasporas of slavery in the Americas and the Islamic world, including the continuities and disjunctures of diaspora history, are not explored in this study. Nonetheless, I believe that understanding the history of servile institutions in Africa is essential to the study of slavery in the Americas and elsewhere. Even though the story of these influences and connections is beginning to be understood, a full study of ethnicity, historical continuity, and cultural change is warranted, although it is surely beyond the scope of this study. This revised book is intended to provide useful background for an analysis of the linkages between diaspora and Africa.

I wish to thank David Eltis, David Richardson, and Stephen Behrendt for providing me with access to their compilation and analysis of the Du Bois data, to Jose Curto and Ivan Elbl, who read portions of the text, to Robin Law for his continuing advice and criticism, to Manolo Florentino for insisting on a second edition, to Ismael Musah Montana, Ibrahim Hamza, and Kwabena Akurang-Parry for assistance in tracking down new materials, and to Michelle Srebrolow, who revised the bibliography.

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Preface to the Third Edition

I first attempted an overview of the history of slavery in Africa in 1979, in a paper first published in *Historical Reflections*, with responses from Igor Kopytoff and Frederick Cooper. Since then, there has been a great outburst in the study of the history of slavery, both within continental Africa and in the context of the development of the African diaspora in the Americas, the Islamic world, the Indian Ocean, and indeed Europe. My initial synthesis was prompted by the dialogue between francophone and anglophone scholarship, as represented in the collections of essays edited by Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*, and by Claude Meillassoux, *L’Esclavage en Afrique précoloniale*, both published in 1975. Moreover, my reflections and then considerable study of the topic were also set in the context of a series of informal seminars, largely held on the floor in Martin Klein’s living room in Toronto, where a number of kindred souls read and studied Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, and then his “precapitalist modes of production.” The group was attempting to come to terms with the preponderance of evidence about the pervasiveness of slavery in African history and society. It was clear that historical and anthropological research were in the process of confronting slavery. Given that Philip D. Curtin and Jan Vansina had been my mentors at the University of Wisconsin during my graduate school days, this trajectory is perhaps not surprising.

The purpose of this preface is to evaluate the progression of research on the history of slavery since the initial publication of *Transformations in Slavery* in 1983, and its updated second edition, published in 2000. My initial intention was to focus research on continental Africa to counter the false impression that Africa’s involvement in the slave trade was somehow passive, ahistorical, and only of interest in examining victimization and seemingly progressive underdevelopment. Somehow, a careful reading of the anthropological and historical literature revealed that this approach was not connected with African history.
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The challenge, therefore, was to make sense of what we know about the history of slavery in the context of political and economic change in Africa over the past several hundred years and how that related to the external traffic in enslaved Africans.

Since then, there has been a growing appreciation of the interconnectedness of African history with the development of the African diaspora, particularly in the Americas. Hence to examine how the study of the history of the descendants of Africans has progressed, it is now necessary to examine how African history was carried into diaspora. The study of slavery in Africa cannot be confined to continental questions any more than diaspora questions only require the study of how people adjusted to the oppression of enslavement.

There has been a great expansion in the study of slavery, as represented by the success of the journal *Slavery and Abolition*, and reflected in many other professional journals, scholarly series with publishers, and the establishment of programs, departments, centers, and institutes devoted to the study of slavery and the African diaspora. This scholarly output has been usefully combined into a bibliography that is annually updated in *Slavery and Abolition*, building on the early, pioneering bibliography of Joseph D. Miller. As a result, the bibliography in this revised edition has been shortened, and reference is made to the online bibliography. The activities of the UNESCO “Slave Route” Project also have highlighted the international focus on slavery, especially in relation to Africa. Significantly, UNESCO took the initiative in exploring the African past, first through the History of Africa project, but subsequently through a recognition of the African cultural heritage, such as at Ouidah in 1992, and more particularly in launching the UNESCO “Slave Route” Project in 1994. This initiative has strongly influenced my own commitment to demonstrating the importance of slavery in African history, as represented in this book and its revisions. Similarly, the persistence of contemporary forms of slavery has broadened the focus from the history of the African diaspora of the Americas, Asia, the Indian Ocean, and the Islamic world to issues of social justice.

