CHAPTER 1

Defining Slavery, Defining Freedom

Introduction

In 1819, Barka became *dan rimi*, a powerful, titled, and official position specifically for slaves in the government of Kano (a major city in the nineteenth-century Sokoto Caliphate – now northern Nigeria). In his capacity as *dan rimi* and over the course of roughly thirty years, Barka advised two emirs – Ibrahim Dabo and Usman – on matters of war, state, and politics. Barka had numerous wives and children all of whom occupied a special section of the palace; wore expensive and ornate robes of state; owned many horses; commanded soldiers; supervised tax collection; and became an absolute force in affairs of state. After his death, a number of Barka's children became *dan rimi* and worked alongside numerous emirs at the highest levels of authority and power. He is well remembered today by his descendants in Kano, Nigeria.[1]

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Msatulwa Mwachitete grew up in Chitete, located in central East Africa, to the west of Lake Malawai, in the house of his father, who had twelve wives. Their home was attacked numerous times by Mkoma of the Inamwanga, who regularly carried off women and children into slavery after setting fire to surrounding villages. During one such

[1] Sean Stilwell, *Paradoxes of Power: The Kano Mamluks and Male Royal Slavery in the Sokoto Caliphate* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004), chapter 2.

attack, Msatulwa was captured, along with his mother and brother. He was taken some distance from his home and given as a slave to Mitano. Msatulwa was forced to grind corn, cut firewood, cook, hoe fields, and fetch water, but was eventually given to another person, who treated him better. In the end, Msatulwa found his way home after running away.[2]

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In South Africa, Floris, the slave of Francois Jacobus Roos, gave testimony in front of the assistant protector of slaves in Stellenbosch regarding what he termed an illegal beating given to him by his master. Floris explained that he had been very sick for a number of days, and that he had been sent to his master's father-in-law's farm for a light day's work. He returned home after dark and sat beside the hearth. Another slave entered the room and told Floris that their master was calling for him. Floris then entered the master's house, saluted him, and was asked by his master whether he remembered that his job was to wash his master's feet. Floris said yes, but that he only just learned that he was being asked to do so. Floris then stated that his master beat him over and over again with a stick until it broke. After the beating, he washed his master's feet, and then was beaten again, with a second stick. Roos explained his actions to the assistant protector of slaves by stating that Floris was insolent, had failed to offer the appropriate deference to him, and had not used the appropriate terms of sir or master.[3]

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Chisi was born in roughly 1870 in Nanwanga, now Tanzania. As a child she embarked on a journey with her brother to see her older sister. While she was staying with her sister, she was captured in a raid carried out by the Bemba. All the men of the village were killed and had their heads cut off to be later displayed to the Bemba chief. Chisi was seized along with her sister. Her sister was enslaved and eventually made into a wife by the man who captured both girls. Chisi became a slave of the chief. She stayed as a slave for three years. At the age

[2] Marcia Wright, *Strategies of Slaves and Women: Life Stories from East/Central Africa* (New York: Lilian Barber Press, 1993), 59–80.
[3] John Edwin Mason, *Social Death and Resurrection: Slavery and Emancipation in South Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2003), 83–84.

of eleven she was sold to four merchants from the coast. In time she escaped and lived with a family headed by Ndeye, who eventually married her. She was mistreated by Ndeye's other wives to such an extent that she did not follow the family when they sought protection with a nearby chief, but in so doing she also had to abandon her children, whom she later managed to recover.[4]

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Rosine Opo was born in 1832 in Akropong (now located in Ghana) and was the daughter of a slave woman and Kwaw Kutanku. In 1844, Rosine was handed over to Kawku Sae as a wife. Kawku Sae did not purchase her, but instead provided a smaller amount of "head money" to her father. Although Kawku had sexual access to Rosine, she was still a slave that belonged to her father's family because she had not been fully purchased. Rosine grew to hate her domestic situation, and she made trouble for her husband, who ultimately sent her away. In the meantime, Rosine had fallen in love with Charles Irinkeye, a pawn (a free loaned person) of Kwaku Sae's. Charles paid Rosine twelve pounds in order to make her his official wife, but Rosine never paid her first husband Kwaku Sae to end the marriage (by making up the cost of what he initially paid in head money), nor did she or Charles pay her father the head price. Thus, Rosine remained a slave of Kwaw Kutanku, who still had rights over her and her children. Because she and Charles failed to pay her first husband back the head price, Kwaku Sae and his family also had claims over Rosine's children. She eventually turned to Christian missionaries, who she hoped could offer her a way out of these conflicting claims on her person. Eventually, Rosine was snatched from her second husband by her paternal family and given to another headman as a wife. Her six children were divided among family members.[5]

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Barka, Msatulwa, Floris, Chisi, and Rosine were all slaves in Africa. Yet, each experienced slavery differently. For Barka, slavery provided a route to power and brought him closer to assimilating into the free elite. Over the course of his career as a slave official he grew both

[4] Wright, *Strategies of Slaves and Women*, 81–91.
[5] Peter Haenger, *Slaves and Slave Holders on the Gold Coast* (Basel: P. Schlettwein Publishing, 2000), 32–48.

rich and influential. Msatulwa's experience of slavery was defined by powerlessness and violence. He was enslaved through war and was subjected to brutal treatment in the context of an increasingly disordered political situation in nineteenth-century Eastern Africa. Floris experienced humiliation and subordination within slavery. He was not only forced to wash his master's feet, but also severely punished for not acting respectfully, although his master had to defend his actions in front of the protector of slaves. Chisi experienced slavery as a woman and found herself attached to powerful households through marriage in ways that offered opportunities, yet she still suffered from all the uncertainties that came with her status as both a woman and a slave. Finally, Rosine negotiated complex and overlapping networks of dependency as a slave, client, wife, and mother. Her status as wife, daughter, and slave often overlapped. She experienced claims on her person, labor, wealth, and children as a result, yet she did her best to improve and stabilize her social and economic position by using those multiple identities to her advantage.

These different experiences demonstrate just how difficult it is to discuss slavery across a continent as large and complex as Africa. Yet, it is possible. Slavery in Africa was diverse: slaves occupied a wide range of roles and positions in African states and societies. The statuses and treatment of slaves varied dramatically as well. Some found that slavery offered them an opportunity to achieve prominence and power. For others, slavery became the means through which they – although most usually their children – developed ties of belonging as members of kin or other corporate social groups. For yet others, slavery was defined by being bought and sold and then forced to work at tasks ranging from household labor to difficult work on African versions of plantations. Slavery in Africa was not simply a benign path toward greater inclusion, nor was it always defined by violence and hard agricultural labor. Yet, in all cases, slavery in Africa was powerfully conditioned by the ways in which African individuals and corporate groups valued people. It is now axiomatic that in Africa, possession of – or control over – people meant power. Power over people provided access to labor, to the reproductive capacity of female slaves, and to political agents or functionaries who then bolstered the power of elites and other big men. Thus, to understand slavery in Africa, and to appreciate why slaves were often regarded as the ultimate form of wealth in people, we must understand the nature of African ideas about human capital, about value, and more broadly, about belonging.

What Is Slavery?

Slavery and freedom are slippery concepts. For most, slavery conjures images of men on cotton plantations working under the sun and subject to the constant threat of the whip. The key to understanding slavery in Africa is to understand that slavery cannot be defined by the ways slaves were treated or by the jobs they performed. Although plantation slavery existed across parts of the world as varied as Brazil, the American South, West Africa, and ancient Rome, it by no means existed everywhere, nor was it the most common form of slavery. Many slaves labored in non-plantation skilled and unskilled occupations. In Africa, male and female slaves performed a wide variety of jobs – from skilled labor to domestic work to farming to soldiering to tax collection. Additionally, men were not the most commonly used slaves; in many places, including large parts of the African continent, women were more numerous and were the most valuable slaves. Finally, violence is certainly a common theme in all places slavery existed, but violence was not always necessary for slavers and was often the least effective means for getting slaves to do what was needed. Once we remove type of work and type of treatment as the defining features of slavery, what is left? Perhaps the best way to understand slavery is to think of it as being composed of a bundle of traits.[6] The various traits in the bundle that made up slavery varied over time and place. Slavery was not static or changeless. Historical forces altered the nature of slavery. Slavery was a dynamic product of history and of the often accidental choices made by people in history. Sometimes slavery could be largely economic, at other times mainly political, and in yet other circumstances largely social. Most kinds of slavery in Africa would have contained elements from all three categories, stressing one or another depending on historical circumstances.[7]

Clearly, however, we must better develop the key features of the bundle of characteristics that define slavery. Definitions of slavery usually focus on at least one of the following three traits: slaves as kinless outsiders, slaves as property, and/or slaves as violently dominated

[6] Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (eds.), *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 5.