An overview of developments in historical scholarship, particularly since the publication of the second edition in 2000, demonstrates the wealth of documentation that is available on the subject of slavery and its importance in the history of Africa. It is no longer acceptable to generalize about slavery in Africa in some anthropological present or indeed timeless past. It is possible to document change and difference. The new scholarship is sensitive to gender issues, religion, and the varied nature of historical information and sources. My reading of much of this literature confirms the general-transformation thesis of my original publications, including an insistence on the recognition of regional differences and temporal trajectories. An overview of the published literature since the publication of the second edition of this book, let alone the first, would require a full-length study in itself. It is my general sense, nonetheless, that the “transformation thesis” propounded in the first edition has had an important influence on the course of research.
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There is reason to publish a revised, third edition of *Transformations in Slavery* because of the trajectory of slave studies over the past thirty years. This book was conceived in the 1970s, when the presence of slavery in Africa was only beginning to draw the attention of scholars. Since then, there has been an explosion in the study of slavery, whether historically or in contemporary anthropology. It is now widely recognized how important slavery has been in the history of Africa, and indeed extending through the colonial era to the present, in some places.

The third edition updates the overview of the history of slavery in Africa and provides an assessment of recent research. The references in the notes and the bibliography have been updated to reflect the great expansion in the research and publication on slavery in Africa. The third edition specifically incorporates the revised estimates on scale and direction of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and reassesses the implications of the new data in terms of the regional impact on Africa. There have been important advances in studying the migration of Africans to the Americas, which is reflected in the slave voyage database, initially published by Cambridge and now online.

*Transformations in Slavery* specifically and deliberately focuses on continental Africa. Initially, the purpose was to confront the reality that there was slavery in the history of Africa, at a time when some romantic visionaries and hopeful nationalists wanted to deny the clear facts. The launch of the UNESCO “Slave Route” Project in 1994 marked a shift in research focus. It is now generally recognized that Africa and its people were fully enmeshed in the international system of slavery that stretched across the world and specifically tore at the fabric of African life. How to assess the changes that affected Africa and its people and the transformations that resulted from the web of slavery and its expansion was and remains the purpose of this book. The transformation thesis emphasizes the interplay between local, regional, and intercontinental forces and interactions that have affected the history of slavery in Africa, and by implication everywhere that Africans were taken.

Despite the focus on continental Africa, the study of the transformations in slavery in Africa has enormous implications for understanding the history of the African diaspora, both in the Americas and everywhere else. Any focus of slavery that privileges the Atlantic stands accused of failure in understanding the diaspora of Africans elsewhere. It is essential to know where enslaved Africans who went to the Americas came from and what their departure meant to the history and society in Africa, just as it is for Africans who went to the lands of the Indian Ocean or the Islamic world of North Africa and the Middle East.

The first edition of *Transformations in Slavery* drew on Marxist concepts to highlight the complexity of the slavery past. The reference to “modes of production” is not archaic, I would suggest, because the intellectual debate on the various social formations that have developed historically, and how these formations were transformed, remains the central preoccupation of our
attention. The fact that there were at least as many enslaved people in Africa as there were in the Americas at any time in the past requires careful reflection. At the outbreak of the U.S. Civil War, there were probably more slaves in the Muslim states of West Africa than in the Confederacy, or indeed in Cuba and Brazil. The Sokoto Caliphate alone probably had as many slaves as the United States and continued as a major slave-owning economy and society until the crisis at the time of European occupation after 1897. The system of production and the social formation of the Sokoto Caliphate had similarities with the slave societies of the Americas and warrant comparison. We may call this comparison of “modes of production” a way to examine “modes of exploitation” that occurred on a massive and global scale. Breaking the silence about the implications of slavery in history is the aim of the Durban accord of 2002 pronouncing slavery “a crime against humanity.”

Paul E. Lovejoy
Cahuita, January 1, 2011