[7] Also an argument made by Claude Meillassoux (ed.), *L'esclavage en Afrique précoloniale* (Paris: Maspero, 1975), 22–23.

or powerless.[8] In Africa, slavery was composed of a varying degree of all three characteristics, which often overlapped. In virtually all times and places, slaves were outsiders. In other words, they did not belong in any way to the dominant slaveholding society except in relation to their status as slaves. This often meant that slaves had no ties to kinship systems. They were, in effect, anti-kin: outsiders who did not belong and had no families or social ties except those moderated through their master. As Orlando Patterson noted, "Not only was the slave denied all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations but, by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants."[9] Scholars have debated the extent to which slaves remained permanent outsiders and the extent to which slaves were gradually absorbed into kinship systems. Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, for example, argue that the marginality of slaves was gradually reduced as they were incorporated into broader kinship systems, whereas Claude Meillassoux sees slaves as permanently and completely kinless – fundamentally different from all other dependents.[10] In all cases of slavery in Africa, slave status was hereditary. Even when slaves were frequently manumitted or incorporated, the hereditary element of slavery existed initially, and could only be removed by granting the slave a status closer to that of an insider. In many cases – usually in societies with well-developed market systems – slaves were also salable. Turning human beings into property made them exploitable as outsiders and helped maintain their dependent status. Thus, masters gained and maintained control over slaves by virtue of their ability to both buy and sell them, which also ensured that slaves remained outside kinship systems. Obviously, the importance of the chattel/property component depended on the nature of the society in which slaves were used. Finally, violence was a characteristic of slavery in Africa. Slaves were often – albeit not always – produced through violence, usually war or kidnapping. Acts (or threats) of violence reinforced slave status and emphasized the powerlessness of the slave. Slaves were not always subject to violence, but the potential

[8] Martin Klein (ed.), *Breaking the Chains: Slavery, Bondage, and Emancipation in Modern Africa and Asia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 4.

[9] Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 5 as quoted in Klein, *Breaking the Chains*, 4.

[10] In general, see Miers and Kopytoff, *Slavery in Africa* and Claude Meillassoux, *The Anthropology of Slavery: The Womb of Iron and Gold* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

for violence and the powerlessness of slaves were unique to slavery. This is especially true because slaves tended not to reproduce themselves. Some died and others were manumitted or incorporated. This meant slave populations needed to be continually replaced by new slaves through war or other – most often violent – means.

Although scholars of African slavery generally agree that these characteristics are related to slave status, they also often disagree on which ones to emphasize. Most especially, scholars have debated the extent to which slavery was part of a continuum of dependent statuses that involved claims of rights over persons. The idea is that African societies were organized in ways that sought to make claims on people as kin, as children, as wives, and as slaves. The key question is: can slaves be placed along a continuum of statuses that included kin (those who belonged) by conceptualizing slavery as one institution among many that offered control over rights in persons? Slavery would then be at the most extreme end of dependency, whereas marriage and parentage would be at the least extreme. Slavery was, the argument goes, not the opposite of freedom or kinship but similar to other institutions that emphasized dependency and that served to incorporate Africans into broader corporate groups.[11] Other scholars have pushed back to argue that the incorporative view of African slavery erases the exploitation and struggle central to the institution; indeed, for these scholars, the dependency of slaves was something both unique and special.[12] Slaves were persons who occupied a substantively different status than did those who belonged. In the words of Meillassoux, slavery was the antithesis of kinship. Because slaves were not part of a continuum that included non-slave dependents, incorporation was much more fraught, contested, and problematic. Overall, this debate is about the extent to which we can accept binary definitions of slavery and freedom or of slave/non-slave status in Africa. The usual thinking is that an absolute opposition between slavery and freedom is problematic because it involves the imposition of modern notions about labor, freedom, and individuality on a unique African historical context. While it is indeed imperative to contextualize slavery and freedom within African ideas and histories, this book argues that Africans in most times and places did indeed see slavery and freedom as oppositional. However, African ideas about slavery and freedom were intimately connected to

[11] This view is most commonly associated with the work of Miers and Kopytoff.
[12] Lovejoy and Meillassoux are the main proponents of this position.

conceptions about belonging and not belonging. Africans drew profound distinctions between those who morally, politically, and socially belonged and those who did not, which were in turn mapped onto broader social distinctions between slaves and non-slaves.

On Freedom and Belonging: Insiders, Outsiders, and Slavery

Freedom is usually understood as the opposite of slavery. In most cases, freedom is described in the context of individual or personal freedom (to do what one pleases) and civic freedom (to be able to influence and participate in how one is governed).[13] Thus, freedom conventionally refers to the absence of obligations, dependence, or other ties that restrict or narrow an individual's right and ability to make decisions and act autonomously. In many African contexts, freedom might better be defined as the ability or right to belong. In most African social systems, belonging mattered. Africans could belong to numerous institutions or corporate groups – some were religious (Islamic brotherhoods), others occupational (a herder or blacksmith), and still others political (a state, city, or neighborhood). But in general, to belong meant that one was enmeshed – as an insider – within reciprocal systems of mutual obligation and patronage organized around kinship and descent.[14] It meant that one was socially, morally, and politically a member of the community, which offered broader opportunities to belong to a variety of institutions within that society, and which in turn meant one could make claims on the individual members of those groups. Thus, those who belonged to households, lineages, and/or states had both obligations and privileges governed by a wide variety of social norms that were broadly acknowledged.

Not everyone who belonged was equal. Many African corporate structures were exploitative. Those closest to the center of power or the highest of statuses, sometimes defined by age, gender, birth, or wealth, gained the most protections and privileges. Others were

[13] Patterson's *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* is a good introduction to these concepts. See Patterson, *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

[14] In general, see Joseph C. Miller, "Introduction: Women as Slaves and Owners of Slaves: Experiences from Africa, The Indian Ocean World, and the Early Atlantic" in Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph C. Miller (eds.), *Women and Slavery, vol. I: Africa, The Indian Ocean World, and the Medieval North Atlantic* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), 26.

profoundly dependent on those more powerful and more senior. But the exploitation of dependents was often limited by virtue of the fact that they were insiders. Social subordination was not the equivalent of slavery. Belonging offered protection *and* potential for higher status. Even the least powerful members of a group gained by virtue of their positions as insiders. The benefits of belonging might not have been as substantial for a low-status person as they were for a higher-status individual, but the ability to claim status as an insider was nonetheless valuable, for it was through belonging that one could claim socially sanctioned rights to marry, practice religion, farm, build homes, inherit, have socially recognized children, claim the labor of those children, and many other privileges. These rights were not simply defined by dependence; they offered those who could rightfully claim them autonomy – in the sense that one could exercise rights that provided opportunities, choices, and control, dependent of course on one's social position. Slaves could acquire some of the privileges enjoyed by those who belonged, but these privileges were not normally grounded in their membership within the broader community of the free; instead, they were granted at the prerogative of the master. Even when slaves secured privileges that were more broadly grounded, they were still a product of their specific status as slaves and could be revoked.

Thus, slavery in Africa was based on the distinction between people defined as insiders – those who belonged to and in local and regional social, religious, and political systems – and slaves, who were outsiders. However, slaves in Africa were not just outsiders; they were also understood as kinless. They lacked the social ties to ancestors and progeny that made one an insider and provided webs of patrons and clients on which people could draw for social meaning and for political and economic support. This in turn made slaves especially useful – as workers, political agents, soldiers, or dependents – because their special vulnerability meant that their owners could use them as they saw fit. Slaves could act as high-ranking generals or as lowly farm laborers because they were genealogically isolated and had no or weak claims to social or political capital and support. Contrastingly, the free could access a wide variety of relationships and experience a variety of claims upon their persons. This provided the free with choices and protections, along with the possibility of balancing claims and obligations across different social networks and individuals, often composed of kin. Slaves had only one avenue through which they could access the world of the free: the master. In Buganda, for example,

the opposite of slave was known as a *musenza* or "client/freeman."[15] The latter could change patrons of their own accord, whereas slaves could not. They were dependent on their masters and could be used in whatever way their masters wanted. Nothing better embodies the position of slaves in this regard than the Swahili proverb: "Slaves have no words of their own."[16]

Africans usually wanted to acquire slaves who had been transported far from their homes rather than slaves acquired closer to home. Mungo Park, who traveled throughout the Senegambian region in the 1790s, noted: "The value of a slave in the eye of an African purchaser increases in proportion to his distance from his native Kingdom."[17] Why? Slaves acquired in this way were initially regarded as absolute outsiders. These slaves had no rights or social identity except as mediated through their master. This made them valuable and especially useful because they were fully exploitable objects. Likewise, in the Nkanu region of Igboland (now southeastern Nigeria), even though slaves were theoretically conceptualized as inferior kin and thereby brought within the domain of kinship relations, in practice these slaves suffered profound disabilities that could only be imposed on kinless outsiders of slave status. They could, for example, be sold or sacrificed, whereas kin could not be subject to such violence. In addition, while Igbo masters granted some of their slaves the right to form families, they were not created or protected in the same way as free families. In contrast to marriages between free persons, the slave husband did not pay bridewealth (a payment in goods or service) to his future father-in-law. Instead, the master of the slave literally purchased a slave wife for his slave. This meant that, in practice, the master effectively owned the children produced within such a marriage because the master owned the husband and the wife, their labor power, their bodies, and whatever their bodies produced. The master could therefore do what he wished with the children produced by these unions, which included sacrificing them at funerals, selling them, or taking

[15] Henri Médard, "Introduction" in Henri Médard and Shane Doyle (eds.), *Slavery in the Great Lakes Region of East Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), 16.

[16] Cited by Jonathon Glassman, *Feasts and Riot: Revelry, Rebellion, and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast. 1856–1888* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995), 79.

[17] Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa … in the Years* 1795, 1796, *and* 1797 (London, 1800), 430 cited in James F. Searing, *West African Slavery and Atlantic Commerce: The Senegal River Valley,* 1700–1900 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 54.